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"Blood Draws Flies": Arab-Western Entanglement in Sulayman Al-Bassam's Cross-Cultural *Hamlet*

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As England's East India Company expanded its global market to the East, cultural material, like the works of William Shakespeare, were transmitted along with tradable goods. The works of Shakespeare first reached the Arab world in the early 17th century. On the third voyage of the London East India Company in 1608, the crew of the *Red Dragon*, the company's flagship, performed *Hamlet* on the island of Socotra, now part of the Arab Republic of Yemen.[1] This voyage, and its theatrical endeavors, were recorded in General William Keeling's journal, in which he notes that *Hamlet* was staged twice and *Richard II* once during the outbound voyage (Barbour and Marlowe 255). By 1609, the *Red Dragon* had reached colonial Indonesia. Thus began Shakespeare's journey through the Middle East and Asia very early in the history of British global trade and empire expansion.

Such cultural exchanges were considered "…an important tool in the cultural work of colonization" (Barbour and Marlowe 255). The performance of Shakespeare by the crew of the *Red Dragon* on this third expedition of the Company was particularly important in establishing diplomatic ties in Africa, where previous expeditions had resulted in pillaging and the capture of Africans for slavery. African dignitaries were invited onboard the ship to witness this demonstration of "English cultural achievement." Similar cultural exchanges and diplomatic treatment of Arab officials in Socotra proved invaluable to the Company, as Keeling thereby obtained crucial navigational information from local mariners, facilitating the Company's expansion into the Indian Ocean and surrounding ports of trade (256). These early performances by the crew of the *Red Dragon* created a precedent establishing *Hamlet* as a global political property. By performing the play as a means of gaining the trust of people who would eventually fall victim to British imperialism, the *Red Dragon* provided these areas with their first encounter with political Shakespeare—ironically

[1]See the Prologue to *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange* (Columbia UP, 2009) ed. Alexander C. Y. Huang and the Introduction to Sulayman Al-Bassam's *The Al-Hamlet Summit* by Graham Holderness (U of Hertfordshire P, 2006).

through the staging of *Hamlet* and *Richard II* which embody the struggle over power that the near and far East would experience internally and with foreign powers over the next four hundred years.

Although Shakespeare first found his way into the Arab world propelled by the sails of British trade, the Middle East's "Shakespeare" was formed through a multiplicity of lenses reflecting Shakespeare's status as a global author. As Margaret Litvin asserts in her book, *Hamlet's Arab Journey: Shakespeare's Prince and Nasser's Ghost*, the Arab Shakespeare was formed through a "kaleidoscope" of influences including the British "original" as well as Italian, French, American, Soviet, and Eastern European Shakespearean adaptations and traditions (2). Graham Holderness and Bryan Loughrey, in their article "'Rudely Interrupted': Shakespeare and Terrorism," argue that Shakespeare remains a symbol of Western dominance, even if not solely Anglo-dominance. In their interpretation of the March 2005 suicide bomber attack on the Doha Player's Theatre in Qatar during a performance of *Twelfth Night*, Holderness and Loughrey contend that, to the Al-Qa'eda organizers and perpetrator of the attack, the production "must have represented...a flagrant display of Western cultural power" (114). "Shakespeare and jihad," they assert, "no longer appear such improbable bed fellows" (112). The production, according to Martin Walker, encapsulated

> …the Shakespeare who stands for the Western invasion of Islam's holy peninsula. He is the symbol of the English language that he helped perfect, and thus he also symbolizes its steady advance into the mouths and sensibilities of a generation of educated Arabs. (qtd. in Holderness and Loughrey 114)

The attack, they assert, was not only an attack on a culturally diverse audience and theatre troupe (including many Western expats), but an attack on Shakespeare himself as an instrument of cultural imperialism and symbol of Western cultural and political dominance. Despite Shakespeare's hybridization through contact with other cultures, Holderness and Loughrey's analysis of the terrorist attack in Qatar claims that, in the eyes of the terrorists, Shakespeare serves as a dominant symbol of continued Western influence and oppression within the Arab world.

Litvin, however, argues that Shakespeare has outgrown his imperial roots precisely because of the kaleidoscope of influences that have created his Arab identity. This establishes him as "a global author rather than a British one" and prevents him from being "resisted or

subverted" as an object of cultural imperialism or dominance (*Journey* 58). In fact, in the Arab world, as in China and other post-colonialities, Shakespeare was "globalized and naturalized" as an "ally in the fight against British rule" (14, 75). The earliest translations of Shakespeare in the Arab world first appeared in the 1890s and, similar to China, saw a progressive evolution "toward ever more faithful and readable" versions (59). Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales From Shakespeare* served as an early source for Arabic translations of Shakespeare and the English version of the *Tales* was studied in Egyptian schools throughout the twentieth century (72). Thus, like other post-colonial nations, Shakespeare's adaptation, appropriation, and performance became instrumental in the founding and growth of a modern Arab theatre tradition.

Arab theatre emerged from Middle East traditions of shadow plays, puppetry (*karagoz*/*karakoz)*, the recitation of poetry, and public storytelling by the *hakawait* or storyteller (Zuhur 4). Nadia Ai-Bahar notes that the introduction of Shakespeare and Western theatrical traditions was instrumental in the formation of an Arab dramatic tradition, which previously did not include plays. In "Shakespeare in Early Arabic Adaptations," Ai-Bahar explains, "The theatrical field being void of indigenous plays, the ground was open to the introduction of the adaptations of Shakespeare's plays" (13). Much like other post-colonial regions, Arabs embraced theatre and Shakespeare in particular as cultural ambassadors to "...foster greater respect for Arab culture and greater self-respect among Arabs" (Litvin, *Journey* 48). Early engagement with Shakespearean performance in the Arab world, particularly in Egypt (the Arab world's cultural center until its defeat by Israel in the June War of 1967), was part of an attempt to master "world classics" and to put Egypt, both literally and metaphorically, on the world stage (11).

Shakespeare became a "…battleground on which a native identity is asserted and an adult artistic personality begins to develop" (Litvin, *Journey* 55-56). While Shakespeare's translation and production formed the foundation on which Arabs sought to modernize their theatrical traditions, "[t]he Shakespearean text" became "a means for discussing...diverse post-colonialities" (Loomba and Orkin 19), and, in many cases, it asserted Arab nationalism. Theatre took on a nationalistic impetus as "…encroachments of Western powers on parts of the Arab world gained momentum" (Al-Shetawi, "Conflict" 46). Influenced and inspired by the development of nationalism in West, Arabs turned to the development of "…a committed literature...to reflect the Arab national quest for independence and unity." It was in plays that

this committed literature first became apparent and the work of Ahmad Shawqi (1868-1932) was its first example.

While writers like Shawqi forged a uniquely Arab voice for the stage, Shakespeare formed the litmus test of theatrical maturity for Egypt and many other Arab nations. As Litvin argues, "[U]se of Shakespeare mirrored that of many emerging states striving to prove their worthiness for international respect and political independence" (Litvin, *Journey* 50). The early formative Shakespearean productions in Egypt were both politically and commercially driven as Egypt strove to prove its cultural prowess and fill the seats of its newly formed theaters with Western immigrant businessmen (60). As Arab theatre developed and sought a position on the global stage, Shakespeare's tragedies, and among them *Hamlet*, became the primary vehicle for the assertion of Arab theatrical prowess. However, these plays were often performed in classical Arabic to the point that even the most educated of audience members did not understand them. Such distancing effects as these kept the stark political undertones of plays like *Hamlet* safely tucked away and prevented allegorical readings of the play (50). Thus, early Arab-Shakespeare interaction was largely a teaching and cultural exercise, while the practitioners strove to maintain, at least overtly, an apolitical tone.

However, Arab theatre, and subsequently Shakespeare's arabic renditions, have grown into vehicles for political engagement. As Sulayman Al-Bassam has noted, "Shakespeare's world, with its mixture of autocracy and feud, conspiracies, adoration of rhetoric, and its feudal structures, has specific [political] resonances for the Arab world" (qtd. in Culshaw). Sherifa Zuhur similarly contends that Middle Eastern theatre and the arts "…have been highly responsive to political circumstances" (6). He further argues that theatre's "vitality" is measured in the Arab world by its "…ability to continue to sharpen social consciousness or point out the abuses of political power." Moreover, its political and social work was openly recognized by Egyptian dramatists who considered themselves as "mediators between the revolution and society" (Litvin, *Journey* 45). Egyptian theatre of the early 1960s, like China, served as "regime-directed allegorical drama," and the government funded and promoted art "…that would 'contribute to the objectives of a democratic socialist society'" (45, 93). Such government interest and investment in theatre, in Egypt and throughout the Arab world, indicates a general recognition of the power of performance to influence the masses.

However, public funding of theatre in the Arab world, like other emerging nations, has ensured that the overt messages played on

stage further state agendas. The funding of theatre in the Middle East has generally followed the trend of moving from private to public following the various revolutions and uprisings each nation has encountered (Zuhur 7).[2] Due to state control and censorship of theatrical works, issues of "social realism or critique" were the main focus, and political theatre was, at least overtly, supportive of the ruling regime. State control and censorship of theatrical engagement emerged largely in response to controversial and often illegal uprisings or *coup d'états.* The ruling regimes thus recognized the stage's latent power for suggestion and strove to suppress theatre's political engagement to ensure that it may not undermine an already frail system.

An increased "intolerance of dissent" in 1960s Egypt lead to "…playwrights and directors...cod[ing] their political suggestions in more subtle ways" (Litvin, *Journey* 48). By employing "historical, classical, foreign or fabulistic locales," dramatists were able to convey political messages with greater safety. Therefore, Shakespeare, distanced from contemporary Arab politics by language, time, and location, emerged as a perfect vehicle for political commentary and engagement. Theatre practitioners could employ his works overtly as part of the ongoing mission to establish a rich and globally relevant cultural tradition within Arab nations; covertly, however, many productions began to take on political import.

Despite some instances of early drama censorship, until recent times, Shakespeare was assimilated with greater enthusiasm and less formal restriction within the Arab world than in China and other emerging Asian and African nations. *Hamlet,* in particular, was considered appropriate for Arab audiences and was continuously produced in various adaptations (suited to current social/political climates) in Egypt from the 19th century onwards. In fact, *Hamlet,* according to Margaret Litvin, is the most translated play (into Arabic) of the entire Shakespeare canon (Litvin, *Journey* 3). Mahmoud F. Al-Shetawi argues that the reason for *Hamlet*'s popularity with early Arab audiences was three-fold: first, the supernatural elements of the play are reminiscent of those present in traditional Arab folklore; second, the theme of revenge expresses "a time-honored trait of the Arab social character" ("*Hamlet*" 44) and third, the melodrama of Hamlet's madness would appeal to an "ordinary audience."

In the early years of its production, the play was often staged as an historical romance with Hamlet victorious against Claudius. These

[2]See for instance the Egyptian revolution of 1952, the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979 and "Syria after the rise of Asad" (Zuhur 7).

early adaptations also contained songs and musical interludes, as music was expected by the early Arab theatre audience. In productions throughout Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia from the 1970s onward, Claudius was often characterized as "…the powerful Arab despot, while Hamlet was the 'Arab intellectual, a figure commonly portrayed as impotent when it came to positively responding to the miserable conditions of his country'" (Holderness 11-12). Hamlet's Arab evolution has spanned the gamut from Arab national hero to freedom fighter to homegrown terrorist. The play's progression mirrors the social and political climate of the producing nation, and thus maintains a contemporaneity often lost in Western productions.

The earliest recorded Arab production of *Hamlet* was performed in 1901 as a musical with a happy ending for the tragic prince (Litvin, "French" 133). This production's script was derived from mostly French sources and featured "heroic Hamlet in pursuit of justice" (Litvin, *Journey* 10). Tanyus Abdu's adaptation was performed "...in Egypt at least seventeen times during the years 1901 to 1910," proving that Shakespeare could be a great commercial success. In 1922, the first full direct English to Arabic *Hamlet* translation was published in Egypt by Sami al-Juraydini, and although his script was criticized in production as "too dry and stilted," the tradition of fidelity to the English original was, for many years, the standard of Shakespeare translation and production (71).

After 1955, Soviet models of adaptation and performance became prevalent as many Arab directors traveled to the Socialist bloc to study with its foremost theatre practitioners (Litvin, *Journey* 77). The Soviet influence on Shakespearean performance and interpretation resulted in an apolitical view of *Hamlet* until Grigori Kozintsev's film version, *Gamlet*, planted "the seed of a political Hamlet" when it was first screened in Cairo's Odeon Cinema in 1964 to commemorate Shakespeare's quadricentennial (85; 79). It was only after Egyptian directors tackled a handful of seemingly less challenging Shakespeare plays between 1962 and 1964 that "Egyptian theatre was deemed ready to tackle *Hamlet*, considered Shakespeare's most grueling play" (86). This piece was not, however, staged as a "political parable" (87) and critics of Sayyid Bidayr's production "call[ed] for more purposive, topical stagings" that would help "frame the pressing concerns of contemporary Arab society" (89).

Despite calls for a more politically engaging Shakespearean tradition, *Hamlet* was not used to examine political or social concerns in Egypt until the 1970s. However, in regards to the incorporation of

Hamlet in "politically themed Arab drama," Litvin argues that it was not "…caused by any conscious agenda of postcolonial appropriation" (*Journey* 90). Instead, Arab playwrights strove to portray emotionally complex and "politically topical characters," which resulted in a "'Hamletization' of the Arab Muslim political hero." Hamlet thus became synonymous in the audience's minds with "the theme of earthly justice." Litvin's analysis portrays the modern Arab Muslim as a Hamlet figure, and she argues that it is because of the Muslim world's familiarity with *Hamlet* that such allegory has found footing. Similarly, Al-Shetawi argues that *Hamlet*'s "…assimilation into the fabric of Arabic creative processes" is so thorough that its lineage and evolution is difficult to trace ("*Hamlet*" 60). *Hamlet* has become so culturally pervasive in the Arab world as to make reference to the play in creative or political discourse absorb a myriad of symbolic significance.

Litvin is not the only critic to recognize the figure of Hamlet as a metaphor for the modern Arab. Sadik J. Al-Azm in his *Boston Review* article, "Time Out of Joint: Western Dominance, Islamist Terror, and the Arab Imagination," argues that the Muslim world's simultaneous assimilation and rejection of "European modernity" has made the modern Arab into the

> …Hamlet of our times, doomed to unrelieved tragedy, forever hesitating, procrastinating, and wavering between the old and the new, between *asala* and *mu'asara* (authenticity and contemporaneity), between *turath* and *tajdid* (heritage and renewal), between *huwiyya* and *hadatha* (identity and modernity), and between religion and secularity, while the conquering Fortinbrases of the world inherit the new century.

Hamlet's political struggles and vacillations between action and inaction became powerful metaphors for the modern Arab's internal and global struggles. Bari Walsh, in her article about Margaret Litvin's research, confirms the Hamlet-as-metaphor theory. She writes, "Hamlet's problem mirrors a problem facing the Arab world: 'to exist or dissolve, to awaken politically or to slumber while history passes by'." Just as Jan Kott saw in Shakespeare a powerful metaphor for the Grand Mechanism of history, contemporary scholars of Arab politics analyze the political strife and struggle for identity in the Arab world in Shakespearean terms. Similarly, Litvin affirms that "...Arab cultural commentators see the character, and *Hamlet* itself, as a potent way to talk about 'an existential threat to a valued collective identity'" (Walsh). Thus, *Hamlet*'s pervasiveness throughout Arab culture has provided not only fodder for theatre practitioners, but a powerful im-

age and source of language with which to engage in political discourse.

It is the theme of political agency, according to Litvin, that has drawn Arab adaptors and directors to *Hamlet*. She argues that the direct link between "the contemporary Islamist" and Hamlet is "their politics" (Litvin, *Journey* 16). Litvin hinges the emergence of *Hamlet*'s political life in the Arab world on the humiliating 1967 defeat of Arab forces in the June Six-Day War with Israel and, particularly, Gamal Abdel Nasser's death.[3] Nasser's death, she argues, was felt throughout the Arab world as representation of the death of hope for Arab unity. As this hope crumbled, early political adaptations of the play focused solely on internal Arab politics and removed the Fortinbras subplot (126). In contrast with previous archetypal Arab hero Hamlets, "The new Hamlet lacks power—most notably, *verbal* power" (146). Hamlet's loss of language reflects the impotence felt within Arab societies after the June War and Nasser's death. In Arab societies, "rhetorical virtuosity" or the use of "fluent and often artful language" was a sign of "competence, power, and manly virtue" (146), and without it, Hamlet is left powerless in a corrupt state.

Since the 1967 defeat, contemporary politicized adaptations often purposely separate themselves from Shakespeare's text and instead rely on the audience's familiarity with previous renditions and interpretations of *Hamlet* to highlight Hamlet's new-found impotence. As Litvin writes, "The old play is allowed to haunt the new one" (Litvin, *Journey* 146). Arab Shakespeare adaptors create a dialogue between the new play and contemporary Arab politics with earlier, more faithful renditions of *Hamlet*, through the tension created by free adaptation. After the Six-Day War defeat, Arab theatre directors stopped attempting to address corrupt regimes through productions, but instead shifted their focus on Hamlet as metaphor for the now voiceless and impotent audience. Hamlet emerged as "…a revolutionary martyr for justice who dies confronting a repressive regime" (115). "Because his will was pure," writes Litvin, "the outcome was foreknown: Hamlet's conflict with the overwhelming corruption of his environment destined him for martyrdom." Hamlet thus emerged as a political everyman doomed to fall under a corrupt and repressive regime. Like Zhaohua's impotent Danish prince, his plight is effectively collectivized and he becomes a metaphor for the disenchanted and im-

[3]Ed note-See the Chapter 2 of Margaret Litvin's *Hamlet's Arab Journey: Shakespeare's Prince and Nasser's Ghost*. Princeton UP, 2011. Gamal Abdel Nasser Hussein was the second President of Egypt whose policies and personality majorly influenced the Arab Hero Hamlet according to Margaret Litvin.

potent modern Arab, battling fruitlessly against corruption of a magnitude that renders individual action ineffective.

However, in more recent Arab history, the trend in *Hamlet* adaptation has seen a greater focus on the figure of Fortinbras as a foreign threat. Mahmoud Al-Shetawi argues that nationalistic literatures emerge in response to foreign influence and dominance in the Arab world and often portray "...the deteriorating political and social conditions of Arab societies because of foreign domination and point...to ways out of this decline" ("Conflict" 46). As Al-Azm asserts, Arabs, like Hamlet, feel their place on the world stage as makers of history that has been usurped

> …by modern Europe *fi ghaflaten min al-tarikh*—while history took a nap, as we say in Arabic. I say usurped—and usurpation is at the heart of Hamlet's tribulations and trials—because this position belongs to us by right, by destiny, by fate, by election, by providence, or by what you have.

Hamlet has been woven into the very fabric of Arab political discourse and identity. His trial is so engrained in the Arab imagination that it is only fitting that productions of *Hamlet* have come to directly address Arab politics. Contemporary Arab politics has resulted in *Hamlet* adaptations which are highly attuned to both the internal and external struggles of Arab states that have erupted in the post 9/11 world. As Al-Azm and Litvin have asserted, the post 9/11 Muslim predicament resembles Hamlet's and has fueled free adaptations of Shakespeare's play that are timely and biting in their criticism of both the East and West.

The time is truly out of joint throughout the Arab world and as the ten year anniversary of the liberation of Kuwait during the Gulf War approached, Kuwaiti playwright and director, Sulayman Al-Bassam, envisioned *Hamlet* as the perfect raw material for a contemporary and politically relevant adaptation, *The Al-Hamlet Summit: A Political Arabesque*. Like his politically engaged Egyptian predecessors, Al-Bassam composed an adaptation that strips Hamlet of his language and sets the play up to dialogue with the "authoritative" renditions most familiar to both his English and Arabic-speaking audiences. The adaptation has been performed and published in both English and Arabic and has received both condemnation and accolades.[4]

[4]Al-Bassam was accused on one occasion of funding the production through secret Israeli contributions as a pointedly anti-Arabic/anit-Islamic production (Al-Bassam 24).

Al-Bassam recognized the political nature of Shakespeare's original and relied upon his audience to recognize the struggle for rulership and the use of violence and revenge embedded in *Hamlet*. By locating his adaptation as a fictional meeting of Arab delegates, he underscores the political implications of Shakespeare's original, seamlessly aligning his work both with the original debate over succession and the possibility of modern Arab monarchical so-called "democracies." Although Shakespeare's original language was completely expunged from his adaptation, all of the major plot elements of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* can be correlated to scenes in Al-Bassam's adaptation, with Al-Bassam even attempting to mimic Shakespeare's original word-play in his characterization of Hamlet. The main cast of characters remains intact—Claudius, Gertrude, Hamlet, Polonius, Laertes, Ophelia, and Fortinbras—with one significant addition: the Arms Dealer. In the introductory list of characters, the players are designated as either "delegates" or "outsiders," the outsiders being Fortinbras and the Arms Dealer.

From the beginning, Al-Bassam situates his text as a commentary about foreign influence in Arab society and culture. By unfolding the plot in an unspecified location, the playwright establishes a universal commentary on the Arab world. This adaptation into the modern Arab world is a particularly apt reflection of the post-9/11 War on Terror and, in the light of the media's recent references to the political uprisings in the Middle East, the Arab Spring. Al-Bassam's play simultaneously focuses on Western societies' influence in the Arab world and the treacherous nature of Arab internal politics, where religious extremism and politics mix and conflict with deadly consequences. As per the play's conclusion, internal conflict between factions led by Hamlet, Claudius, and Laertes throw the country into civil war, and when all the major characters have died, the country is left for usurpation by an Israeli-esque force led by Fortinbras.

The Al-Hamlet Summit evolved out of two previous projects, *Hamlet in Kuwait* and *The Arab League Hamlet*, and was first performed for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 2002, for which it won the Edinburgh Festival Fringe First 2002 for Excellence and Innovation in Writing and Directing. *Hamlet in Kuwait* featured a more recognizably Shakespearean text and traditional costumes, but it made use of site-specific cultural signifiers that linked the production directly with Kuwaiti history and politics. The cross-cultural aims of *The Summit* were in evidence even in this earlier version, as the production was also performed in front of 600 American troops in Doha. While *Hamlet in Kuwait* was more specifically attuned to a particularly Ku-

waiti audience, featuring an exaggerated Claudius-Saddam Hussein link and video footage of Kuwait's burning oil fields during the Iraqi invasion, the adaptation's next rendition, *The Arab League Hamlet*, adapted the previous text into a composite of Arab nations to produce a collective Arab lens and, while maintaining Shakespeare's text, situated the play in "a grotesquely pompous summit meeting" set in an unidentified Arab nation (Al-Bassam, "Mad" 86).

The play's political evolution was fueled by the penchant of Arab audiences "to extract political meaning" from theatrical works. "In fact," Al-Bassam argues, "…as a result of decades of censorship, they had grown to almost demand political significance" (Al-Bassam, "Mad" 86). By relocating *The Arab League Hamlet* into a summit setting, Al-Bassam was able to take further liberties with Shakespeare's text and introduce the character of the Arms Dealer, "…who is desperately courted by each of the delegates" (86-87). The Tunisian audience for which this adaptation was written "…immediately read the work as a piece of radical agitprop" (87).

While the production was readily recognized as political theatre by Arab audiences, when Al-Bassam's company played the adaptation in front of an invited London audience that included well-known theatre critics and other working professionals from the theatre world, it was viewed as "…little more than a 'clever' adaptation of Shakespeare" (Al-Bassam, "Mad" 87). Al-Bassam was dismayed by the reaction. He explained that he "...had wanted them to feel the same voyeuristic thrill that the Arab [viewer] had felt" in viewing and hearing the "forbidden act." Al-Bassam had wanted his English audience to "…experience the same sense of strangeness in familiarity" that his Arab audience had felt, but, most importantly, "the same degree of implication in the events presented to them on stage. (87)" This was not, however, the reaction that *The Arab League Hamlet* received.

Hamlet's familiarity to Western audiences prevented the complete inscription of contemporary and local import that Al-Bassam sought. To reach a cross-cultural audience, Al-Bassam realized that his *Hamlet* needed to lose its Shakespeare. To guide the adaptation that would become *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, Al-Bassam imagined a kaleidoscopic Arab audience constructing meaning of his English-language text and strove to maintain the "poetry, anger, irony and sorrow" of his Arab inspirations. "Part of the success of *The Al-Hamlet Summit*," Al-Bassam argues, "…was that it brought the English audience into a world so foreign that it was almost taboo" (Al-Bassam, "Mad" 88). *The Summit* gives Western audiences a sense of voyeurism in watching

the dirty and frightening inner workings of Arab-West political engagement, and a sense of discomfort arises through the open revelation of Western political influence (and dominance) within the Arab world.

A component of SABAB[5] Theatre's[6] mission "…is to establish new spaces of action and reflection inside the contemporary Arab world and beyond it" (sabab.org). They work with ensembles of pan-Arab actors, and following the kaleidoscopic Arab model that inspired the text, *The Summit* featured actors from around the Arab world including actors from Kuwait, Syria, and Iraq. SABAB finds inspiration in "…the points of articulation—literary, historical, geo-political and imagined—that link the Arab World to a wider global context, and seeks to initiate new ones through a theatrical process." It was to carry out this mission of reaching across cultural and national boundaries that Sulayman Al-Bassam created his *Summit* and it guided much of the adaptation's evolution.

In September 2002, *The Al-Hamlet Summit* toured to the 14th Cairo International Festival of Experimental Theatre. The Cairo performance caused "a riot outside the theatre" as "[w]ord about the play's political frankness had gotten around" (Al-Bassam, "Mad" 88). The show sold out and a crowd of three hundred gathered outside the theatre to demand tickets. Due to the large and increasingly unruly crowd amassed outside the theatre, the Festival Jury members had to be shuttled into the theatre through a "tight security cordon." Rumors began to spread that only Western audience members were being allowed in, and when the British Ambassador's convoy arrived, "...it was the last straw—blows were thrown, the theatre doors began to shake, police were called and people arrested, television cameras went to the ground," and the Ambassador was snuck into the theatre through a stage door. After the first performance of the play, the company obliged the raucous crowd by performing the show a second time with a midnight curtain. This was the English-language show's first performance in front of a mostly Arab-speaking audience and included simultaneous translations of the dialogue.

The initial reactions to this performance, both from audience members and the Arab press, were mixed. Some condemned the play for making a false link between Islam and violence and denounced its creator as a "Western traitor" (Al-Bassam, "Mad" 88). However, Al-

[5]SABAB's name comes from the verb *sabab*: to cause, bring forth, provoke, trigger, arouse, inspire, prompt; (noun): reason, cause, motive.
[6]SABAB Theatre is Al-Bassam's international touring theatre company.

Bassam was pleased that the majority of the responses, particularly from younger audience members, were positive and they lauded the production as addressing contemporary Arab concerns and presenting "...them to the West in a sophisticated and human form." The production received awards for Best Director and Best Performance at the Cairo Festival. In 2004, the Tokyo International Arts Festival commissioned an Arabic language version of the play and co-produced its tour, which began in Tokyo at the 10th Festival in February 2004. The production then toured to the UK, South Korea, Poland, Iran, and Kuwait. There was a revival in 2005 with tours to Denmark and Singapore.

Al-Bassam's motivation to totally jettison Shakespeare's language while maintaining his characters and the political spirit of the play is two-fold. Firstly, he argues that it was necessary to rewrite Shakespeare's text for his Western, English-speaking audiences because Westerners do not immediately recognize *Hamlet*'s political import. In Brechtian fashion, Al-Bassam sought to distance his audience from the preconceptions of *Hamlet* that have rendered it politically void in most contemporary anglophone productions. However, Al-Bassam's choice to maintain the characters and much of Shakespeare's original plot line puts the production in dialogue with the version most readily recognized by Western audiences. Such adaptive practices, rather than undermining Shakespeare, resurrect those parts of the play's history lost through disuse. Secondly, like so many of his predecessors within highly censored emerging nations, Al-Bassam recognized the play's (and its author's) iconoclasm as a clever way to veil political commentary in sensitive Arab capitols. His inspiration, Al-Basam argues, came from the "Elizabethan dramatists [who] used historical settings and poetic conceit to encode their political critiques and get past the censor of their day" (qtd. in Culshaw). The familiarity with the play in "...the Middle East...was a way around the Cyclops of the state censors." Al-Bassam was inspired by the play's original political roots, and Shakespeare's success as "…an innovator who took an old Elizabethan revenge theme and turned it into a tragedy of the total political process" (Gran 278). If the play's political import was to reach its Arab audience and bypass state censors, Al-Bassam needed Shakespeare's *Hamlet.* And if it was to reach his Western audience, *Hamlet* needed a facelift. In the tradition of global Shakespeare, Al-Bassam was able to breathe new life and purpose into Shakespeare's text, and through these processes, the hybrid tradaptation, *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, was born.

What *The Al-Hamlet Summit* became is a text bridging the gap between East and West, Sulayman Al-Bassam and William Shake-

speare, the modern Arab and Hamlet. As Gershon Shaked explains in "The Play: Gateway to Cultural Dialogue," "Directors who try to bring traditional texts back to life...attempt to translate the tradition and the language of the past into the language of culture close to that of the audience attending a play here and now" (Shaked 8). Al-Bassam's adaptation succeeds in reinvigorating *Hamlet* for his targeted audience, and, in particular, breathes new political life into the play that creates a bridge between cultures whose shared history has been politically fraught. Al-Bassam hopes that his work 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, "Mad" 88). Theatre, Al-Bassam believes, can play a vital role in elucidating all sides of an issue and can challenge preconceived notions, something that Shakespeare understood "very well" (qtd. in Culshaw). Al-Bassam's adaptation is based on keen understanding of Shakespeare's original *Hamlet* and its original political verve. He also sees contemporary theatre as having a unique role on the global political stage.

Modern Arab history is punctuated by what Litvin refers to as "historical ruptures" (*Journey* 19). Beginning with the Gulf War and continuing through 9/11, the War on Terror, the Arab Spring, and the current turmoil in Syria and rise of ISIS, these ruptures have resulted in increased East-West tension. These historical ruptures lead to an existential crisis in the collective Arab identity that causes Arabs to question "To be or not to be" again and again. Despite Al-Bassam's Kuwaiti heritage, it is the crisis of the collective Arab identity that prompted his decision to leave the location of *The Summit*'s action ambiguous. He explains that while "[t]he piece is set in an unnamed Arab country similar in its anarchy to Kuwait during the Iraqi invasion or Lebanon during the civil war, [t]he attitudes expressed and the questions raised [are]...common to many countries in today's Arab world" (Dent). Through the ambiguous locality, *The Summit* captures the universal themes of "…the inadequacy of democracy, the militarization of the social sphere, [and] the failures of intellectual revolution" that permeate the Arab world.

Al-Bassam is cognizant of an Arab collective identity, and it is this collectivized identity that forms the basis of his adaptation. Such collectivization broadens the play's impact and relevance to encompass the concerns of not just one Arab state but many. It also encourages the West to see the pattern of these historic ruptures throughout the Arab world and to analyze their effects distanced from the emotional and teleological pre-conceptions that come about when certain

nations or figures are mentioned. So while Claudius may at times bear a resemblance to Saddam Hussein, Al-Bassam's choice to engage with contemporary Arab politics through Shakespeare's characters allows the audience to examine the present state of Arab-West relations and internal Arab political unrest without bias.

Like Syria's Sa'dallah Wannus "…who articulated a search for an Arab theat[re] as a theat[re] of struggle and change," Al-Bassam argues that theatre has a role to play in politics (Zuhur 24). Zuhur would refer to Al-Bassam's employment of theatre for political ends as a "Brechtian impulse," for "Brecht theorized that the theat[re] can play a pivotal role in directing and changing a viewer's consciousness" (24) Al-Bassam argues that theatre provides a means of combating the "vacuous 'world views'" that are promoted by globalized politics. For Al-Bassam, globalized politics means that "[e]very 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," but such simplistic tautology "…does very little to increase dialogue between cultures" (Dent). Al-Bassam argues back that "…culture and theatre become vital [because] [t]hey 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" (Smith 41). While Wannus makes a distinction between "…a theatre that is interested directly in politics and a theatre that conducts politics," it is clear that for Al-Bassam, theatre that is interested in politics cannot help but conduct politics (qtd. in Zuhur 24). Al-Bassam's aim for his *Summit* is to promote cross-cultural dialogue, and in the case of East-West relations, such dialogue is, at its core, political.

The Arab world is in flux as regimes crumble and nations struggle to rebuild, and as the Islamist movement clashes with Western-style modernity. Mona Eltahawy, in "A Generation's Passing Brings Opportunity," argues that as old leaders die out, the youth of the Arab world are granted opportunities for change. In 2004, Eltahawy wrote of an aging ruling class in the Arab world. She argued that "...the one thing our leaders cannot cheat or change is death" (Eltahawy). And while many Arab leaders paint themselves as sanctioned by Allah, she argues that "...when their day comes, there will not be an eclipse of the sun nor will blackness enshroud the people just because a human being has returned to his maker" (Eltahawy). Rather than buying into the fatalistic portraits painted by aging Arab despots, Eltahawy argues that the death of the current ruling classes will "...herald a new day tomorrow" (Eltahawy).

However, while Eltahawy's outlook in 2004 was decidedly hopeful, Al-Bassam shows more uncertainty. Al-Bassam's Hamlet, like his Arab counterparts, is a character on the cusp of change. An old regime is dying out. His father is dead and his uncle, who has no heir, has taken Old Hamlet's place to herald in a "New Democracy." Laertes and Claudius become locked in a battle with Hamlet over what their nation can and should become, while the West waits in the wings to collect the spoils after civil war rips the country apart. Al-Bassam explains, "What interests me is that Hamlet looks at the dying days of an imperial order, the dying days of an aristocracy at a moment of historical change. The house of Denmark collapses because of the rot inside it. It is the dawn of a new moment in history" (qtd. in Jaafar). The death of the aristocracy, as represented in Old Hamlet's death, leaves the youth of the country fighting to form a new order while the West fuels the growing unrest. As Litvin asserts, "Hamlet straddles a cultural shift in which the social and moral system has given way before there is anything solid to replace it" (*Journey* 17). Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a play marked by uncertainty, its protagonist plagued by vacillation and, foreign and domestic threats. It is this uncertainty that drew Al-Bassam to his adaptation and it is this same uncertainty with which his audience is left.

Al-Bassam's *Summit* paints an Arab world poised between binaries in which Arabs struggle to carve out their place in the world. The play walks a delicate line that pits Arab versus West, public versus private, internal versus external, religiosity versus secularism, and "New Democracy" versus traditionalism. While its characters grapple with a rapidly changing nation, the outside world moves closer and closer, echoing a Cairo boy's chant in the hours immediately following the 9/11 terrorist attacks: "*Al-Kull mrtabit/Am-reeca qarabit*—Everything is linked/America just got closer" (qtd. in Al-Bassam, "Mad" 85). The external pressures felt by the Arab world after the 9/11 attacks are mirrored in Al-Bassam's adaptation. Fortinbras, the leader of an unnamed (possibly Israeli) Western force presses in on the crumbling nation. The movement of Fortinbras's forces on the border elevates the tensions within an already stressed political system. The Arms Dealer—played by a woman in the English language production of the play and an Englishman in the Arabic version—furthers the insider/outsider tensions by supplying weapons to each character, which fuels the growing internal unrest throughout the play.

The ghost-like presence of the Arms Dealer, the threat posed by Fortinbras's forces along the border, and the revelation of Claudi-

us's position as the puppet of Western capitalism are central to the play's exploration of Arab-West relations. Al-Bassam argues that *The Al-Hamlet Summit* is an examination of the fatalistic entanglement between the Arab world and the West. The penetration of Western economics into Arab nations is at the center of this entanglement. Graham Holderness sees a vision of the inevitable link between fundamentalism, terrorism, and Western economics in Al-Bassam's adaptation. Al-Bassam, Holderness asserts, shows "Islamic fundamentalism and terrorist violence" to be "…the inevitable consequences of an alliance between native Arab despotism and the economic machinations of the West" (Holderness, "Introduction" 19). Claudius emerges as the prototypical Arab despot whose mission to modernize his nation is dependent upon Western finances.

Claudius's desperation to join the global stage, and therefore the global economy, as a formidable player is evident throughout *The Summit*. Like Shakespeare's Claudius, Al-Bassam's character focuses on establishing and maintaining his image as a strong and capable ruler. The public image he portrays is paramount in his bid for control. Disruptions to his carefully constructed public persona are met with immediate and violent retribution. During the celebration of the first meeting of the New Parliament, car-bombers attack the opening session and threaten a key pipeline. Rather than worrying about the attacks as a threat to his people or national stability, Claudius's immediate concerns are for maintaining an image of strength that will ensure the West's continued investment in his nation. He cries, "The investors are terrified!" (Al-Bassam, *Summit* 52). The response, spearheaded by Polonius, is swift and violent. He tries to reassure Claudius by explaining that he is doing everything possible to uncover the perpetrators of the attack, including rounding up and torturing the Shia leaders of the People's Liberation Brigade (the political movement opposed to Claudius's rule). The extremist actions of bombings on the pipeline prompt an equally extreme government-sanctioned response: torture. In *The Summit*, extremism comes from all sides, and despite Claudius's desire to pave the way for a "New Democracy," it is clear that his democracy is anything but that.

As the play progresses, Claudius strives to conform to the secular capitalist image that will increase his ties to the Westerners who supply his weapons, and who he hopes will come to his aid as he and Laertes fight with both Fortinbras at their Southern border and Hamlet from within. While Claudius's identification as a Sunni marks him as a Saddam-esque figure, Al-Bassam avoids such direct allegory by maintaining an unnamed Arab state as the play's setting. "The Claudius

character," according to Al-Bassam, "is a secular tyrant" and reliant on his Western "imperial masters" for both financial backing and approval (qtd. in Dent). Al-Bassam's characterization of Claudius as a secular leader challenges Western preconceptions that often link Islam and tyranny or terrorist violence. Claudius's corruption is fueled by his desire for supreme and uncontested power. Additionally, while many previous Arab political adaptations of *Hamlet* omit Claudius's failed confession speech in order to maintain his image as the ultimate "opaque" tyrant and the play's sole antagonist, Al-Bassam's adaptation identifies the puppet masters of the West as the play's ultimate villain (Litvin, *Journey* 177). Al-Bassam's adaptation paints Claudius as "a puppet himself," rather than his more traditional role as puppet master. The true villain of the play "…transferred upstairs—to the United States, global capitalism, oil interests, and so forth," and Claudius becomes a monster of the West's creation (178).

While Laertes fights for Claudius against Fortnibras's forces in the south, Hamlet aligns himself with The People's Liberation Brigade (PLB) and identifies Claudius as an "imperialist dog" and "leader-by-proxy" (Al-Bassam, *Summit* 64). Laertes identifies the nation's true enemy as the Western forces moving against the nation, as represented by Fortinbras's army. Hamlet, however, argues that the enemy is much closer to home. He recognizes "the stench of rot" hidden just beneath "the film of our perfumes" (34). He tries to win Laertes to his cause against Claudius: "The enemy on the border is the illusion they feed you ....The real enemy is here, in the palace, amongst us" (58). Laertes, however, remains convinced that "[t]here will be no nation to fight over unless we defeat Fortinbras." Hamlet believes his country's future will only be preserved if they "…destroy the rot that devours it from within," but what neither man realizes is that the threat from without and the threat from within are one and the same.

The simultaneous threats that Al-Bassam's Arab nation faces, both within the nation's borders and without, have their roots in the West. While Claudius is a puppet of the West, Fortinbras is similarly painted as an agent of the West by the weaponry in his possession. Fortinbras's army is described by Laertes as having "…not a convoy, but a juggernaut, a 15 mile column of Merkava and British Centurion tanks" (*Summit* 52). The use of Merkava and Centurion tanks allude to Fortinbras heading an Israeli force as these tanks were used extensively in the 1978 and 1982 invasions of Lebanon, and as personnel carriers in Gaza, the West Bank and the Lebanese border. Both the Merkava and Centurion tanks have been used by Israel in conflicts with Lebanon as recently as the 2006 Isreal-Hezbollah war.

In Al-Bassam's footnote to Laertes's description of the advance of Fortinbras's army, he cites Peter Fisk's *Pity the Nation: The Abduction of Lebanon.* Fisk's book explores the Israel-Palestine conflict and Al-Bassam's reference to it maintains the image of Fortinbras as a Western agent. The ties with Israel are further corroborated, but not explicitly stated, when, after Hamlet and Claudius have destroyed the nation from within, Fortinbras enters to lay "biblical claims upon this land" and proclaim "the dawn and the birth of the Greater Is—" (*Summit* 85). Fortinbras's final utterance, that could firmly identify him as the leader of an Israeli force, is silenced by white noise and leaves the audience to judge the origin and import of Fortinbras's invasion, and their own implication in the conflict between Middle East and West. Fortinbras's final words further complicate issues of religious extremism, as he is presumably a non-Arab, non-Muslim agent of the West. The religious impetus of his invasion thus broadens the audience's understanding of the ties between religion and violence and expands those ties beyond the stereotypes of Islamic fundamentalism.

In his yearning to become a global figure, Claudius unwittingly becomes an agent of the West and aids in the fall of his nation and its eventual capture by Fortibras's forces. Claudius's alliance with the West represents the ultimate example of "Western political opportunism" (Litvin, "Record" 224). As Al-Bassam notes, Claudius's "Petro dollars" speech, an analog to Claudius's failed prayer in Shakespeare's original, "…is a moment of truth that moves away from the rhetoric of the political arena and where we see the man in desperate need of the hand that feeds him—and that he longs to bite. It is about the tortured relationship between the puppet ruler and his imperial masters" (qtd. in Dent). As the PLB, with Hamlet as their leader, gains further public backing, Claudius longs for Western support to combat the growing unrest and political radicalism within his country. He prays to the God of "Petro dollars," a composite vision of the West, and Western oil-backed global capitalism. He identifies himself as "…the poor, sluttish Arab, forgoing billions to worship you" (Al-Bassam, *Summit* 71). Claudius is willing to hemorrhage assets and oil to gain recognition on the Western global stage. However, it is this struggle for a place within the West that has left his country easy prey to the machinations of Fortinbras and the Arms Dealer.

Claudius becomes a monstrous marionette of the West's creation, and in his time of most need, when the forces of Fortinbras and Hamlet threaten his personal and his nation's security, he is left pleading to an unfeeling God. He questions, "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?" (Al-Bassam, *Summit* 71). Even in his abandonment, he wants to be considered part of the West and acknowledges a lack of identity without the West's approval. He pleads,

> 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? (71)

Like a victim of Stockholm syndrome, without the West, Claudius "cannot bear to be [him]self," because his political and personal identity are entirely tied to his Western manipulators. Despite his characterization of his Western backers as false, treacherous and destructive, Claudius is dependent on the "world-shafting bank" of the West. Without Western purchase of his oil supplies and without its supply of weaponry and other support, Claudius's rule is revealed to be most precarious as the Hamlet-led PLB quickly closes in on the capitol.

When Claudius's supplication for Western aid fails—the nation is offered a UN peacekeeping force and a "summit meeting chaired by disinterested political figures"—Claudius is unwilling to accept that he is a pawn, even as he buys additional munitions from the Western Arms Dealer (Al-Bassam, *Summit* 83). He threatens the Arms Dealer to preserve his reputation: "Don't ever tell anybody I am a monkey, or I'll have you shot" (76). In his obsession with his public appearance, Claudius fears that others see him as the Western pawn he is even as he corroborates such a label by buying weapons from a Western arms dealer to fight Fortinbras, a force of the West, and Hamlet, himself an unwitting tool in the West's political machinations.

Even as Hamlet attempts to combat the puppet Claudius, he too falls victim to the West's machinations. Hamlet, like the rest of the play's major players, obtains weaponry, in his case bomb-making materials, from the Arms Dealer. The Arms Dealer refers to Hamlet's plight as "destiny" and argues that "[h]owever we curse and spit, kick and writhe...We nudge each other towards its manifestation!" (Al-Bassam, *Summit* 82). Ghost-like, the Arms Dealer paints a fatalistic entanglement of Western-Arab relations. She then reveals that pitting the factions against one another within the nation has been part of Fortinbras's design: "Fortinbras will be so pleased!" (82). Hamlet per-

ceives his nation's total victimization to the West at the hands of the Arms Dealer too late to prevent his nation's downfall.

Similar to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Al-Bassam's Hamlet returns from studying abroad to find his uncle, Claudius, as the new President Elect and married to his mother. However, Hamlet's years abroad carry a new host of associations in Al-Bassam's timely adaptation, as Hamlet is painted as a westernized outsider upon his return. Claudius and Gertrude forbid Hamlet's return to school both because of the internal and external pressures that jeopardize the nation's stability and because of the threat posed by a Western education. Gertrude explains, "The University has long been the source of regressive trends amongst us; already it has changed you: your father and I have deemed it council to keep you away from such throbbing beds of lunacy" (Al-Bassam, *Summit* 35). For the play's Western audience, academia is often considered a threat to established norms because of its penchant toward leftist and progressive ideologies. However, in a nation caught between the extremes of Western modernity and Islamic traditionalism, the university can pose a regressive liberal threat to a more traditional society.

Similarly, in the beginning of the play, the PLB paints Hamlet as a foreignized other unwilling to take up his charge to rid his nation of the threat posed by Claudius. They bomb the cities with propaganda leaflets that describe Hamlet as a "Murtad[7] dissolute, gambling and whoring" with his nation's money "in the playgrounds of Europe" (43). The PLB, the leaflets claim, will take up Hamlet's duty to rid the nation of "…the evil forces of imperialism [that] have found a willing agent in the figure of Claudius." The leaflets further suggest that Old Hamlet's forensic tests have revealed that he was murdered in the same manner employed by the secret police under Claudius's charge, thus implicating Claudius's role in a *coup*. While the People's Liberation Brigade lingers in the play's background as the faceless ghost of propaganda, it is, unsurprisingly, the Arms Dealer who provides Hamlet with a copy of the propaganda that spurs his downfall. As the play progresses, Hamlet becomes the radicalized Islamist leader of the PLB, itself a backlash against Claudius's pandering to the West. While Hamlet believes that he is fighting for the best interest of his people and his nation, the Arms Dealer's role as instigator of Hamlet's radicalization is revealed in the simple act of providing Hamlet with the PLB's propaganda.

[7]*Murtad fitri* translates to "apostate natural." It is a person born into a Muslim family who later rejects the faith.

The Arms Dealer plays an active role in stirring the pot of growing tensions both internally between Hamlet and Claudius, and externally with Fortinbras. On the one hand, the Arms Dealer panders to Claudius's lust for power: "Power suits you. You look like a King" (Al-Bassam, *Summit* 46). Just minutes later, however, she proposes an alliance with Hamlet: "You have a great future, we would like to develop something with you, promote your agenda" (51). The Arms Dealer refers to a mysterious "we," emblematic of Western interests as a whole. While the Arms Dealer claims that the powers that be would like to promote Hamlet's agenda, it is clear that no one yet knows what that agenda is. Right before her offer of alliance, the Arms Dealer acknowledges that "nobody really knows what you're doing" (51). Rather than supporting Hamlet's agenda, however, the Arms Dealer's offer exploits Hamlet's personal and political turmoil in order to further an undefined Western agenda.

Although Claudius senses the Arms Dealer's ploy, with growing unrest within the nation and the steady advance of Forinbras, he has no choice but to take on the role of a pawn offered to him by the Arms Dealer. While the Arms Dealer professes support of Claudius's new regime, offering assistance in the form of munitions and the media bonus of her presence at state functions, she also professes an agenda of mutual benefit: "Early bird catches the worm" (Al-Bassam, *Summit* 46). Claudius retorts: "And blood draws flies." Claudius knows the Arms Dealer has an agenda and that Old Hamlet's death and the war with Fortinbras have drawn her to the nation like a fly to carrion. She further intensifies Claudius's dependence upon her by pitting the image of Fortinbras—"so endearing, so forward looking, so modern somehow"—against the backdrop of Claudius's more regressive public persona to highlight what he must become in order to compete in the global arena with his enemy. Claudius responds at once with the proposition of a party to introduce the Arms Dealer to the ministers and sweetens the deal with a crate of Bordeaux (another symbol of the increased influence and influx of the West). Claudius knows that it is important that he demonstrate his alliance with the West to his fledgling nation's ministers in order to present a strong front against the advancing Fortinbras. It is further imperative that he prevent her from changing allegiances to the more "modern" and "forward-looking" Fortinbras.

Each delegate in *The Summit* meets with the Arms Dealer in turn, and after each meeting he (or she) comes away with a munitions box that symbolizes both his entrance into the political struggles of the

country and his entanglement with the West. Their dooms, like Hamlet's fateful meeting with the Ghost in Shakespeare's original, are determined by their interaction with the Arms Dealer. Ophelia, like Hamlet, is driven to become a radical Islamist who dies in a suicide bombing. The harrowing death of the angelic Ophelia spurs Gertrude's realization of the inescapability of the political cycle: "No one is exempt. Exemption is impossible" (AlBassam, *Summit* 80). While trying to stop Claudius's onslaught against Hamlet, she too dies silenced, like Ophelia, and victim to the political cycle that Jan Kott refers to as the "Grand Mechanism" in which "…every great Shakespearean act is merely a repetition" (Kott 10).

In the final scene, when Hamlet's clash with Laertes and Claudius reaches its pinnacle, the Arms Dealer's role in the downfall of the Arab nation's leaders is made strikingly clear. Al-Bassam's stage directions, which reflect the English language production's stagings, state that as news reports fill the screen above the stage, each character in turn grabs the munitions box on his or her desk, removes the weapon within and moves to the front of the stage. As Laertes was the only character who did not meet directly with the Arms Dealer, he removes his father's munitions box to fulfill his role as "death's double" and Claudius's new right-hand man (Al-Bassam, *Summit* 80). Al-Bassam describes the scene: "Amongst these gathering mounds of information, each delegate waits for the confirmation of their own death" (83). As each character quietly awaits his demise, the patient stillness of the scene supports the inevitability of the play's outcome, and the incorporation of the munitions boxes serves as a symbolic implication of the West in the nation's downfall.

In a final act of manipulation, the Arms Dealer tells Hamlet that his father would have been proud, and that she is leaving the country as her work is done. She tells Hamlet, "I am happy to have been of assistance," but Hamlet warns her, "I will make you regret your assistance" (80). Hamlet laments that "[i]n the name of God I have invented a curse that writes the history of other nations in my own people's blood" (85). Hamlet understands that the civil war he is fighting is not for his people, as each side has been manipulated by the Arms Dealer, as the representative of non-Arab, Western nations. He realizes only too late that his country is in ruins because he, Claudius, and Laertes have become pawns in the history of other nations: "This perception of truth too late, is hell" (85). Hamlet enters his final battle with Claudius aware that this fight represents one with a greater force against which he cannot win, and that he has besmirched the name of God in the process.

Al-Bassam's adaptation takes *Hamlet*'s internal and external concerns and dramatizes them as a play speaking "on behalf of Arab audiences" to the West. The play itself acts as a diplomatic mission written in the language of the West (Shakespeare and English) and directed to both Arab and Western audiences (Holderness, "Introduction" 17). Because of its emphasis on Arab-West relations, the play acts as a *Mousetrap* in the Western world, but "[t]he cross-cultural construction of the piece create a sense of implication in the affairs of the other" (Dent). While Litvin argues that the play is ineffective in serving as a *Mousetrap* for Arab audiences and exacerbates Western stereotypes of Arabs, Holderness argues that the play has a

> …capacity to generate dialogue across borders, dialogue that challenges and questions and enters reservations, but remains fundamentally an international conversation. As such, it offers an alternative, an urgently imperative alternative, to mutual misunderstanding and reciprocal violence. ("Introduction" 17)

Dialogue, however, is the only thing that the play offers as it fails to provide moral resolution. Al-Bassam claims that in the "…absence of authorial judgment...it leaves the spectator in free-fall and this is empowering" (qtd. in Dent). Al-Bassam empowers his audiences, both Arab and Western, to witness the reflections of their own roles in Arab-West conflict and avoids playing into stereotypical views of either side.

Although both Litvin and Holderness agree that there is a clear tie between Islamic fundamentalism and "the economic machinations of the west," Al-Bassam's failure to identify a hero on either side in opposition to these forces holds each side equally implicated in the violence that transpires (Holderness, "Introduction" 19). The fire within Al-Bassam's fictional nation, while fanned by the machinations of the Western Arms Dealer, was ignited by Claudius's greed and corruption. While the West toyed with the idea of allying itself with Hamlet, his increasing radicalization causes the Arms Dealer to abandon the crumbling nation to the ever-encroaching Fortinbras, himself a likely pawn of Western manipulations. Fortinbras's silence at the end further maintains the play's moral ambiguity as the eventual victor is never geographically or historically placed. Instead, the stage is laid for the continuing cycle of violence and political upheaval of the Grand Mechanism, and Al-Bassam's audience is left to search for a way out.

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