

WHEN THE VILLAIN STEALS THE SHOW:
THE CHARACTER OF CLAUDIUS IN POST-1975
ARAB(IC) *HAMLET* ADAPTATIONS

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Abstract

The character of Claudius dominates post-1975 Arabic adaptations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. After a brief survey of the twentieth-century Arab *Hamlet* tradition, this essay examines five recent Arab *Hamlet* plays. In four Arabic-language plays, a hypertrophied Claudius plainly allegorizes contemporary or recent regimes in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt. He displaces both Hamlet and Hamlet's father's ghost, who become weak characters. Recurrent animal imagery portrays him as literally a brute, lacking a conscience and impervious to reason. However, this essay argues, the plays are not "political in function": they do not work to build audience support for political change. Instead, Claudius' irresistible power demonstrates the futility of political action (in the Aristotelian sense), including political theatre. A recent Arab-themed *Hamlet* adaptation in English confirms the pattern but enlarges it to cover the international backers of the local tyrant. Rather than a call for political awakening, then, these five plays offer a dark meditation on the nature of power and the limits of politics.

This essay will examine the characterization of Claudius in five post-1975 Arab adaptations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. These plays differ in many respects, including plot. They are written in different registers of Arabic; the latest was first written in English.² Yet they share a strikingly similar intertextual relationship to a single "original" text. All five plays explicitly invoke Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a source or model. The four texts written in Arabic also emphasize their *departures* from prevailing readings of Shakespeare's play. They do this to

¹ I am grateful for provocative suggestions offered by Hazem Azmy, David Bevington, Paul Friedrich, Ken Garden, Bryan Garsten, Beatrice Gruendler, Joel Kraemer, Farouk Mustafa, Sonali Pahwa, and two anonymous readers for *JAL*.

² Mamdūh 'Adwān's *Hamlet Wakes Up Late* and Maḥmūd Abū Dūma's *Dance of the Scorpions* are in Modern Standard Arabic; Jawād al-Asādī's *Forget Hamlet* was staged (under the title *Ophelia's Window*) in Modern Standard Arabic with Egyptian colloquial admixtures. 'Abd al-Ḥakīm al-Marzūqī's *Ismail/Hamlet* is in Syrian colloquial. Sulayman Al-Bassam's *Al-Hamlet Summit* was originally written in English and later rewritten (with some revisions and two added scenes) in Modern Standard Arabic. See references below.

sharpen their commentary on contemporary Arab political reality. Abandoning the Arab Hamlet of the late-1960s and early-1970s (a revolutionary fighter for justice), the recent Arabic-language plays present weak protagonists overpowered by tyranny and corruption.

After a brief overview of the 20th-century Arab *Hamlet* tradition to which the post-1975 plays respond and contribute, I will analyze how they characterize their villains. I will highlight four shared features: Claudius' lack of a conscience, the bestial imagery used to describe him, his oversized role in the plot, and the way he eclipses Hamlet's father's ghost. It is fair to say that Claudius, not Hamlet, occupies the imaginative center of a typical post-1975 Arab *Hamlet* play. But this hypertrophied villain does not function to "expose" the abuses of Arab governments or to build audience support for political change. Rather, I will argue, Claudius' irresistible power demonstrates the futility of political action (in the Aristotelian sense of politics), including political art. Rather than a call for political awakening, then, these plays offer a dark meditation on the nature of power and the limits of politics.

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Let me begin by acknowledging the apparent perversity of my topic. Shakespeare has bequeathed world literature some memorable villains. Iago and Richard III are two of the worst: gleefully inventive, opportunistic, unbothered by taboos. Others, perhaps less mesmerizing, are equally wicked: Lady Macbeth, King Lear's daughters Regan and Goneril. But who would include Shakespeare's Claudius in this list? When Western European or American readers notice Claudius at all, it is to plead that he *might* have been a tragic hero.³ Critics call him a man sincerely in love with his wife, a killer with a conscience, a Macbeth manqué.⁴ Soviet and Eastern European *Hamlet* interpreters, more attuned to Claudius as a dictator, nonetheless make him vulnerable enough to serve as a foil for Hamlet's political heroism.⁵ The fratricidal usurper

³ A striking exception was Abraham Lincoln, who memorized Claudius' prayer-scene soliloquy (III.iii), recited it to friends, and insisted that it was superior to any of Hamlet's. See Adam Gopnik, "Angels and Ages: Lincoln's Language and its Legacy," *The New Yorker*, May 28, 2007, 30-37: 36.

⁴ See, e.g., Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 216-25. See also Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Hamlet* (Dover: University of Delaware Press, 1992), 47: "Claudius shares, though to a lesser degree, some of Hamlet's complexity . . . He delays. He is roiled by fierce passions. He has a conscience. Give him more soliloquies, and he could have been Macbeth."

⁵ For instance, Soviet theatre and film director Grigori Kozintsev in his diary *Nash Sovremennik Shekspir* describes Claudius as a taurine and seductive figure, "a perverted unity of something heavy, coarsely powerful, bullish, and at other moments affectedly refined." But Kozintsev adds: "His struggle with Hamlet is only a surface line of Claudius's action. Far more important is the interior motif, deeply concealed: the struggle with conscience." See Grigori M. Kozintsev, *Shakespeare: Time and Conscience*, trans. Joyce Vining (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966), 222-3. I have argued elsewhere that Kozintsev's 1964 film adaptation of *Hamlet*, very popular in Egypt

is a cog in “the Grand Mechanism” of power, not its center.⁶ And no wonder. Shakespeare’s Claudius hardly takes center stage: he speaks about one-third as many lines as Hamlet, two brief asides, and two soliloquies.⁷ He may usurp the throne of Elsinore, but it is Hamlet who takes over the play.

Even Hamlet’s father’s ghost seems to tower over Claudius. Inheriting this discrepancy between brothers from his sources, Shakespeare sharpens it further.⁸ The Ghost calls his killer “a wretch whose natural gifts were poor/To those of mine”⁹—and other characters seem to agree. Several recall the dead king Hamlet’s “fair and warlike form” (I.i.50) and military valor. By contrast, Claudius never raises a weapon and is easily embarrassed or “distempered” (III.ii.293-5, see also IV.iv.69-70). His hypercorrect tones in the court scene (I.ii) suggest he is anxious about filling his brother’s shoes; when he publicly admits that Fortinbras may hold “a weak supposal of our worth” (I.ii.18), one suspects that Fortinbras has good reason. Gertrude, who has been married to both men, appears sincerely troubled when Hamlet makes her compare their portraits (III.iv.88). And when Hamlet speaks of Claudius it is with a degree of contempt he usually reserves for himself; his stepfather is a “damned villain” (I.v.106) but also a “king of shreds and patches” (III.iv.103) and a “vice of kings”: a buffoon (III.iv.96-102).

As we will see, Claudius gets much more respect in Arab adaptations. Arab directors and playwrights have produced dozens of versions of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in the past half century; many of these, particularly the more recent, make the Claudius character an important and sinister focal point. This may come as no surprise. In a theatre tradition in which “politics has tended to assume enormous proportions,”¹⁰ Claudius’ allegorical utility is obvious: he not only rules like a tyrant (informers, conspiracies, eavesdropping, extrajudicial killings, etc.) but, fundamentally, is a usurper with no legitimate claim to the throne. What better vehicle, one would think, for exposing the abuses of Arab regimes and galvanizing the anger of Arab audiences?

However, as I will suggest in this essay, the rise of Claudius actually corresponds to the *decline* of such edificatory goals since the mid-1970s. True, Arab

and shown repeatedly on Arab television in the late 1960s, profoundly influenced subsequent Arab interpretations of the play. (See *Critical Survey* 19:3, forthcoming.)

⁶ The phrase is Jan Kott’s, in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964). Kott’s essay “Hamlet at Midcentury” barely refers to Claudius; it focuses instead on Fortinbras, the foreign occupier.

⁷ For rough line counts, see “The Play’s The Thing,” <http://eamesharlan.org/tppt/hamlet01.html>.

⁸ In the early version by Saxo Grammaticus, available to Shakespeare through Belleforest’s *Histoires Tragiques* (1570), Amleth’s uncle kills his brother because he envies his success. See Sir Israel Gollancz, *The Sources of Hamlet* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1967).

⁹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1997), I.v.51.

¹⁰ M.M. Badawi, Introduction, in S.K. Jayyusi and R. Allen, eds., *Modern Arabic Drama: An Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 20.

Five Arab *Hamlet* Offshoot Plays (1976-2002)

Play	Author (nationality); language of play	Year published or produced	Production city, first director	Synopsis	Fate of Claudius figure
Hamlet Wakes هملت متأخراً يستيقظ متأخراً	Mamdūh 'Adwān (Syrian); MSA	1976	Damascus; Mamdūh 'Adwān	Drun kard theatre-director prince awakens too late to the political implications of his father's murder, uncle's dictatorship, and kingdom's impending peace deal with Fortinbras; he is condemned in a show trial and executed.	On the throne as the play ends
Dance of the Scorpions رقصة العقارب	Mahmūd Abū Dūma (Egyptian); MSA	Published 1988, performed 1989 and 1991	Alexandria; Mahmūd Abū Dūma	Claudius conspires with Fortinbras in a phony war to extort money from nobles and sideline the largely apolitical Hamlet. But Fortinbras betrays Claudius by actually attacking; seizing the moment, domestic opposition ("Crusaders") launch a revolution.	Hamlet kills him at last minute as revolutionaries storm the palace
Forget Hamlet/Ophelia's Window انسو هاملت إنسو هاملت	Jawād al-Asadi (Iraqi); MSA with Egyptian colloquial incorporated in performance	Performed 1994, published 2000	Cairo: Jawād al-Asadi	Ophelia watches Claudius murder the king and inaugurate a reign of terror unopposed by passive Hamlet. Claudius orders blind dissident Laertes tortured and liquidated; silences Gertrude; tries to seduce Ophelia; and sends two goons to assassinate Hamlet. A pair of gravediggers provides sarcastic commentary throughout.	Survives; a surrealist coda shows him being killed in a duel by Laertes' ghost
Ismail/Hamlet إسماعيل هاملت	'Abd al-Ḥakim al-Marzūqī (Tunisian); Syrian colloquial	1999 and 2001	London and Cairo: Rūlā Fattāl (with Syrian al-Raṣīf company)	Ismā'īl's mother seduced by <i>hammad</i> owner Abu Sa'īd, who puts Ismā'īl and his mother to work in the baths. Later Ismā'īl (whom a friend nicknames Hamlet) becomes a corpse washer. Play is his monologue as he washes Abu Sa'īd's corpse.	Dead and ready for burial, but stepson appropriates his fortune and his values
The Al-Hamlet Summit (English- and Arabic-language productions) مؤتمر الهاملت	Sulayman al-Bassam (Kuwaiti/British); English, later revised and produced in Arabic	2002-2005	Edinburgh, Cairo, London, Tokyo, etc.: Sulayman al-Bassam	Crumbling Arab dictatorship (based on a collage of actual states) convenes government conference amid car bombs in the capital, rebellion in the south, and an international army massed on the borders. Arms Dealer sells to all, including Islamist Hamlet and suicide bomber Ophelia.	Killed in civil war (shooting from the palace as Hamlet fires mortars from the mosque). Arms Dealer survives.

adapters continue to use Claudius to allegorize “The Power” (*al-sulta*), with all its attached connotations of patriarchal and political despotism. But they turn the villain into an almost limitless source of brutality against which *no* revolutionary hero could prevail. In the starkest cases, Claudius comes to resemble precisely Shakespeare’s Iago or Richard III.¹¹ He seduces or devours everyone in his path. He adapts smoothly to circumstances; everyone else adapts to him, like iron filings to a magnet. His regime usurps the prerogative to improvise, leaving no creative space for the other characters.¹²

This villain’s presence in recent Arab plays marks them as *post*-political. Or rather, borrowing the taxonomy proposed by Graham Holderness, we can describe these plays as political at the level of *content* and *form*, but not at the level of *function*:

A drama which addresses what is conventionally accepted as the political “reality” of a society may in fact be collusive with that society’s ideology: a play might propose that a society’s politicians are corrupt, without looking beyond the existing political system to alternative forms of government, administration and political morality. Thus a politics of content cannot guarantee political efficacy, if both form and function are simultaneously collaborating with a dominant ideology.¹³

The taxonomy applies, but it would be simplistic to accuse these Arab *Hamlet* offshoot plays of “collaborating” with the political order in their countries. “Efficacy” is a crude term, and who is to say which ideology is “dominant” in a particular audience? The late *Hamlet* plays participate in a more ambiguous relationship of subversion and containment.¹⁴ For one thing, several of them explicitly dramatize the failure of theatre to reshape the structures of power. By drawing attention to their own inefficacy—to the inefficacy of political art in general—they take aim at the ideology of “committed” intellectuals who flatter themselves that political intervention through art is still possible.¹⁵ Such intel-

¹¹ It is no coincidence that two of the playwright-directors discussed here, Jawād al-Asadī and Sulayman Al-Bassam, are currently working on adaptations of *Richard III*.

¹² On Iago’s improvisational genius, see Stephen Greenblatt, “The Improvisation of Power,” in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 232-36.

¹³ Introduction to Graham Holderness, ed., *The Politics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 9.

¹⁴ Cf. Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

¹⁵ Syrian scholar Ghassān Ghunaym singles out ‘Adwān’s *Hamlet Wakes Up Late* for its effective satire of several types of contemporary intellectuals: the opportunistic intellectual, the intellectual who has no weapon but words, the intellectual unaware of the people’s problems, and the exhausted-passive-depressed intellectual. His sketch of the latter is interesting in this context: “He is like one who drives his car to the right while signaling to the left, a ‘reflist’ (*shamīni*).” See Ghassān Ghunaym, *Al-Masrah al-siyāsī fī sūriya*, 1967-1990 (Damascus: Dār ‘Alā’ al-Dīn, 1996), 148.

lectuals were likely to have been well represented in their black-box theatre audiences in Damascus, Alexandria, and Cairo.

Still, this unmasking of intellectuals' "resistance" does come at the cost of naturalizing the existing power arrangement. An omnipotent tyrant cannot sustain, for instance, a Brechtian dramatic structure that aims to expose injustice as "resistible."¹⁶ Only the earliest play we will consider, Mamdūh 'Adwān's¹⁷ *Hamlet Wakes Up Late* (published 1976, and staged in Damascus), implies that it might make any practical difference whether Hamlet wakes up or not.¹⁸ Maḥmūd Abū Dūma's *Dance of the Scorpions* (1988),¹⁹ although it ends with a revolution, presents a world where Claudius' baldest lies remain unchallenged as long as his military power is intact. Brute strength, not legitimacy, lets him impose any beliefs he wants. Jawād al-Asādī's *Forget Hamlet*²⁰ ends with its Saddam Hussein-like Claudius character, ruthless and seemingly omnipotent still on the throne. And in 'Abd al-Ḥakīm al-Marzūqī's monodrama *Ismail/Hamlet* (1999),²¹ the story moves from a national to a familial scale, but the upshot is the same. The tyrannical stepfather's spirit haunts the play even after his death, contaminating the next generation.²² In all four of these plays the tyrant defines the script. Like the generation of "old men" who have until very recently dominated Arab politics, his presence is unendurable, but his absence is unimaginable.²³

The most recent play we will examine, Sulayman al-Bassam's *Al-Hamlet Summit* (2002), is an exception that proves the rule. First written in English

¹⁶ The extent to which Bertolt Brecht's own drama did this can be debated. See, e.g., the fearsome protagonist in Brecht's *Richard III* offshoot play, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*.

¹⁷ His name is vocalized 'Udwān in many sources. The spelling 'Adwān is preferred by his son (London-based actor Ziad Adwan) and by the Library of Congress.

¹⁸ Mamdūh 'Adwān, "Ḥamlit... yastayqizu muta'akhhiran," *al-Mawqif al-adabī*, no. 65/66 (1976): 178-228. Later reprinted in book form (Beirut: Dār Ibn Rushd, 1980). 'Adwān's title remained a catchphrase among Syrian intellectuals even years later; see, e.g., Sadiq al-Azm, "Owning the Future: Modern Arabs and Hamlet," *International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World Newsletter*, no. 5 (2000): 11, and Anwar Badr, "Ḥamlit al-isrā'īlī," *Alhourriah.org*, Nov. 7, 2004.

¹⁹ Maḥmūd Abū Dūma, "Raḡṣat al-'aqārib," in *Jā'ū ilaynā gharqā; al-bi'r; raḡṣat al-'aqārib* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣriya al-'amma Lil-Kitāb, 1989).

²⁰ Jawād al-Asādī, *Insū ḥamlit* (Beirut: Dār al-Fārābī, 2000); and see Jawād al-Asādī, *Forget Hamlet*, trans. Margaret Litvin (Brisbane: Faculty of Arts, University of Queensland, 2006).

²¹ 'Abd al-Ḥakīm al-Marzūqī, *Ismā'il ḥamlit* (Damascus: Masraḡ al-Raṣīf, 1999), 4. Manuscript in Syrian colloquial Arabic kindly provided by Peter Clark. The translations below are mine but draw on Clark's translation, performed in London in 1999.

²² As director Rūlā Fattāl explicitly told an interviewer, "Oppression and abuse give birth to a new tyrant: [Ismā'il] will be just like his stepfather." See Fawzī Sulaymān, "al-Suriya rūlā fattāl: uqaddim masraḡan lahu 'alāqa bi-l-shāri' al-'arabī wa-l-ḥayā al-yawmiya," *al-Bayān*, June 17, 2001.

²³ See, e.g., Mona Eltahawy, "Arab Politics and Society: A Generation's Passing Brings Opportunity," *International Herald Tribune*, Nov 23, 2004: "A few years ago, I stood in a public square in an Arab capital and watched the funeral procession of an Arab leader... 'It's like eclipse [sic] of the sun,' one man told me. 'This is a black day.'"

by a London-based dramatist/director for a Western audience (although later revised into Arabic), this play stands on the margins of the Arab *Hamlet* tradition. Accordingly, its Claudius does not quite conform to the pattern of the other four. He has limited powers and visible insecurities. But that is only because he is the puppet of the play's *real* protean villain, one even more monstrous and mythical than those of the other plays. This villain is militarized global capitalism; its faces include the United States, oil interests, and the global arms trade.

Amalgamating many ideas and images that preoccupy the contemporary Arab political imagination, al-Bassam's play may presage a trend in future Arab productions. Plays following this trend would continue to focus on brute *power* and to dismiss the possibility of *politics* in the Aristotelian sense—i.e., the activity of people determining together, using language, how power should be organized in their society.²⁴ Such plays would also look beyond local despots like Claudius, casting the United States in the ruthless and omnipresent villain role once reserved for autocratic Arab regimes.

The Arab Hamlet Tradition

The plays examined in this essay emerged from a dialogue with an Arab *Hamlet* tradition over a century old. The earliest Arabic *Hamlet* adaptations were designed to entertain.²⁵ The first, adapted for the stage by fianyūs 'Abdūh, omits Fortinbras and ends happily: Hamlet kills Claudius and marries Ophelia before ascending the throne as the Ghost showers him with blessings.²⁶ Lyrics

²⁴ Aristotle famously supports his claim that "man is a political animal" by pointing out that human beings, alone of the animals, can speak and thus can discuss their notions of good and evil. Such discussion is the essence of politics. "And whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals... the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust. And it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense make a family and a state." *The Politics and The Constitution of Athens*, ed. Stephen Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 1253a10 (p. 13). A tyranny, Aristotle therefore says, is not properly a political system at all; it is "the very reverse of a *politeia*" (1293b30, p. 103).

²⁵ For the early history of Arab Shakespeare reception, see Tawfīq Habīb, "Shaksbīr fi miṣr," *al-Hilāl*, Dec 1 1927, 201-04; Ghāli Shukrī, "Shaksbīr fi al-'arabiya," in *Thawrat al-fīkr fi adabīnā al-ḥadīth* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Anglū al-Miṣriya, 1965); M.M. Badawi, "Shakespeare and the Arabs," *Cairo Studies in English* (1963/1966): 181-96; Suheil Bushrui, "Shakespeare in the Arab World," *Middle East Forum* 47 (1971): 54-64; Nadia al-Bahar, "Shakespeare in Early Arabic Adaptations," *Shakespeare Translation* 3, no. 13 (1976); Amel Amin Zaki, "Shakespeare in Arabic" (PhD, Indiana University, 1978); Fatma Moussa Mahmoud, "Hamlet in Egypt," *Cairo Studies in English* (1990): 51-61; and Sameh F. Hanna, "Hamlet Lives Happily Ever After in Arabic," *The Translator* 11, no. 2 (2005): 167-92. See also the forthcoming special issue of *Critical Survey* (19:3).

²⁶ This adaptation, published in 1902, was performed at least 19 times in Cairo and Alexandria between 1897 and 1910 (al-Bahar). Like other Arab Shakespeare translators of the period, 'Abdūh drew on a neoclassical French version rather than translate directly from English. See fianyūs

by poet Aḥmad Shawqī (“On Hamlet’s Lips”) were interpolated in the script to display his singing talent of the star, Shaykh Salāma Higāzī, and to entice his fans to the theatre.²⁷ The overall impression, consistent with the conventions of French neo-classical theatre, is of Hamlet’s unshakeable strength and nobility.

The 1916 translation by Lebanese-born Egyptian poet Khalil Mufirān (1872-1949) follows the same pattern. Mufirān likewise drew on a French version or versions.²⁸ He cut a great deal of dialogue and emphasized Hamlet’s soliloquies, which he rendered in a classical Arabic prose generally still considered “beautiful.”²⁹ The (physically huge) French-trained actor Georges Abyad, who had commissioned the translation for his new theatre company, “declaimed, ranted and spluttered” his way through these speeches.³⁰ In his hands, *Hamlet* resembled the “heroic dramas and melodramas . . . prevalent in Paris at the opening of the century.”³¹ This further accustomed the Arab public to think of Hamlet as a noble and heroic protagonist.

In the postcolonial period, Hamlet retained his aura of nobility even as the main thrust of theatre changed from entertainment to political edification. For our purposes, postcolonial Arab Hamlet appropriation can be roughly divided into three phases.³² In the period of Nasserist revolutionary optimism (roughly 1952-1964), *Hamlet* was seen mainly as a great and difficult classic. The ability to perform *Hamlet* competently was adduced as evidence that the Arab world had “world-class” theatre and deserved a place on the world stage. A related tendency (1964-7) was some Arab writers’ choice to weave “strands of Hamlet” into their own protagonists, borrowing Hamlet’s depth and interiority to turn their heroes into credible moral subjects and political agents.³³ Although

²⁷ ‘Abduh, *Hāmlit*, ed. Sāmiḥ Fikrī Ḥannā (Cairo: Supreme Council of Culture of Egypt, 2005) and the editor’s critical introduction. See also Zaki, 87-113.

²⁸ See Aḥmad Shawqī, “‘Ala lisāni hāmlit,” in *al-Shawqiyāt al-majhūla* (Cairo: Mafibā‘āt Dār al-Kutub, 1961). Several sources report that the opening-night audience nearly rioted when Higāzī tried to present the play without songs, leading Shawqī to be called in. Higāzī later recorded Shawqī’s *Hamlet* poem for Odeon records (1905). Besides the studies cited above, see Aḥmad al-Mughāzī, “Shaksbīr fī al-masrah al-miṣrī,” *al-Masrah* 4, no. 40 (1967): 42-52.

²⁹ Badawi names Georges Duval’s translation (published between 1908 and 1910) as the likely source. But Moussa Mahmoud, after examining both translations, believes it more likely that Mufirān relied on a greatly abbreviated “French school edition of *Hamlet*.” I have not personally repeated the comparison. See Badawi, 181; Moussa Mahmoud, 55-56; and Georges Duval, *William Shakespeare, Oeuvres Dramatiques, Les Meilleurs Auteurs Classiques* (Paris: Flammarion, n.d.).

³⁰ Mufirān’s translation has been much attacked for inaccuracy. For a defense see Shukrī, 55-60.

³¹ Nehad Selaiha, “Royal Buffoonery,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, April 4, 2002.

³² Moussa Mahmoud, 28.

³³ For a fuller discussion see Margaret Litvin, “Hamlet’s Arab Journey: Adventures in Political Culture and Drama (1952-2002)” (PhD, University of Chicago, 2006).

³⁴ A famous example is Alfred Farag’s play *Sulayman of Aleppo* (1965); for discussions of the Sulayman-Hamlet resemblance see Ragā’ al-Naqqāsh, “Hāmlit . . . fī al-azhar al-sharif,” in *Maq‘ad ṣaghīr amāma al-sitār* (Cairo: al-Hay‘a al-Miṣriya al-‘Āmma lil-Kitāb, 1971); M.M. Badawi,

many Egyptian playwrights in this period addressed the regime through allegorical political plays,³⁴ *Hamlet* stayed largely outside the allegorical tendency. Instead, its edifying function was to demonstrate the Arab theatre's mastery of "classic" plays and psychologically "deep" heroes.

Incidentally, the effort at complex characterization in this period did not extend to the antagonists. For instance, the Claudius in Sayyid Bidayr's Cairo production (1964) appeared "too much the awesome ruler" to be fully human.³⁵ Meanwhile, the character of Kléber in Alfred Farag's *Sulayman of Aleppo*—the Claudius to Sulayman's Hamlet—was criticized as (and is) a comic-book villain, unrepentant and cruel by nature.³⁶

The second phase (1970-76) privileged an archetype whom I have termed the "Arab hero Hamlet." Following the complete military defeat of 1967 and especially after Nasser's death in 1970, dramatists in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq decided that political agency had to be seized, not earned. They shifted their allegorical efforts to address audiences, not regimes. The idea was to provoke audiences to think critically about their political systems and to confront Claudius-like domestic tyrants. To this end directors turned Hamlet into an Arab revolutionary hero, a fighter for justice brutally martyred by an oppressive regime. The best-known such production (Cairo, 1971-7) was directed by Muḥammad Šubḥī, who also played Hamlet.³⁷ A reviewer enthused:

The contemplative, thinking side of the character (*jānib al-tafkīr wa-l-ta'ammul*) is obscured here by the plotting, active side, so that he appears to be a revolutionary

Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 173; and Rasheed El-Enany, "The Quest for Justice in the Theatre of Alfred Farag: Different Moulds, One Theme," *Journal of Arabic Literature* vol. xxxi, no. 2 (2000): 171-202. Some critics have also heard Hamletian echoes in Šalāh 'Abd al-Šabūr's *Tragedy of al-Hallaj* (1964). See, e.g., Nehad Selaiha, "Poet, Rebel, Martyr," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, April 18, 2002.

³⁴ For such allegory (and the later disenchantment with it), see Tawfīq al-Hakīm's 1974 description of his 1960 play *al-Sultān al-ḥā'ir*: Tawfīq al-Hakīm, *The Return of Consciousness*, trans. R. Bayly Winder (New York: New York University Press, 1985), 38.

³⁵ Sayyid Bidayr directed *Hamlet* (with Karam Muḥiawī in the title role) at Cairo's Opera House Theatre in 1964-5. Critic Maḥmūd Amin al-Ālim found Claudius (Muḥammad al-Ṭūkhī) insufficiently torn by the inner suffering that should have resulted from his crime: "His face was too much the awesome ruler, not enough the murderer." Maḥmūd Amin al-Ālim, "Ma'sāt ḥāmlit bayna shakbīr wa-l-sayyid bidayr, in *al-Wajh wa-al-qina' fī masraḥinā al-ʿarabī al-muʿāšir* (Beirut: Dār al-Adāb, 1973), 163.

³⁶ Again, some critics were disappointed at the shallow characterization. For instance, Bahā' fiāhir explicitly and unfavorably contrasts Farag's one-dimensional Kléber to Shakespeare's Claudius; interestingly for my discussion below, Ṭāhir dwells on the "prayer scene" and its function in humanizing Claudius. See "Al-Ḥalabī wa amīr al-danimārk," in *10 Masraḥiyāt mišrīya: ʿarḍ wa-naqd* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1985), 32-3.

³⁷ Šubḥī's *Hamlet*, first staged with amateur actors in 1971, was reprised at the Art Studio Theatre and then the commercial Gala'a Theatre in 1976-7. A similar production was directed by Riyāḍ 'Iṣmaṭ (Damascus, 1973). Also part of this Hamlet-as-revolutionary trend was *Hamlet Arabian-Style*, an adaptation by Sāmi 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Nūrī (Baghdad, 1973).



fighter, furious and pure (*munād ilan thawrīyan shadīd al-naqā' wa-l-ḥidda*), seeking justice and freedom with integrity and honor.³⁸

These agit-prop productions flattened the character of Claudius, again turning him into a caricature villain. As Ṣubḥī recalls:

Claudius? I modeled him on the Arab [rulers] (*laughs*)... I eliminated the prayer scene. I didn't believe it. Impossible. If he had done that in front of someone—in front of another person—in front of Queen Gertrude—I would believe it. It would be for show. But for him to say that when he's by himself, that would mean he's sincere. It won't do.³⁹

The third and longest phase of Arab *Hamlet* appropriation (since the mid-1970s) is the one that concerns us here. All four of our Arabic-language *Hamlet* plays emerge from the agit-prop tradition of Arab drama and comment on its perceived failure.⁴⁰ These plays (though in some cases not their authors) have given up on advocating political change, instead redeploing the heroic conventions of the previous phase for dramatic irony. Of course, each play has its own emphases and would repay a fine-grained reading. But let me focus here on several key strategies that they share.

First, unlike earlier productions such as Ṣubḥī's, these plays do not claim to offer an authoritative rendition of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Instead, they explicitly invoke (the standard Arab reading of) Shakespeare's text in order to emphasize their divergence from it. For instance, both Abū Dūma and 'Adwān turn Horatio into a Brechtian-narrator-cum-*ḥakawātī* (traditional Arab storyteller) whose commentary reminds the audience that they are watching one version of *Hamlet*. Abū Dūma's Horatio opens *The Dance of the Scorpions* like this:

Honored ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce myself to you: I am Horatio, Hamlet's friend whom he entrusted to tell you his story. I've been telling it for five centuries, and finally I got bored of telling it the same way every night. Therefore I will try tonight to tell it to you in a different way (113).

This technique forces the audience to approach the new play with a "binocular vision" that keeps both the received and new versions in mind.⁴¹

Using this binocular effect, the contemporary plays exploit their audiences' expectations of a heroic (manly, articulate, politically potent) Hamlet. They

³⁸ Nisīm Migallī, "Abū zayd al-hilālī... wa-hāmlit: bidāya qafzatin masraḥīya," in *al-Masraḥwa qaḍ īyat al-ḥurriya* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣriya al-ʿĀmma lil-Kitāb, 1984), 169.

³⁹ Interview with the author, 9 August, 2007.

⁴⁰ On the ambivalence toward *iltizām* in Egyptian fiction of the same period, see David F. DiMeo, "Inverting the Framework of Committed Literature: Egyptian Works of Disillusion of the 1960s-80s" (PhD, Harvard, 2006), 343 and *passim*.

⁴¹ "The sought-for effect in such drama relies primarily upon an audience's binocular vision—their members' familiarity with the previous treatment of this same material and their ability to draw comparisons between that and the new, rival treatment." Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: U Michigan Press, 2001), 27.



portray protagonists who are uninformed, ineffectual, naïve, and either inarticulate or uselessly and diarrhetically talkative. Again, they discuss this contrast explicitly. After one infuriating argument, al-Asadī's Horatio bursts out: "You are not the Hamlet I know and have lived with." Hamlet responds with infuriating blankness: "Well, maybe I should change my name" (35). Later, al-Asadī's Ophelia deploys one of Hamlet's key lines for dramatic irony. "Get yourself to a monastery," she tells Hamlet. "There you can rest your mind and body and have leisure to re-pose your question, 'To be or not to be'" (44).

To highlight their protagonists' inefficacy, all four plays use reversed, circular, or otherwise disjointed temporal frameworks. 'Adwān and Abū Dūma start the narration at the end and proceed in flashback; this sense of belatedness weakens Hamlet's character, making him the last to learn "news" that most of the other characters and the audience know already. Al-Asadī starts his action before *Hamlet* begins but has his characters behave as though *Hamlet* had already happened and everyone knew the script. Marzūqī's monodrama collapses a lifetime into a single chain of out-of-order flashbacks where change and character development are impossible.

To be clear: our post-1975 Arab playwrights are not among those Shakespeare adapters who aim to "write back" to Shakespeare's text or subvert its authority.⁴² Rather, they borrow that authority to cast an ironic light on the contemporary Arab situation and the intellectuals it produces. Their unheroic Hamlet, as Mahmoud al-Shetawi has remarked, "embodies the image of the educated Arab in the sense that he is always taken by surprise."⁴³ Yet this critique, which could be read as calling for more constructive political action, also has the opposite effect. For the critique is conscious of itself as coming too late: while Hamlet has slept, Claudius has stolen the show. Filling the vacuum created by Hamlet's impotence, the comic-book villain has expanded into a monster of mythological proportions. His triumph announces the futility of further political action: the displacement of politics (in the Aristotelian sense) by a brute power strong enough to remake reality in its own image.

A king without a conscience

The central fact about the post-1975 Arabic Claudius is that he has no conscience. Thus, he is impervious to political theatre of the sort that Shakespeare's Hamlet deploys in his own play-within-a-play, *The Murder of Gonzago* or *The*

⁴² Cf. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989). On the limits of this model see Ania Loomba, "'Local-Manufacture Made-in-India Othello Fellows': Issues of Race, Hybridity, and Location in Post-colonial Shakespeares," in *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*, ed. Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

⁴³ Mahmoud al-Shetawi, "Hamlet in Arabic," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 20, no. 1 (1999), 51.

Mousetrap (a strategic rewriting, incidentally, of a well-received foreign work). Such performances aim either to persuade the ruler to change his ways or to inspire other audience members to act against him. But in both cases, success depends on the target revealing his own guilt. Hamlet expects his play to produce a physiological response, as in a lie detector test:

Hum- I have heard
 That guilty creatures sitting at a play,
 Have, by the very cunning of the scene,
 Been struck so to the soul that presently
 They have proclaimed their malefactions.
 For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
 With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players
 Play something like the murder of my father
 Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks;
 I'll tent him to the quick. If a do blench,
 I'll know my course. The spirit that I have seen
 May be a devil, and the devil hath power
 T'assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps,
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
 As he is very potent with such spirits,
 Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
 More relative than this. The play's the thing
 Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King. (II.ii.584-601)

Hamlet's *Mousetrap* is an ingenious device, set so that the prey himself will trigger it. To end the performance, Claudius must expose that he recognizes himself in the action onstage, making explicit the interpretation that the actors have only implied. His public response provides rhetorical ammunition for Hamlet: "relative" (relatable) evidence that not only helps push Hamlet to act but could also bolster Hamlet's royal claim in a post-Claudius Elsinore.⁴⁴ Fortunately for Shakespeare's Hamlet, Claudius loses his composure and betrays himself. His apparently involuntary reaction—rising from his chair, calling for more light—marks the success of the play.

By contrast, recent Arab incarnations of Hamlet get nowhere when they try to interpellate the king through performance or criticism. Anything they can *say* is irrelevant next to what he can *do*. For instance, let us look what happens when 'Adwān's Hamlet tries to put on a play.

'Adwān's *Hamlet Wakes Up Late* depicts Elsinore as a brutal political order run by killers, cynics, and spies. The kingdom has suffered a bitter defeat by Fortinbras, with whom the king is (treacherously) planning to make peace and sign an economic cooperation agreement.⁴⁵ Meanwhile 'Adwān's Prince Hamlet,

⁴⁴ For this argument see Litvin, *Hamlet's Arab Journey*, 179-81.

⁴⁵ Some aspects of Fortinbras are suggestive of Israel (e.g., he has inflicted many war casualties and occupies "a few miles" of Danish territory). The play's 1976 publication date rules out

a state-sponsored director, is rehearsing a play called *Shahrayār*. The play is a simple projection screen for his moods.⁴⁶ When Hamlet belatedly learns the rumor that his late father was murdered, he considers integrating it into his play-in-progress. Despite his friend Horatio's warning that "a play can't stab" (196), he believes this would make a sharp political statement. However, the informer Rosencrantz, a member of the cast, runs to tell Polonius, who tells the king. The play is shut down without accomplishing anything.⁴⁷ The actor who told Hamlet the rumor is forced into hiding.

Eventually 'Adwān's Hamlet turns to a more threatening form of performance: he loudly disrupts a state dinner in honor of the visiting former enemy Fortinbras (208-10). This represents a direct challenge to the Claudius regime, which needs to impress foreign investors with the state's "stability." But the challenge is short-lived. Fortinbras orders Claudius to silence the embarrassing dissenter for the sake of "the capitalists" and "their millions" (218). Over his wife's objections, the King helps Polonius and Rosencrantz stage the play's final performance—a show trial at which Hamlet is convicted of a long list of trumped-up charges and condemned to death. (Horatio, who narrates the entire story to the audience in flashback form, is finally arrested as well.)

In Abū Dūma's *Dance of the Scorpions*, Claudius likewise holds a monopoly over the symbolic domain, at least for as long as he has military control. This play posits that Claudius has fabricated a foreign war, bribing his apparent enemy Fortinbras to pretend to attack his kingdom in order to silence his domestic opponents and extort war taxes from the poor. Further, Claudius has invented a council of nobles who, the stage directions tell us, are "not human but are simply paper dummies" (124). At a meeting of this imaginary war council, Hamlet attempts to expose the so-called ministers as paper dolls: "Enough! What's happening? What's this stupid buffoonery (*at-tahrīj as-sakhīf*)? Where are these nobles you're talking to, King? . . . If these dolls are human, let me hear their voices" (126). Again, however, this emperor is untroubled by the child's revelation that he is naked. Hamlet does not catch the king's conscience or even disrupt his puppet show. Hamlet receives a stern warning not to mock the King's cabinet, and the meeting continues. What finally unseats Claudius is not Hamlet's critique but Fortinbras' betrayal (his troops actually attack), coinciding with a revolution led by a domestic militant group.

any allusion to actual peace talks. Rather, I think, 'Adwān presents an *imaginary* state visit by Fortinbras as a nightmare scenario, a deliberately provocative piece of dramatic hyperbole.

⁴⁶ For instance, after an angry conversation with the Queen he splices in a scene: a woman fans the dirt on her husband's grave, hoping to make it dry faster, because he told her not to remarry while it was still wet (193).

⁴⁷ 'Adwān's Syrian audience immediately grasped that Hamlet's theatrical outbursts should not be viewed as "resistance." See Ghunaym, 148-51.



These failures, and others like them, begin to show how formidable the Arab Claudius can be. He has no conscience to make him vulnerable to Hamlet's art. In any case, his confession would be useless, because there is no court to hear the evidence. He is so powerful that "exposure" as a murderer would only reinforce his stature, demonstrating his power to silence his critics and dictate which absurdities are mouthed in his kingdom.⁴⁸ With scenes of this kind, all four Arabic-language plays question the power of words and representations (writing, rewriting, speech, drama, or drama criticism) to achieve political change. In effect, they offer an argument about the futility of arguments.

"Claudius, the state barbarian"

Claudius' lack of a conscience suggests that he is super- or sub-human. This impression is reinforced by the imagery used to describe him and his regime: an imagery of savage beasts, festering waters, and poisonous growths. These metaphors spring from the disgust of Shakespeare's Hamlet, who sees Elsinore as "an unweeded garden" possessed by "things rank and gross in nature." In the Arabic plays, Claudius is a wild animal. His regime is a jungle whose unregulated growth threatens the integrity of the other characters and of the kingdom itself.

'Adwān's play, pervaded by a mood of post-1967 nationalist betrayal, generalizes the contagion. The poisonous growth is not only Claudius but everyone who colludes with him, putting private interests above shared principles; eventually this includes all the surviving characters. As the narrator Horatio puts it just before Hamlet's trial:

Horatio: Everything is destroyed. The human structure has collapsed, from the walls of the homeland to the care of the soul. Borders have been crushed and values have caved in. The corruption that surrounds us and Hamlet wasn't one person and wasn't a few people. Corruption was the soil and the air, and corrupt people sprouted from it without being planted, like weeds sprout from garbage. They just hatched, greedy for any spoils and hating any order and ready to ignore any values (225).

The other plays are more concrete in tracing the contagion to the Claudius figure. Claudius is described as "a wild buffalo" (*jāmūs barrī*) and an "unholy grinder" (*miflḥana ghayr muqaddasa*),⁴⁹ a "mosquito" run wild and grown into a "scorpion" (*istawhashat al-ba'ūd a ḥatā ṣ ārat 'aqraban*),⁵⁰ and (in colloquial

⁴⁸ "The regime's power resides in its ability to impose national fictions and to make people say and do what they otherwise would not." (Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, 84-5.) The fictions' implausibility is part of the point; it is a matter (as Orwell put it) of making people proclaim that 2+2=5.

⁴⁹ Al-Asadī, *Insū hāmlit*, 53, 66, 45 (by Horatio).

⁵⁰ Abū Dūma, *Raqṣat al-'aqārib*, 114 (by the Ghost).



Arabic) a “sewer [that] swallows up everything and only gives off a bad smell” (*al-bālū‘a bi-tabla‘ kull shayy wa-ma bi-tuṭālī‘ ghayr al-rawā’ih*).⁵¹

In al-Marzūqī’s monodrama *Ismail/Hamlet*, the protagonist, a corpse-washer named Ismā‘īl, addresses the corpse of his wicked stepfather. (Part of the play’s dramatic irony is its very distant relation to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Ismā‘īl does not even know why a friend has nicknamed him “Hamlet,” and he shares only a bathhouse version of Hamlet’s dilemma: the *hammam* owner Abū Sa‘īd has sidelined Ismā‘īl’s father and married his mother.) Ismā‘īl’s opening speech links Abū Sa‘īd’s physical filth to his lack of moral boundaries, particularly his tendency to appropriate other people’s wives and girlfriends:

Ah, welcome, welcome, Mister Abu Sa‘īd. I take care of your neighborhood. Abu Sa‘īd whose word is never spoken twice. He decided to marry Umm Lufifī—sent her husband to prison and married her. Decided to marry my mother before the dirt on my father’s grave was dry, and married her. He decided to marry Sa‘diya, and he married her. They say, “Whoever marries my mother I’ll call him Uncle,” well—whoever marries my girl, what do I call him... my boy?

Ah, Uncle Abu Sa‘īd. Finally you’ve come to me. God took you to his place so he could bring you to mine. I’m going to wash you, remove your outside dirt, cut your fingernails, pare your talons, shave you. I’ll stuff your orifices with cotton and send you there to get clean, to roast properly in hellfire. If only I could have cleaned you from the inside or pared your nails while you were alive, you son of a snake. When I worked at your place as a bath attendant, you wouldn’t deign to be washed between one Feast and the next, you filth, too afraid of wasting water! Why didn’t you put in your will for them to dig your grave so you could stand up in it, to cost you less? Abū Sa‘īd whose bones were gold—they’re going to rust away under the dirt and be gnawed by slugs and worms. But I’ll have a few words with you, before you go there. (1-2)

The idea of an animalistic Claudius is even more pronounced in *Forget Hamlet*, which was staged at Cairo’s Hanager Theatre during its author’s nearly 30-year exile from Ba‘thist Iraq. Al-Asadī’s main departure from Shakespeare’s plot is to have Ophelia witness Claudius’ killing of the old king through her window.⁵² Yet even as she becomes the moral center of the play, Ophelia is unable to take any effective action against Claudius’s reign of terror. In part this is because Al-Asadī’s Claudius is impervious to language—he is a *brute* in the most literal sense. He is referred to not only as a “butcher” and “barbarian”(75) but also as a “bull” (22) and a “dinosaur” (*dīnāṣ ūr*, 32); at one point Horatio has a vision of him in the guise of Poseidon, as a wild buffalo holding a sword and parting the sea (34-5). Claudius is also credited with

⁵¹ ‘Abd al-Ḥakīm al-Marzūqī, *Ismā‘īl hāmlit*, 4.

⁵² Hence the original title, *Ophelia’s Window*, under which the play was performed in 1994. Ṣalāḥ ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr’s daughter Mu‘tazza was praised for her fine debut performance as Ophelia. On the production see Fawziya Mahrān, “Shubbāk ūfiliā aw hāmlit ‘ala al-fariqa al-‘aṣriya,” *al-Hilāl*, May 1994, 154-61.



sexual/political appetites on a mythological scale, as in this ironic exchange between the Chorus-like female gravediggers:

Digger 1: [The old king is] the only one who brought our country some sense of dignity and peace of mind. What will become of us with his brother Claudius, the shameless one? We hadn't even buried the body of the old king yet, when the news came out about his marriage to the old hag.

Digger 2: Claudius won't just marry the hag-queen: he'll marry you, and he'll marry me, and he'll marry your mother and my mother... He'll marry all of Denmark. (*They laugh.*) (23)

The bestiality of al-Asadī's Claudius is related to his oversized role in the play. Like a wild animal or mythological figure, he refuses to remain confined by civilized boundaries. Even al-Asadī's introduction to the play illustrates this effect:

I wanted in my dramatic text *Forget Hamlet* to pull the curtain (*uzīḥal-sitār*) from some characters suffering the edge of madness and to open the door of the text (*aftaḥbāb al-naṣṣ*) to their desires and their rancor (*raghbātihim wa-ḥaqdihim*), postponed in the face of Claudius, the state barbarian (*barbarī al-dawla*) who swallowed up (*ibtalaʿ*) his brother and sister-in-law both at once to send the former to the gravediggers and the latter to his own bed and his boorish unmanly haste (*ilā firāshihi wa-nazqihi al-nisawī al-fazz*) (9).

The gestures of curtain-pulling and door-opening suggest a liberation or public airing. Yet the "barbarian," rather than the marginalized characters, fills all the air thus created—he dominates even al-Asadī's explanatory sentence, "swallowing up" its second half. Exposing his barbarity makes it no easier to resist.⁵³ In fact, Al-Asadī's "upside-down rewriting of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*" (as it is subtitled) makes the "state barbarian" more central and irresistible than ever. The gravediggers' earthy political gossip is a microcosm of this fact: while apparently subversive, it actually works to underscore the Claudius regime's power and reach.

All four of our Arabic *Hamlet* plays reinforce their characterization of Claudius through shocking scenes not present in Shakespeare's text: Claudius shaking hands with the foreign enemy Fortinbras, Claudius and Gertrude spitting on the dead king's corpse, Hamlet overhearing his mother's and uncle's bedroom banter, etc. Perhaps the most interesting such scene is Claudius' attempted seduction of Ophelia in al-Asadī's *Forget Hamlet*. In this scene, Ophelia begs Claudius to release her brother, the blind dissident Laertes, from prison; she agrees to spend an evening drinking with Claudius in exchange. (We later learn that Laertes by this time has already been tortured to death.) Claudius signs the pardon papers and pours the wine. Ophelia, either drunk or just unable to bear it any longer,

⁵³ See Achille Mbembe, "The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarity in the Postcolony," *Public Culture* 4 (1992).



confronts Claudius with the murder of the old king. She is under the spell of the murder scene she has witnessed: “I saw the whole scene (*mashhad*)! I saw it with these two eyes (*bi ‘aynayya hātayn*)!” She recounts it as though reading from a screenplay. Meanwhile Claudius, intent on sex, praises the beauty of those same witnessing eyes (“What eyes [*ya laha min ‘aynayn*]!”). A “deaf dialogue” ensues, at one point breaking up into two interlaced monologues:

Ophelia: There is a window in my room looking onto the King’s room and close to it. So I saw everything.

Claudius: Do you want more wine?

Ophelia: It seems the killer is experienced and knows how to carry out his task with unique skill.

Claudius: Oh God, your breasts are trembling just like your lips!

Ophelia: The King was sleeping like a naked child! Gertrude covered him with a light sheet and disappeared! I don’t know how he fell asleep and started snoring so quickly! A huge man entered, wrapped in a cloak and with a turban on his head, carrying a dagger. He pulled off the sheet and slaughtered the King without a noise! The King died without a noise. He didn’t struggle a lot! What a suspicious death. What animal carried out this hideous deed?

Claudius: I issued my order to pardon Laertes in order to drink with you, not so you could tell me bloody tales like this! Don’t be afraid. And to get straight to the point, I want you!

...

He kisses her, tears her clothes and attacks her like a wild buffalo (53).

Already in Shakespeare there are hints of Claudius’ excessive interest in Ophelia, whether as an attractive woman or as a source of subversive talk (“Pretty Ophelia... Follow her close, give her good watch, I pray you”).⁵⁴ But nowhere does Shakespeare’s Claudius explicitly reach a tentacle across the generation gap. Al-Asadī unpacks and extends these hints, just as Marzūqī does in *Ismail/Hamlet* by having Abu Sa’īd marry Sa’dīya, his stepson’s beloved. In both cases, the “state barbarian” thwarts Hamlet personally as well as politically. His sexual rapacity contributes to the Arab Claudius’ status as a mythical figure: a power-grabbing Leviathan and maiden-eating Minotaur.

The eclipse of the father

As we might expect, this overbearing Claudius steals some thunder from the other figure supposed to haunt the play: the ghost of Hamlet’s father. Shakespeare’s text leaves room for a Ghost who is “amazingly disturbing and vivid.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ IV.v.40-74. For a detailed argument see Nehad Selaiha, *Shaksbīriyāt* (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-Miṣriya al-‘Āmma lil-Kitāb, 1999), 168.

⁵⁵ Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

In the Arabic plays, however, Hamlet's father is a uniformly disappointing figure: an old hypochondriac (al-Asadī), a penniless consumptive (Marzūqī), or a liar and rent-seeker (Abū Dūma). Perhaps most devastating is the dead king in 'Adwān's version: a corpse reduced to a heap of "bones and maggots," once great but now able to offer no moral or political guidance to his son. In 'Adwān's play and to some extent in the others, these disappointing fathers can be understood to represent Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Arab nationalist leaders of his generation. Their failure—followed by Claudius' success—leaves the Arab Hamlet in an impossible dilemma, caught between an unmanly father figure and a monstrous one.

In al-Asadī's *Forget Hamlet*, we actually see the old king: a spoiled but harmless hypochondriac wheeled onstage in the first scene, perhaps a version of Shakespeare's gently unimpressive Player King or the "impotent and bedrid" elder Norway (I.ii.29). Even before his death, the old king feels cold and complains that Gertrude does not pay him enough attention. His decency is somehow unimposing. "I never liked the old king," Polonius tells Ophelia later. "That's because he didn't know how to turn you into a servant," she says, "but treated you like a person" (41).

Likewise, in *Ismail/Hamlet*, Ismā'īl's father Ibrāhīm is a pathetic bath attendant, coughing to death while his wife, flirting with Abu Sa'īd, does not bother to bring him a glass of water. Abu Sa'īd openly mocks his rival; he twice insults Ismail using the phrase "like your father." Ibrāhīm is a piteous sight even when he reappears as a ghost, coughing and still carrying his washing-glove and bowl. When he does carry a sword, it is just a priapic appendage, not a weapon. As Ismā'īl puts it, delivering the ironic facts in his usual fiat paratactic way:

Only the ghost of my father [still appears] but this time without his sponge and bowl, carrying a sword in his right hand and a hose in the left.

– Father, where's your bowl?

– It's lost.

– And where's your sponge?

– It wore away and doesn't clean right anymore.

And he left me and kept walking carrying his sword, with the water coming out of his hose strongly. Unclear if he was cleaning something or watering something, and when the sun came out he went to sleep in his grave, but his sword kept sticking up, raised as high as the tombstones or maybe a little higher. And even when they bombed the cemetery in the war, and a lot of graves collapsed on their owners' heads, and many of the dead met a heroic end, but they weren't compensated with new graves, even then my father's sword stayed raised. (11-12)

His father's demotion is more than an insult to the Arab Hamlet: it is an existential challenge, leaving him with no solid identity and hence no way to stand firm against Claudius. The Hamlet in Abū Dūma's *Dance of the Scorpions*, for instance, stays loyal to his father's ghost throughout most of the play, even as

it is promiscuously appropriated for politics: Claudius and even servants and prostitutes claim to have conversed with it about “the enemy at the gate” (120). But in the final scene Hamlet is completely undone by the revelation that his father, the revered late king, was a despot and profiteer who squeezed the peasantry, extorted from the nobles, bribed army commanders, controlled judges and priests, and killed political opponents:

Hamlet: Yes! He was more virtuous than all the kings in the world... My father was pure and untouched, but you contaminate everything.

Claudius: Does that make you feel better? Yes, he was pure and clean, and you don't want anyone to tell you the truth. You always went out of your way to find someone who would mislead you. I suppose you haven't heard anything and have not seen fit to follow the news of the war.

Hamlet: What war? If this is true, then the war is over. If this is true, then for whom did I waste those days sitting and planning revenge? Was it for nothing? (*Looks confused*) Father. Answer me, for the sake of my humiliated pride. Everyone was on the right path except Hamlet. Everyone said, “Do it, Hamlet.” Do it. But what should I do when everything has become just words? Revenge is words and war is words... Words, words, words won't heal the wound.

Claudius: Stop it, Hamlet. It isn't fitting for an army commander to cry like a woman.

Hamlet: Because my heart is wounded and my tears are ready. We should all cry. It isn't right for the likes of us to taste sweetness or see flowers or take pleasure in manly council. We are falling, falling to a place with no decision and no end... If I could find the head of this flaccid life, I would cut it off (139-140).

A political meaning for these father-demotion scenes is suggested by the most wrenching of them, a scene early in *Hamlet Wakes Up Late*. Haunted by the ghost, 'Adwān's Hamlet goes to the cemetery and exhumes his father's coffin, not realizing that he is courting disenchantment. Like many Arab intellectuals after 1967, this Hamlet still wants to trust the ideals the paternal figure represents:

Horatio: Answer me, Hamlet. What happened?

Hamlet (*about to cry*): I saw my father.

Horatio: Have you started imagining him again?

Hamlet: It's not imagination, Horatio. I saw him. I went to the grave and I saw him.

Horatio: Why did you go to the grave?

Hamlet: (*tired*) It came over me, Horatio. Wherever I turn I see his picture. I wanted to make sure that he was not leaving his grave and coming out to me. I can't bear it anymore. I was drinking with them and suddenly he appeared in front of me as usual. I got up right away and rushed to the cemetery.

Horatio: And what's the good of your going to the cemetery?

Hamlet: I opened the coffin. Oh God, Horatio. A disgusting thing. Is that what happens to dead people? Imagine... My father... has become... (*He cannot find the words.*)



Horatio: How could you open the coffin of a man who's been dead a month? Are you mad?

Hamlet: He's my father.

Horatio: Even if he is your father. How could you open the coffin?

Hamlet: I couldn't bear it anymore. Nothing was doing me any good. If I drank I saw him and if I slept I saw him and if I embraced a woman I saw him. Look. (*Takes a book from his pocket.*) I'm even reading the Gospels to escape from him. But Christ himself talks about nothing but his father! What do I do? What do I do? (*Collapses*) O God, Horatio, if you saw the image in that coffin. My father. My father in his greatness and his might was a heap of bones. (*Shakes his head to chase out the picture*) I didn't find his clear eyes or his wrinkled brow. I didn't find his dreams or his faith or his pride or his wrath. (*Explodes*) All I found were bones and maggots!

Horatio: I hope this encounter will convince you that in this condition he cannot leave his coffin to chase after you. When will you get rid of your fantasies? (186)

Thus, Hamlet's father's ghost provides no logical or ideological refuge from which to challenge the successor regime. He simply becomes irrelevant. Against the background of the virtuous father who has failed to deliver, the audience's attention is drawn back to the unprincipled, reality-defining stepfather who has taken his place.



"Let us be dirty together"



The last Arab Hamlet play I will analyze seems clearly a member of the same extended family, but one that grew up overseas. Kuwaiti-British playwright/director Sulayman al-Bassam's *Al-Hamlet Summit* (2002) was first written in English, premiered in Edinburgh, and has been staged (to mostly positive reviews) in London and at international festivals.⁵⁶ Since 2004 it has been performed in Arabic.⁵⁷ It portrays a tottering Arab dictatorship holding an Arab League-style conference with nametags and microphones as civil war engulfs the country, international support withers, and Fortinbras invades. Claudius, Gertrude, Ophelia, Polonius, and Hamlet conspire, declaim, make love, and buy weapons—mostly without leaving their desks in the conference hall.

Reflecting and parodying a newly globalized Arab public sphere, *The Al-Hamlet Summit* offers a channel-flipping mix of Al-Jazeera, CNN, BBC, democracy

⁵⁶ Because the text was in English first, I refer to it as an "Arab *Hamlet*" but not an "Arabic *Hamlet*" play. The play was awarded Best Performance and Best Director at the Cairo International Festival of Experimental Theatre in 2002. For a stage history see Sulayman Al-Bassam, *The Al-Hamlet Summit (Arabic and English)*, ed. Graham Holderness (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2006), 22-27, and <http://www.albassamtheatre.com/node/19>. References are to the printed edition.

⁵⁷ Al-Bassam's shift into Arabic theatre, which has continued with his *Richard III* adaptation, is a subject I hope to explore in a future article.



rhetoric, terrorism, Umm Kulthūm, and Mahmūd Darwish. Al-Bassam's Hamlet grows into an Islamist leader determined to "crush the fingers of thieving bureaucrats, neutralize the hypocrites, tame the fires of debauchery that engulf our cities and return our noble people to the path of God." (82) Ophelia dies as a suicide bomber, quoting Darwish's "Ramallah 2002" in her farewell video.⁵⁸ Claudius' last speech, a televised address declaring war on "terrorist positions belonging to Hamlet and his army" (84), lifts from recent speeches by George W. Bush, Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden and Ariel Sharon.⁵⁹ Background events suggest a collage of several Arab states: car bombs in the capital, Israeli Merkava and British Centurion tanks on the southern border, an oil pipeline deal, and a Shi'a rebellion in the south.⁶⁰ Rather than advance a specific allegory, then, this amalgam relies on and reproduces a blurred composite image of Middle East tyranny and violence.

However, despite these obvious divergences from the Arabic-language *Hamlet* adaptations discussed above, Al-Bassam preserves the concept of an all-pervading villain. The difference is that the villain this time is not Claudius' regime but that of militarized global capitalism. It is introduced in the character of the Arms Dealer, a polyglot personage absent from Shakespeare's text. The dealer sells Claudius and Fortinbras their tanks and rockets, Hamlet his phosphorus bombs, and Ophelia her suicide belt.⁶¹ S/he is explicitly described as unbounded, opportunistic, and voracious—the very qualities the Arabic plays associate with Claudius.

Arms Dealer: Glimpsed in the corridors of power, blurred in the backdrop of official state photographs, faceless at parties, anonymous at airports, trained as a banker, conversant in Pashtun, Arabic, Farsi, and Hebrew, feeding off desire: I am an Arms Dealer.⁶²

The arms dealer is only the beginning, however. The real global villain is identified more precisely in Al-Bassam's version of the "prayer scene," the soliloquy in which Claudius kneels to seek forgiveness for his crimes. In Shake-

⁵⁸ "The one who has turned me into a refugee has made a bomb of me" (78 and n. 8). See also, Ali Jaafar, "Al-Hamlet Daringly Transposes Shakespeare's Classic Play to Modern Middle Eastern Setting," *The Daily Star*, March 29, 2004.

⁵⁹ Al-Bassam has pointed this out himself: see Sulayman Al-Bassam, "Am I Mad? Creating *The Al-Hamlet Summit*," *Theatre Forum* 22 (2003). See also, Al-Bassam's interview with Shirley Dent, available at <http://www.culturewars.org.uk/2003-01/albassam.htm>.

⁶⁰ The allusions to Iraq, Lebanon, and other countries are deliberately ambiguous or contradictory. Al-Bassam's program note says: "It is not a piece about any specific country in the Arab world. Rather, it presents a composite of many Arab concerns that affect peoples from the Arabian Gulf to the Atlantic and beyond" (<http://www.albassamtheatre.com/node/19>).

⁶¹ In the original English version, the dealer is a woman; in the Arabic version, the dealer is male and the only native-English-speaking actor in an otherwise Arab cast.

⁶² Original English version, manuscript p. 3. Excised from subsequent Arabic version.

speare, this soliloquy reveals the usurper's anguish and reminds the audience of his human weakness:

O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,
A brother's murder.

...

Try what repentance can: what can it not?
Yet what can it when one can not repent?
O wretched state! O bosom black as death!
O limed soul, that, struggling to be free
Art more engag'd! Help, angels! Make assay.
Bow, stubborn knees; and heart with strings of steel,
Be soft as sinews of the newborn babe.
All may be well. (III.iii.36-72)

All four of our Arabic-language plays omit this scene, leaving Claudius opaque and thus more awe-inspiring. (The omission also takes away Hamlet's only clear opportunity to kill the king.) Al-Bassam's play does just the opposite. It turns the prayer scene into a long, delirious monologue. Claudius climbs atop his desk, undressing as he talks, until he remains kneeling in his underwear. "Oh God: Petro dollars. Teach me the meaning of petro dollars," he prays. "I have no other God than you, I am created in your image, I seek guidance from you the All Seeing, the All Knowing Master of Worlds, Prosperity and Order ...

Claudius: Help me, Lord, help me—your angelic ministers defame me, they portray me as a murderer, a trafficker of toxins, a strangler of children, why is this God? I lie naked before you while they deafen you with abuse. Let me not be disagreeable to you, God, I do not compete with you, how could these packets of human flesh compete with your infinity; I am your agent, nor am I an ill partner for your gluttony and endless filth.

I do not try to be pure: I have learnt so much filth, I eat filth, I am an artist of filth I make mounds of human bodies, sacrifices to your glory, I adore the stench of rotting peasants gassed with your technology, I am a descendant of the Prophet, Peace be Upon Him, and you, you are God.

Your angelic ministers want to eliminate me, throw me like Lucifer from the lap of your mercy, but who brought me here, oh God, let us not forget, who put me here?

In front of your beneficence, I am a naked mortal, full of awe: my ugliness is not unbearable, *surely* it is not? My nose is not so hooked is it, my eyes so diabolical as when you offered me your Washington virgins and CIA opium. Oh, God, my ugliness does not offend you now, does it?

Your plutonium, your loans, your democratic filth that drips off your ecstatic crowds—I want them all, Oh God; I want your vaseline smiles and I want your pimp ridden plutocracies; I want your world shafting bank; I want it shafting me now—offer me the shafting hand of redemption—Oh God let us be dirty together, won't you? (70-1)

The local despot, so formidable in the Arabic-language *Hamlet* plays, here appears reduced and transparent, as pathetic as an addict pleading with his dealer. Yet rather than being dissipated, his magical powers are transferred upstairs to his prayer's addressee—the United States, global capitalism, oil interests, etc. The play suggests that these powers are enormous, nearly unlimited. The chameleon arms dealer is just a branch of the enterprise. Whereas earlier versions of the Claudius character govern through puppet shows, this king is a puppet himself. The audacity of Al-Bassam's rewriting lies not in casting an Arab leader as Claudius, but in casting the United States as God.

* * *

A ruler whose power serves as its own justification is not bound by any political process. Sitting alone above politics, he must be, in Aristotle's phrase, "either a beast or a god: he is no part of a state."⁶³ The post-1975 Arab Claudius characters we have examined approach this level of self-sufficiency. Particularly in the works by Syrian and Iraqi playwrights, 'Adwān's *Hamlet Wakes Up Late* and al-Asadi's *Forget Hamlet*, the Claudius regime's brutality appears nearly bestial, its omnipotence nearly divine.

Their beast-or-god status helps explain why these Claudius figures cannot serve a consciousness-raising model of theatre in the Brechtian sense. Brechtian theatre seeks to foreclose identification with dramatic characters in order to awaken reason and thus demystify the hidden workings of political power.⁶⁴ But where power is seen as *non-political* (where it can afford to be indifferent to politics and thus to critical analysis), such an intervention is of no use. There is no underlying logic to expose, only power. In an extreme case, like al-Asadi's *Forget Hamlet*, playgoers trained to decode political allegories find themselves plunged into a context where their understanding makes no difference. (Ophelia has seen Claudius commit the murder "with [her] own eyes"; yet she is powerless to stop the mass murders that follow.) Such a play invites the audience to share an experience of powerlessness before an irresistible villain—precisely the effect Brecht wished to avoid.

Al-Bassam's *Al-Hamlet Summit*, as I have suggested, is a rule-proving exception. Drawing on the Arab political imagination although not the Arab dramatic

⁶³ Aristotle, *The Politics*, 14.

⁶⁴ "The essential point of the epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason. Instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things." Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 23. On Brecht's importance as a model in Arab theatre, see Farouk El-Demerdash, "Dix années de théâtre dans la république arabe unie," in *Le Théâtre Arabe*, ed. Nada Tomiche and Cherif Khaznadar (Paris: UNESCO, 1969); Nehad Selaiha, "Brecht in Egypt," *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, June 11-17 1998; and Mahmoud El Lozy, "Brecht in Egyptian Political Theater," in *The View from Within: Writers and Critics on Contemporary Arabic Literature*, ed. Ferial J. Ghazoul and Barbara Harlow (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1994).

tradition, Al-Bassam creates a weak Claudius closer to Shakespeare's "king of shreds and patches." But his play arrives at the same concept of unlimited self-justifying power, albeit on a global scale. In the past few years, Al-Bassam's move of casting the United States as an evil deity has become increasingly common in Arab theatre productions.⁶⁵ Developed with local Arab regimes in mind, the dramatic trope of an omnivorous Leviathan/Minotaur is now available for transplantation. Amid the continuing images of violence pouring in from Iraq and elsewhere in the region, Arab playwrights and directors are likely to elaborate that trope still further.

⁶⁵ At least two plays presented in Cairo in 2004 featured uniformed US soldiers storming through the stage and audience, breaking the fourth wall and loudly disrupting the action: Khālid al-Şawī's immensely popular *Al-La'b fi-l-dimāgh* (Messing With the Mind) and Mahmoud El Lozy's revival of Alfred Farag's *Sulaymān al-Ḥalabī*. Some variations on this theme were apparently also present at the 2004 Damascus Theatre Festival; see Rāshid 'Isā, "Mahrajān dimashq al-masraḥī fi dawiratihi al-12: 'urūḍ min ghayr bayānāt wa-lā mashārī' wa-l-hurriya ṣawt al-jamī'," *Al-Safir*, Dec. 3, 2004.