

Four Arab Hamlet Plays

Four Arab Hamlet Plays eds. Marvin Carlson and Margaret Litvin with Joy Arab
A Book Review
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The recent publication of the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center [Four Arab Hamlet Plays](#) (2015) encompasses the translation of four plays and an autobiographical sketch. The four Arab appropriations in the volume constitute only an illustrative sample of the Arab Hamlet canon which has produced hilarious political satires and farces throughout the Arab World. The collection features plays written by Nabyl Lahlou (*Ophelia is Not Dead*, Morocco, 1968), Mamduh Udwan (*Hamlet Wakes Up Late*, Syria, 1976), Nader Omran (*A Theatre Company Found a Theatre and Theatred "Hamlet"*, Jordan, 1984), Jawad al-Assadi (*Forget Hamlet*, Iraq, 1994). Three plays in the volume are rancorous political satires parodying Shakespeare's *Hamlet* while Omran's play, though belonging to the Arab Hamlet tradition, is simply a socio-esthetic critique of Arabic drama imitating Western dramaturgy. The book concludes with a brief autobiographical sketch by the Egyptian playwright Mahmoud Aboudoma "*Gamlet" is Russian for "Hamlet"*, 2006. The book was edited by Marvin Carlson, Professor of theatre, comparative literature and Middle Eastern studies at The City University of New York and Margaret Litvin, Associate Professor of Arabic literature at Boston University and the author of *Hamlet's Arab Journey: Shakespeare's Prince and Nasser's Ghost* (2011), in collaboration with the theatre producer Joy Arab.

Among the various Arabic transadaptations and adaptations of Western literary classics, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has always been the most frequently adapted corpus. The Arab Hamlet canon is governed by a text and context relationship based on intertextual appropriations. Litvin (2007) calls such intertextuality of appropriations that are influenced by domestic social and political circumstances the "global kaleidoscope of sources and models" (79) since there has been a huge repertoire of intertextual Arab rewritings of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The plays still have a continuous appeal to modern audiences throughout the Arab World in light of the current political turmoil sweeping across the Middle East and North Africa. The Arab Hamlet tradition has been extremely influenced by political upheavals transgressing the Arab world since the late forties, particularly in the creation of the state Israel, the subsequent Palestinian exodus in 1948, and the 1967 setback. Despite the fact that the plays reflect the post-1967 war trauma and communicate a critical awareness to the post-colonial state of affairs, their political rhetoric (with the notable exception of Omran's play) is directed principally towards the domestic realities, mainly the autocratic regimes in some Arab countries. Most of the Arab Hamlet adaptations seem to have turned their criticism toward national politics rather than Israel or former colonial powers in the region.

The Moroccan playwright Nabyl Lahlou's *Ophelia is Not Dead*, written originally in French as *Ophélie*

n'est pas morte and translated into English by Khalid Amine, is a postcolonial rewriting of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The play portrays the suppression of civil liberties, surveillance, censorship on theatres and artistic freedom, autocracy, and imprisonment and draconian torture of dissidents in the newly independent postcolonial Arab countries. However, the colonizer is not a colonial power dominating the country, but is merely a despotic regime ruling with an iron fist to suppress freedom of speech and crushes all forms of opposition. The play teems with obscenity, references to scatology and the lower bodily stratum, curses and abusive language just to highlight the absurdity of Arab revolutionaries' futile resistance to a corrupt and unconquerable autocratic regime. The excruciating and extremely intolerable vulgarity of the character's language reflects their carelessness, helplessness, resentment of the political status quo, the absurdity and the nihilism of their micro-theatrical performances. Lahlou combines two tragic characters from two Shakespearean tragedies, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, to create an absurdist Arab political satire with a Beckettian tone. The two theatre actors' voluntary physical paralysis reflects their barren spirituality, absurdist predicament and the loss of any hope for both political reform and artistic freedom. The two seemingly crippled characters amuse themselves, in the manner of the two tramps in Samuel Becket's absurdist play *Waiting for Godot*, with various sequentially improvised micro-dramas accompanied by lashing, cursing, beating, and other forms of physical violence. Though their improvised sketches seem trivial and absurd, they are charged with political critique of misgovernment, and the regime's suppression of artistic freedom. The self-imposed voluntary paralysis of the two characters is indicated by both characters being seated in wheelchairs or walking with crutches and the confined setting - prison cell. Such a claustrophobic and confining location reveals the two actors' frustration, confinement, imprisonment, whether real or metaphorical, and their inability to take action to change the oppressive political status quo in the country. Though the action of the play seems to take place in an out-of-joint world, it is entirely associated with the factual world surrounding it. Like all Arab *Hamlet* incarnations, the play embodies transgression of the Shakespearean legend in both theme and style. The two paralyzed actors have devoted their entire lives to theatre, but their devotion has been futile due to the regime's strict censorship on political theatres. The two political prisoners are theatre actors convicted with politicizing audiences. After a long period of imprisonment and being exposed to all types of unbearable torture the outraged Hamlet complains, "Each actor- militant had his own cell." (40)

Despite being imprisoned for politicizing audiences in theatres, and despite being crippled in wheelchairs, the two downcast actors keep improvising scenes in prison - an action denoting the persisting suffering of the Arab masses toiling under dictatorships. However, their acting is not watched by an audience thus reflecting at once the worthlessness of political theatre to incite revolution among the ignorant, intimidated populace. Even Hamlet does not know what caused his paralysis and how he got into prison. The only thing that the traumatized actor remembers is that while acting the Mousetrap "The Murder of Gonzago" on stage he saw censors and cops entering the theatre. The lights in the theatre were suddenly turned off and he was led to an interrogation cell where he was humiliated and tortured. Hamlet's unbreakable deadlock ruined his memory and human identity. This scene stresses the futility of the mousetrap political theatre in the face of autocratic regimes. In this context, Edward Ziter (2015) argues that interrogation and torture of political prisoners, frightening citizens with the atrocities of the police security apparatus and intelligence constitute an assault on national consciousness. (197) Having detached himself from the Shakespearean Hamlet, he visualizes the imprisonment and torture following the play. Both reality and improvisation are intermingled to the extent that it becomes difficult to draw a distinction between the two making the whole text problematic. Macbeth attributes Hamlet's artistic paralysis to many related factors. Like almost every commoner in the country, he has been traumatized since early childhood by the state oppression, policing, surveillance and subjugation. He has been traumatized, as

Macbeth puts it, by the “artistic, economic, sexual and political void.” (41) As a postcolonial artist Hamlet, as Macbeth remarks, “You took yourself for a messiah, a redeemer, but your dreams have failed, because dictatorship is much stronger than your ideals.” (41)

As the play progresses Hamlet transforms from a passive, crippled artist into an unheard dissident, a nationalist revolutionary who denounces political despotism, autocracy, totalitarianism and censorship. However, his revolution does not cross the walls of the prison cell. The only relief for both actors is improvising political micro-dramas in their jail cell. Hamlet’s predicament as a postcolonial artist is struggling to free himself from the constraints imposed on his artistic freedom by a domestic dictatorial regime which is worse than the country’s former colonizer. Hamlet cynically admits that political activism, thinking about revolutions against an autocratic regime and being conscience of the political ills and wrongs torment and cripple the sensitive mind of an artist. He grumbles, “I paralyzed my body to keep my conscience from causing me any pain.” (23) Macbeth perceives the fear of a domestic omnipotent despot as an infectious disease that causes physical and mental paralysis. He was infected with his paralysis from other intimidated people and he will likely contaminate others with the same illness. Macbeth complains, “My voluntarily paralyzed body can paralyze other bodies which condemned mine to paralysis.” (23) While Hamlet insists on remaining seated in his wheelchair as long as Claudius is ruling the country, Macbeth expresses his will to become a revolutionary and join the rebellious mob if there is any.

Lahlou’s Hamlet is inarticulate and non-heroic; an artist filled with tormenting feelings of humiliation, defeatism and nihilism. Having realized the futility of his art, he sarcastically introduces himself to an imaginary audience in the prison cell as “The famous painter who signs his works with his shit.” (25) He fears the authoritarian regime and suppresses his dissatisfaction with its atrocities so that he is not further humiliated in life by being executed. Against his will, he refuses to sacrifice his art and put it at the service of a revolution. The micro-dramas the two actors improvise tackle a wide array of topics including politics, sex, and art. The most interesting micro-drama the two paralyzed actors improvise is the one about theatre censorship. Macbeth plays the part of an inquisitor torturing Hamlet - an actor convicted with being involved in political theatre though he simply acted in a non-political Shakespearean play. The actor is instructed to perform only plays selected by the censor or the supreme gatekeeper. Filled with resentment of censorship on arts, Hamlet acerbically and ironically comments on the improvised micro-drama, “Tell this dirty inquisitor that we want to make political theatre that has for its objective the search for human shit, humanity in deep shit.” (25) The intimidated Macbeth mockingly ridicules state surveillance, policing, interrogation of innocent citizens only in a prison cell where no one can hear him except his ears; “there have been cops in our skin.” (29) The improvised micro-drama pertaining to the post-colonial discourse between the colonizer and colonized is not only derogatory, but is also humiliating. Macbeth, playing the white colonizer, boastfully says to Hamlet, playing the dark-skinned colonized, “The future is the civilization of the whites.” (32) The improvised scene shows how the colonizer mistreated the colonized. Macbeth, the white colonizer, is seen smoking his cigar, reading the newspaper and looking through the binoculars, while Hamlet, the uncultured colonized African, is seen polishing Macbeth’s shoes, lighting his cigar, and looking after his livestock. The scene’s focus keeps shifting rapidly from the perspective of the colonized to that of the colonizer and vice versa. However, with the revolt of the colonized and gaining independence, the colonizer lost his plantations and livestock in Africa. The colonizer laments the loss, “Farewell, my plantations, my lands, my slaves, my livestock.” (33) The colonizer wonders why “the savages are celebrating their independence.” In Europe, the white colonizer still looks down upon the dark-skinned colonized immigrants: “We exploited them in their

country; now they come back to us of their own accord to be exploited anew.” (34)

Hamlet’s exhausted clichéd soliloquy “To be or not to be” is turned into a supplication to God to save the populace from the satanic grip of the authoritarian regime and to put an end to their waiting for democracy, gender equality in a patriarchal society and political reform. The play highlights the power of theatre in politicizing the marginalized masses and inciting them to take part in the country’s political affairs. Ziter (2015) points out that the power of theatre is much stronger than the silencing power of a dictatorial regime and its gadget of intelligence ruffians. (218) For Hamlet, an artist should not impose on himself self-censorship, but should rather express himself without fear of a tyrannical regime even if this costs him paralysis through torture or even his demise. However, Macbeth, the other paralyzed artist, denounces his paralysis and intends to immigrate to France, the previous colonizer “I am going to leave this wheelchair...and vomit my years of paralysis. No, it is not possible anymore to continue playing.” (58) Macbeth’s statement “I am going to stand up and go outside, there I will lay claim to change” (58) reveals his intention to form opposition abroad, inside the homeland of the colonizer. Hamlet advises Macbeth not to leave the country since change and reform should be made while he is inside the country rather than making an opposition abroad.

In Mamduh Udwan’s *Hamlet Wakes Up Late*, translated by Margaret Litvin, Prince Hamlet is a helpless and feeble alcoholic theatre director who realizes too late the grave political consequences of his father’s assassination, the hasty marriage of his mother to her brother-in-law and the usurping of the throne by his father’s assassin uncle Claudius. Like almost all plays in the Arab Hamlet tradition, this play is an allegorical political satire where every major event in the play alludes to a political upheaval in the Arab World. Subverting Shakespeare’s text, Udwan’s King Claudius kills the late King Hamlet, marries his sister-in-law Gertrude, the culprit in the murder, usurps the throne and intends to sign a peace treaty with the country’s enemy Fortinbras. The drunken Hamlet’s fornication with the temptress Ophelia in the politically rotten state of Denmark is quite symbolic. The play suggests that almost every intimidated citizen pretends to be ignorant of state oppression and prefers to drink and fornicate rather than being involved in politics. The play departs drastically from Shakespeare’s original text and is charged with subtextual political messages fitting the political situation in the Arab world in the aftermath of the Arabs’ defeat in the six-day war in 1967. The play likens Hamlet’s mother’s hasty incestuous marriage to Claudius and the latter’s signing a peace treaty with Fortinbras to the late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat’s visit to the Knesset to negotiate signing a peace treaty with Israel. The tyrant Claudius sets up a kangaroo court for Hamlet who is convicted with killing Polonius and is executed. The play satirizes the failure of the Arab armies to reclaim Palestine and other Arab territories occupied by Israel in 1967. Moreover, the play censures Egypt’s signing a treacherous peace treaty with Israel in 1979 and normalizing ties with it. Much like Hamlet, who sees Fortinbras’s visit to his father’s palace as a betrayal to the nation’s martyrs who died in the war with Norway, Udwan perceived Egypt’s embarrassing, separate peace accord with Israel as a fatal blow to the nostalgic Arab nationalism and unity advocated by the Arab nationalist Egyptian President Nasser, represented in the play by the resentful silent ghost, and a betrayal of the martyrs who seem to have sacrificed their lives in vain in the 1973 war. Udwan’s *Hamlet Wakes Up Late* is a memory play in which Horatio acts both as a narrator whose commentary caps off all the flashback scenes and a character in the play. The King’s Lord Chamberlain Polonius acts both as a demagogue opportunist who wants to marry his daughter to Hamlet, the legitimate heir to the throne, and Claudius’s conspirator and informant. While weeping Hamlet informs his friend Horatio that he has just unearthed his father’s coffin - an action representing the helpless attempts to revive Nasserism and Arab nationalism. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, minor characters in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, have become

King Claudius's merciless police informants and lackeys who imprison and torture political activists and dissidents.

The extensive biblical allusions in Udwan's play serve two purposes: to avoid censorship, since on the surface the play does not tackle politics in Syria or in any other Muslim country, and to satirically transform Hamlet into a Christ figure who never used violence against transgressors and wrongdoers. However, deep under the skin of the text, the play is entirely a political critique of an autocracy. Hamlet's phrase "You have turned "The house of prayer" "my father's house" in the play, into a den of thieves...a nest for prostitution, trade and treachery" (124) cannot be taken but as a condemnation of the country's autocrat and his corrupt statesmen. While staggering, the drunken Hamlet reminds Claudius of the primordial murder when Cain killed Abel and launches a vulgar attack on his mother, "Why does harlotry still rule your blood." (124) The King's censorship on Hamlet's inset *Shahrayar* is representative of censorship on theatrical performances and surveillance monitored throughout the country. Theatre censorship that suppresses artistic freedom mirrors the country's surveillance policy which aims to crush the slightest opposition. The dissident Laertes warns the corrupt Polonius of the "explosion of the poor people" who will revolt one day against the regime and all his illegal properties will be confiscated. He advises him to understand "the depth of the people's hostility" to the king...They're boiling like a cauldron and one day it will boil over." (108-109) The play reaches its climax in the reception banquet for Fortinbras when the drunkard Hamlet erupts like a volcano, overturns the table, and denounces Fortinbras's visit which has defiled the sanctity of his father's palace. He deprecates the normalizing of ties with Norway through the exchange of goods and other investments in Denmark. The political opponent, Lorenzo, Hamlet's friend, is tortured in prison and is finally executed. Lorenzo might be seen as a Palestinian revolutionary who is tortured and executed by Rosencrantz, a Palestinian policeman and a lackey who spies on and tortures his own people. Hamlet complains "they're torturing Lorenzo...and for whose sake? For Fortinbras's" (128) In the encounter scene with his mother, Hamlet quotes from Macbeth's soliloquy with some alterations, "All the world's a prison," (139) thus moving the expression from existentialism to corrupt politics. For Hamlet the world seems so trivial, man is merely the quintessence of dust and all women are adulterous. Even Ophelia betrayed him by not taking the pills and becoming pregnant to force him to marry her, not out of love, but merely to become a princess. However, after Hamlet's execution she is married to Guldenshtern to save her honor. Having killed Polonius, who has been eavesdropping in his mother's chamber, Hamlet, after a fake trial, is charged with killing Polonius, a peaceable old man, seducing a minor, denouncing the King in a play, ruining the country's diplomatic ties with a friendly state, torturing Lorenzo until death, drinking, debauchery, superstitions about ghosts that have frightened the people, and distorting the verses of the Holy Bible. Before his execution, Hamlet admits the failure of his revolution because he is merely "a small pebble against the current...a wounded wolf in a storm." (150) Even Horatio, whom Hamlet has entrusted to tell his story after his death, is also executed for trying to plot against the regime through works of art.

The depoliticized transadaptation *A Theatre Company Found a Theatre and Theatred "Hamlet"* (1984), by the Jordanian playwright Nader Omran and translated by Joy Arab in collaboration with Michael LoCicero from an initial translation by George Potter, does not belong to the political pattern of the politicized Hamlets in the collection. The play is merely a transadaptation rather than an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with slight departures. For instance, Gertrude is portrayed as a lusty, voluptuous woman who cheats on her husband with Polonius. Hamlet enters his mother's chamber to find her flirting with and seducing Polonius. Addressing his mother, Hamlet justifies killing Polonius to save him from "committing a sin with a whore." (201) Another major drastic shift from the original text is the innocent

Ophelia's unfair trial where she is faced with charges of debauchery in holy places of worship and committing suicide. An interesting departure from the original Shakespearean text occurs at the end of the play where Hamlet carrying a flask approaches his sleeping uncle and pours the poison into his ears. However, before he dies, Claudius stabs both Hamlet and Gertrude with a poisoned rapier. The play ends with Hamlet's soliloquy "To be or not to be...whether to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune or to take arms against a sea of troubles." (208) Here, the soliloquy does not bear a political message, but is rather seen as an esthetic revolt against conventional theatres. This ending reveals the existentialist and esthetic content of the play rather than being seen as a political satire as the other three Hamlet adaptations. The only clear political message in the play is embodied in Hamlet's death wish to see Ophelia (Occupied Palestine) in the afterlife. Ophelia's reply to his question "You see only a mirage" (209) denotes that his death wish is denied. The text is problematic on many levels, but most arise from its theatrical experimentation with a unique dramaturgy; it works as an esthetic revolt against blind imitations of Western theatrical styles.

The play is entirely non-political, but is mainly a highly visualized musical comedy in which scattered sketches from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are transadapted and performed using postmodern theatrical techniques. This depoliticized play is primarily concerned with stressing the autonomy of an indigenous Arabic drama uninspired by Western theatrical styles and the esthetic value of adaptations of world classics. The non-political nature of the play is quite justifiable in the Jordanian political context. In Jordan political and civil liberties are not restricted. Jordan is a liberal country that has repeatedly ranked first in the Arab Democracy Index. Government leftist dissidents are given freedom of speech and are allowed to belong to various political parties. Unlike some Arab countries, since its establishment the country has always been lenient with dissidents and has co-opted them in the government system without curbing their political participation. Government political opponents merely call for the annulment of the 1994 peace treaty with Israel, pursuing economic reform and rejecting corruption, favoritism and nepotism. This moderate Westernized liberalism has helped Jordan to circumvent the pervasive political turmoil resulting from the Arab Spring uprisings that swept across the Middle East in 2011.

In an attempt to decolonize and thus create an indigenous Arabic drama, the Jordanian playwright has experimented with many dramaturgical techniques—postmodernist, absurdist and existentialist. The Director complains of the triviality of the parody performance in content, rhetoric and dramaturgy compared with Shakespeare's masterpiece. Reproaching the actors for poor performance, the outraged Director protests, "If Shakespeare saw this, he would smash your heads." (213) An actor grumbles and informs the Director that Shakespeare lived in a different age and wrote his play for a Western audience "as for us, we see things through another lens. He has his texts. You have your exercises. And we have our performance." The Director maintains his protest, complaining "Is it possible to call this performance of yours art?" (213) The actors' defiance of the Shakespearean conventional theatre and the Director's instructions on how to perform the depoliticized *Hamlet* or any other form of didactic theatre with the phrase "Do you want us to stay under your thumb forever?" (214) reveals that aestheticism is the primary concern of the play, rather than politics. The transadapted sketches performed on stage are instructed by Abu Fawanees (Carrier of Lanterns); the Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss figure who preaches on freeing Arabic theatre from the shackles of Western dramaturgy. Such experimental theatrical techniques aim at localizing the Hamlet legend with the elated hope to create an authentic and indigenous Arabic drama drawn from a Western archetype.

In the introductory notes to his play *Forget Hamlet* (1994), translated by Margaret Litvin, the Iraqi

playwright Jawad al-Assadi proposes what sounds like a historicist theory of literary adaptation of classical texts. He argues that classical masterpieces are not sacred and therefore can be adapted or transadapted into any language “to respond to the intellectual and political changes” (223) to catch the historical moment of contemporary life. Such outdated texts, he argues, can be loaded with political and social themes to suit modern public taste and tackle current social and political issues in any society and in any language. His proposition of “sweeping away the holiness of literary texts” posits that sanctifying avant-garde works of art deadens them and makes them dumb and vapid texts fitting only a certain age and a certain citizenry. (223) He further elaborates that it is a misconception that such holy classical texts do not admit “excavation, rough handling or varied readings.” (223) The Jordanian playwright Nader ‘Omran adopts such a theory as advocated by his mouthpiece in *A Theatre Company Found a Theatre and Theatred “Hamlet.”*

Forget Hamlet is largely a transdaptation of Shakespeare’s original text with some departures and the tone is more politically satirical. Al-Assadi’s Hamlet is a pathetic and an intellectually non-heroic figure and even the memorable quotes, which are supposed to be his, are ludicrously mimicked by other characters to show his embarrassing dumbness. For instance, while Shakespeare’s Hamlet denounces Ophelia’s love saying “Get thee to a nunnery,” Al-Assadi’s Ophelia addresses Hamlet reproachfully for his silence, “Get yourself to a monastery; that would be more merciful.” (255) Moreover, Horatio reproves Hamlet, “Where is your madness?... Didn’t you say, I’ll wipe all trivial fond records, all saws of books, all forms, all pleasures past, your commandment all alone shall live within the book of my brain!” (264) The play is critical of dictatorship, autocracy, suppression of freedom of speech and oppression of the populace. However, like all plays in the Arab Hamlet canon, there is no clue that the condemnation of misgovernment is limited to a domestic regime. The frequent portrayal of Claudius as a ferocious wild buffalo devouring the weak is meant as a direct attack against brutal, autocratic regimes anywhere in the world. The guillotine standing in the town square is a constant reminder for all of the beheading of dissidents. The play reveals the agony of intellectuals and political activists both in prisons and in diaspora. The player who acts as Socrates’ jailer and the guillotine’s guardian seems to be both the narrator and the exiled playwright’s mouthpiece. Socrates is representative of the Iraqi intelligentsia and political activists in jails or in exile. The jailer is ordered to force the imprisoned Socrates to drink a poisoned cup. Socrates regrettably complains, “More than once I knelt at the feet of the saints and begged forgiveness for my sins.” (236) Nonetheless, instead of poisoning the political prisoner Socrates, the jailer takes pity on him and drinks the cup filled with poison and instantly dies. Hamlet does not need to feign madness or to perform a mousetrap play to catch the conscience of his father’s assassin while watching the play, for Ophelia saw the murder from her windowsill. She saw Claudius with the help of his culprit Gertrude slaughtering King Hamlet while he was asleep in the orchard.

Contrasting their counterparts in Shakespeare’s text, the two comic gravediggers in this play act as a chorus offering a comic relief in a tragedy. They appear frequently in the cemetery while digging a grave and satirically commenting on the onstage action. In Scene Two, while digging a grave for the Late King Hamlet, the gravedigger warns his fellow that the new King Claudius is a state barbarian and a dictator who will rule Denmark with a firm hand, “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.” (238) In Scene Ten, the gravedigger scornfully portrays Claudius as an “expert at devouring people” (257) since prisons are full of dissidents who are finally executed by the guillotine. Laertes reports to Polonius that he has doubts that Claudius killed his brother King Hamlet, “which of us doesn’t know that?” He finds it weird that Prince Hamlet does not take vengeance on the man who assassinated his father, whored his

mother and usurped the throne, “Hamlet responds to his father’s murder with “to be or not to be.” (242) In this play, just like in almost all the other Arab Hamlet versions, Al-Assadi’s Hamlet is a representative of the silenced, depoliticized, and intimidated mob. Even the Lord Chamberlain Polonius fears the King and tries to silence and depoliticize his son, “You’ll get me killed with your clamor.” (242) On the day of his coronation the despot Claudius fills the hearts of his citizens with fear and the severe consequences of civil disobedience or treason clearly showing how dictators exploit their citizens, “I want to grip the corners of the kingdom tightly, to make Denmark a fortified stronghold with a fortified army...protected by the guillotine from anyone who would...go fishing in dirty waters.” (243) Laertes is a Hamletian figure who feigns madness to study Claudius’s wrongs. However, since the blind dissident poses threat to the throne, Claudius transfers him to a mental asylum. In defiance, Laertes warns Claudius, using the original Hamlet’s quotes, that before beheading him on the guillotine he will cut off his head because he killed the just king, whored his sister-in-law and usurped the throne.

Unlike Shakespeare’s Ophelia, who is portrayed as an obedient, innocent girl totally submissive to the power structures of her patriarchal society, al-Assadi’s Ophelia refuses to remain a politically inactive woman and joins the opposition against the tyrant King Claudius. Ophelia transforms into a Hamlet’s surrogate and acts like a political opponent who perceives Hamlet’s silence with regard to Claudius’s murder of his father a disgraceful response. In criticizing Hamlet, Ophelia is criticizing the masses’ indifference to the atrocities committed by the regime and considers their silence an “unforgivable crime.” (253) Ophelia even renounces her father Polonius for taking part in the regime’s atrocities. In response Polonius warns her that he would have strangled her in the cradle if he knew that she would be a dissident. Ophelia’s disappointment with Hamlet’s silence turns him into her eyes as a coward that lacks manliness, and a foolish brainless child. However, she is ready to offer her body to Claudius in exchange for issuing a pardon for her brother to be released from the sanatorium. But she is ignorant of the fact that Laertes was tortured to death in the psychiatric hospital and that seducing Claudius will be in vain. Nonetheless, having torn her clothes, Ophelia restores her sense of honor and escapes from Claudius. Her plea to the King for the issuance of a remittal for her brother seems applicable to all opposition activists in prisons or in exile. Laertes neither plotted against the King nor used arms against him. Ophelia cries to the king, “he spoke out loud what was hidden away in his breast.” (258) Toward the end of the play, Hamlet reveals the cause of his silence - helplessness and defeatism to his bosom friend Horatio. His words are pertinent to the anxiety and dilemma of almost every Arab layman confronted with state oppression, “there were two Hamlets living in one body: one vicious, pledged to the dagger, dreaming of salvation and killing Claudius and revenge; the other, a Hamlet disillusioned and full of anxiety.” (264) In this scene, Hamlet admits his frustration and passivity in an unjust world. Defeated by an overwhelming feeling of powerlessness and melancholy, Hamlet opts to become a spiritual person and an existentialist. He discerns the meaninglessness, insignificance and nothingness of life teeming with injustice, oppression and state violence. Gertrude becomes conscience-stricken and is spiritually tormented for committing her crime and incest. Her words to Claudius express public opinion, “The country is not a country anymore! The guillotine has crushed people near and far. You’ve turned life into a big puddle of blood.” (271)

Litvin (2006) remarks that Claudius, rather than Hamlet, occupies the imaginative center of the Arab Hamlet tradition. (217) She observes that all the Arabic offshoots of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* turn Claudius into a brutal despot with absolute authority undefeatable by weak political revolutionaries. (200) While the apparition of the late King Hamlet, an incarnation of Nasser and the upsurge of Arab nationalism after his death, becomes an almost forgotten heroic figure of the nation’s past collective memory, the unheroic

Prince Hamlet becomes a helpless, powerless and disjointed psychopath intimidated to face state oppression. In the meantime, King Claudius's absolute authority becomes incontestable. The arrogant Claudius boastfully addresses Gertrude that he shed all this blood on the guillotine, exiled scholars, and tortured political activists who were plotting against him to save his throne. The megalomaniac Claudius haughtily tells Gertrude, "I came to power in order to be the eternal man! When the throne dies, then dies Claudius" (272) In response to the ignorant Polonius's fear of the crowd demanding to know the name of the corpse being placed in the coffin in the street and is denied a burial ritual, the brute Claudius shouts out, "I want terror to enter into the hearts of all the people." (272) Claudius sends two assassins to slaughter Hamlet who willingly surrenders himself to death while lying down in a basin full of water. The end takes a drastic and unexpected twist when Laertes rises from his coffin, kills Claudius in a duel and sits on the throne. This Deus ex machina or abrupt resolution of the play's plot gives revolutionaries a glimpse of hope that dictatorship is not eternal and the populace will achieve liberty at the end. The final scene, however, becomes tragic again when the two desperate women, Gertrude and Ophelia, commit suicide by drinking a glass of poisoned drink, an action that denotes that bloodshed will continue.

This translated collection of plays is a highly valuable contribution to the field, although Mahmoud Aboudoma's autobiographical essay "*Gamlet* is Russian for *Hamlet*", translated by Margaret Litvin, and Omran's play, interesting in themselves, do not clearly belong to the political pattern of the other three plays in the volume. Of course, the political Arab Hamlet canon has much more to offer than the pieces presented here. The editors might have included, for example, the translation of either *I Am Hamlet* (2009) by the Egyptian playwright Hani Afifi, *Ismail/Hamlet* (1999) by the Tunisian playwright 'Abd al-Hakim al-Marzuqi or Aboudoma's *The Dance of the Scorpions* (1988).

In general, the political adaptations, spin-offs, and parodies of the Hamlet legend in Arab theatres are highly saturated with politics to incite political change and decry autocratic governments for their failure to achieve the Nasserist's revolutionary optimism (1952-1964) in the face of colonialist powers dominating the region. Nevertheless, Omran's play seems to be the only one in the Arab Hamlet canon that deviates from this political configuration. The plays in this volume, with the exception of Omran's play, have much in common. They demonstrate that the political Arab Hamlet is a Christ figure; a justice seeker that has been martyred by the authoritarian Claudius regime. However, his frustration and helplessness to "set it right" and change the political status quo, despite the fact that his struggle for democracy continues, makes him a representative of the marooned, helpless and stranded Arab common man in the face of repressive governments. The plays, again except Omran's, portray how an entire populace is crippled by state tyranny, oppression, imprisonment of political activists, and torture and how such state violence against the masses has created a terrified and depoliticized, docile nation. The plays in the collection deviate from and subvert the Shakespearean legend in structure, treatment and style. The plays' theatricality is postmodern with the inclusion of metatheatrical scenes. In addition to the Shakespearean text as being the main source of the adaptation, each play makes use of intertexts and subtexts. With varying degrees the plays in the volume treat obscenity in a rather crude manner. Moreover, the plays are existentialist in nature; nevertheless, they highlight the absurdity and futility of political theatre to provoke political change. The Arab Hamlet is more concerned with the creation of a communal consciousness and a collective identity rather than private interests. However, the ineffectiveness of his reactions to the current political situation renders him a helpless, silenced revolutionary while trying, no matter how stranded and paralyzed he is, to fight against either a domestic tyrant or global imperialism. Safi Mahfouz (2011) points out that although some Arab Hamlet incarnations such as Alfred Faraj's *Sulyman of Aleppo* (1965), Salah 'Abdel Sabour's *The Tragedy of al-*

Hallaj (1964), and Abdel Rahman Al-Sarqawi's *Tragedy of Jamila* (1962) have not been classified as constituents of the Arab Hamlet canon, the tragic heroes in such plays have been endowed with some traits of the Arab revolutionary Hamlet and therefore can also be considered as semi-appropriations of the Shakespearean legend. (375) Nevertheless, we cannot generalize that every Arab Hamlet parody is a political satire on autocratic governments in the Arab world. Some of them were intended to be a critique of autocracies throughout the world in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Surprisingly, the Arab Spring uprisings that have swept across many countries in the region since 2011 have not yet motivated the performance of any political Hamlet appropriations to join the Arab Hamlet canon.

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Table of Content

Essays

- Khalid Amine & Marvin Carlson - Tayeb Saddiki and the Re-invention of Tradition in Contemporary Moroccan Theatre: An Obituary
- Ziad Adwan - The Local Otherness: Theatre Houses in the United Arab Emirates
- Michael Malek Najjar - Yussef El Guindi's Arab Spring - Revolutions, Upheavals, and Critical Critiques
- Torange Yeghiazarian - On Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*
- Jamil Khoury - Parsing *Disgraced*: An Assault, A Critique, and A Truce
- Chloë Edmonson - Body Politics in Adham Hafez Company's *2065 BC*
- Joachim Ben Yakoub & Fida Hammami - A Counterpoint Reading of the Moussem Cities@Tunis Festival

Reviews

- Marvin Carlson & Philippa Wehle - *The Last Supper* by Ahmed El Attar
- Margaret Litvin - Arab Angst on Swedish Stages
- Heather Denyer - Heather Raffo's *Noura* in Progress
- Sarah Moawad - Two Egyptian Playwrights in Boston: Hany Abdel Naser's *They Say Dancing is a Sin* and Yasmeen Emam's *The Mirror*

Global Posts

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- Torange Yeghiazarian - On Michael Najjar's direction of *Scorched* by Wajdi Mouawad
- Michael Malek Najjar - *AB: Beit Byout* by Tahweel Ensemble Theatre in Beirut
- Safi Mahmoud Mahfouz - Review of *Four Arab Hamlet Plays* by Marvin Carlson & Margaret Litvin (eds.)

Short Plays

- Hamed Almaliki - The Cart
- Ali Abdulnebbi Al Zaidi – Rubbish