

INTRODUCTION

Between acts 4 and 5 of Shakespeare's tragedy, Hamlet is sent on a journey. He encounters pirates, passes from one vessel to another, and rediscovers a skill that he had almost forgotten he possessed. Critics have debated exactly how Hamlet's journey transforms him, but he returns aged and different. Having been momentarily beside himself, he appears re-centered, self-confident, perhaps more kingly. The ghosts and doubts of the early acts are forgotten. He stands at Ophelia's graveside and declares: "This is I, / Hamlet the Dane."¹

This book follows *Hamlet* through the post-1952 Arab world. Here, too, is a Hamlet sent abroad, passed from one vessel to another, pirated, driven to re-writing, pressed to display character traits his close associates may not have known him to possess. He, too, returns from his travels deepened, complicated, and yet brought into clearer focus. To trace his journey is to see Hamlet splinter and be reconstituted; serve as a mask, a megaphone, and a measuring stick; and tell a story as revealing of his hosts' identities as of his own.

The Arab Hamlet will lead us through the tangled corridors of contemporary political debate, behind the loudspeakers of Nasser's revolutionary Egypt, and into the experimental theatres of post-1967 Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq. He will speak in different voices: secular and Islamist, shrill and playful, heroic and ironic. Sometimes he may get tipsy and stutter—or forget his lines altogether—but this, too, is part of his character, and he will remain a good guide. We know Hamlet well (or think we do); his unexpected words and silences can help illuminate some aspects of Arab literary and political culture, and also, like the best instances of cultural exchange, of our own interpretive habits and assumptions.

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Why follow Hamlet, in particular, through the Arab world? That so many people there have things to say about him would be reason enough. Liberals, nationalists, and Islamists have enlisted Hamlet for their causes. Directors and playwrights have invited him into their work. Preachers, polemicists, filmmakers, novelists, poets, memoirists—no matter how public or private the message, Arab writers have drafted and redrafted Hamlet to help them express it.

But the ubiquity of the Arab Hamlet is not the only reason we should attend to him. He also has something interesting to say. To put it, for the moment, very simply: Hamlet's central concern is the problem of historical agency. He asks what it means "to be" rather than "not to be" in a world where "the time is out of joint" and one's very existence as a historical actor is threatened. He thus encapsulates a debate coeval with and largely constitutive of modern Arab identity: the problem of self-determination and authenticity. Following Hamlet's Arab journey, then, helps clarify one of the most central and widely misunderstood preoccupations of modern Arab politics.

The Arab Hamlet can contribute to literary studies as well. His multilayered history helps suggest a new analytical frame for scholarship on literary reception and appropriation: a frame that breaks out of the binary categories (influencer/influencee, colonizer/colonized, and, more recently, Arabs/West) that have shaped the study of postcolonial literatures. The binarism has been much criticized, but it is still with us. As teachers, we often find it easy and fruitful to show our students Text B and ask how it mimics and revises Text A—or, barely better, how it reflects Context X. In organizing its 2007 Complete Works Festival in Stratford-upon-Avon, the Royal Shakespeare Company followed the same logic, billing the Arabic and Indian performances, among others, as "responses" to the mainstream shows.² Some postcolonial "responders"—such as Sudanese novelist Tayeb Salih (al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ)—have been well served by these labels. But to describe a broader range of interesting work and to serve the timely project of reinserting Arabic literature into world literature, it is useful to broaden the frame.

I have termed my new approach the "global kaleidoscope." For *Hamlet* did not arrive in the Arab world only or mainly through Britain's colonization of Egypt. Nor was Shakespeare's work first packaged as a single colonially imposed authoritative set of texts. Instead, as I will show, Arab audiences came to know Shakespeare through a kaleidoscopic array of performances, texts, and criticism from many directions: not just the "original" British source culture but also French, Italian, American, Soviet, and Eastern European literary and dramatic traditions, which at times were more influential than Britain's. Examin-

ing how Arabs got their *Hamlet* and what they have done with it over several generations can point the way to a more fruitful understanding of international Shakespeare appropriation and, in general, of international literary encounters.

Moving between these two main concerns, literary appropriation and moral/political agency, let me quickly map the terrain I hope to cover in this book.

“When Shakespeare Travels Abroad”

The paradox of *Hamlet* appropriation is already apparent in Shakespeare’s text. Hamlet spends the whole play trying to resist appropriations, misrepresentations, or simplifications of his character. He refuses to be summarized: his speech quibbles and equivocates, maddening those who would “pluck out the heart of [his] mystery” or “sound [him] from [his] lowest note to the top of [his] compass.”³ From his first appearance, when he claims that outward forms cannot “denote [him] truly” because he has “that within which passes show,”⁴ to his dying moment, when he wants Horatio to stay behind and tell *his* story, he always insists he is misunderstood. Yet his puns, riddles, and moods deter no one. Almost all the major and minor characters (including Fortinbras and the gravediggers) offer a theory of what Hamlet is “about.”⁵ No one can sound him (in either sense), but everyone keeps trying.

The same drama has played out among readers and audiences worldwide. Hamlet’s first three lines are puns, challenging the very idea of translatability.⁶ Yet *Hamlet* is one of Shakespeare’s most often translated plays; in many languages (including Arabic and Russian) it is *the* most translated. Despite his resistance or because of it, Hamlet is one of the most intensely appropriated literary characters of all time.⁷ There are wilting Romantic Hamlets, nationalist hero Hamlets, humanist dissident Hamlets, Puritan Hamlets, disenfranchised philosopher Hamlets, existentialist Hamlets, *yeshiva-bokher* Hamlets,⁸ and so on.

Scholars have followed the translators and adapters. Hundreds of studies have documented Shakespeare’s global reach; many have focused on Prince Hamlet’s naturalization as a Victorian Englishman, a German, a Russian or Soviet, a Lithuanian, or a mid-century Pole. At the present writing, the University of Chicago library catalog lists 110 works whose titles begin with “Shakespeare in . . .”—excluding copies of the 1998 film *Shakespeare in Love*. “Hamlet in . . .” covers another ten.⁹

The field of Shakespeare studies has opened up to international perspectives over the past thirty-five years.¹⁰ Non-Anglophone Shakespeare really entered

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the scholarly mainstream in the 1990s, when several lines of academic inquiry converged. Translation theorists found in Shakespeare's plays a convenient (because widely known and prestigious) test case.¹¹ Scholars in performance studies, having noted how sharply local context could influence a play's staging and interpretation, saw a need to account for "intercultural" performances of Shakespeare in various languages and locales.¹² Marxist scholars became interested in the fetishization of Shakespeare as a British cultural icon which, in turn, was used to confer cultural legitimacy on the project of capitalist empire-building.¹³ Scholars of postcolonial drama and literature began to explore how the periphery responded.¹⁴

All this scholarship developed quickly and with a great sense of urgency. For instance, the editor of the groundbreaking collection *Foreign Shakespeare* announced in 1998 that "we have not even begun to develop a theory of cultural exchange that might help us understand what happens when Shakespeare travels abroad" and proclaimed that this was "the most important task Shakespeareans face . . . much more important than linguistic analysis, textual examination, psychological assessments, historical research, or any of the Anglo-centered occupations scholars have traditionally valued and perpetuated."¹⁵

Yet hundreds of articles, monographs, conferences, and edited volumes later, such a "theory of cultural exchange" is still lacking. There exists no accepted method or theory to explain where and how Shakespeare's plays and other prestigious European texts are appropriated: who tends to deploy them, in what circumstances, for what ends, and whether some texts (such as *Hamlet*) lend themselves to different agendas than others.¹⁶

That mine is the first book-length analysis of Arab *Hamlets* is no surprise; we can look to the familiar disciplinary cleavages. Specialists in world Shakespeare appropriation, typically based in English or comparative literature departments, tend to lack Arabic language skills. Meanwhile, Arab and western scholars of Arabic literature have opted to spend their limited time exploring the vast terrain of Arabic literature "proper" rather than such hybrid (and "inauthentic"?) phenomena as Arab Shakespeare. They have perhaps felt that appropriation studies are a luxury, to be taken seriously only when enough of the basic research has been done.

The topic has been left to Arab scholars of English literature, and there, too, it has remained marginal. Several Arab students in U.S. and British graduate programs have written useful dissertations on Arabic translations or productions of Shakespeare, but none has led to a book.¹⁷ The fine insights generated by theatre criticism have not been generalized.¹⁸ Scholars in the English de-

partments of Arab universities, facing a relative dearth of adequate Arabic-language studies of Shakespeare, have often felt their first priority was to write for their own students.¹⁹ When well-placed Arab literary scholars in the West (such as Oxford's M. M. Badawi) have occasionally brought "Arab Shakespeare" to their colleagues' attention, they have presented it almost as a novelty, not hesitating to draw easy laughs with the old joke that Shakespeare was really a crypto-Arab, "Shaykh Zubayr."²⁰

More significant is the lack of a convincing framework for a study like mine. The paradigm of literary influence, a mainstay of comparative literary studies, has been useful but inadequate: it overprivileges the influencer and limits the agency of the influencee. It thus neglects to ask why different writers take different things from Shakespeare and bring different things to him (and why many writers familiar with Shakespeare choose not to appropriate his texts at all). But subsequent explanations, despite their authors' professed desire to "provincialize Europe,"²¹ have not moved past the basic idea of a binary relationship between original texts and rewritings.

One attempt is the model of "postcolonial rewriting," which stresses the agency (and the often transgressive intent) of the rewriter. This model serves very well for cases in which nationalist writers in the colonies straightforwardly "write back" to the metropole²²—for example, Martinican poet Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête* (1968), and, in a different way, *The Tragedy of Cleopatra* (1927) by Egyptian poet Ahmed Shawqi (Aḥmad Shawqī).²³ However, the postcolonial model has two well-known flaws. First, it reinscribes the same conceptual dichotomy that it aims to critique (albeit while drawing attention to it, at least).²⁴ Second, and more damaging, it is helpless before the many cases where the local text or performance that borrows from Shakespeare "is not anti-colonial," does not seek to subvert anything in particular, and "is actually not interested in Shakespeare at all, except as a suitably weighty means through which it can negotiate its own future, shake off its own cramps, revise its own traditions, and expand its own performative styles."²⁵

When the former colonizer is not the implicit addressee, who is? If Shakespeare appropriation is not an "aggressive binary action," then what is it about?²⁶ Recently the twin concepts of "global" and "local" Shakespeare appear to be replacing "postcolonialism" as the *mots clefs*—but so far without unlocking new insights about who tends to borrow what from whom, when, and why. Tired with all these, some talented scholars have called for "more supple and comprehensive theories of cross-cultural Shakespeare encounters."²⁷ They have meanwhile returned to the working notion that what shapes a community's engage-

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ment with a foreign text are the specific talents and circumstances of local theatre-makers and their audiences.²⁸ This approach has produced some rich and sensitive scholarship, but it hardly helps chart a direction for future work.

The Global Kaleidoscope

This book proposes a model of literary appropriation that I call the “global kaleidoscope.” As I argue in chapter 3, each rereading and rewriting is created in active dialogue with a diverse array of readings that precede and surround it. Contextual factors help condition both the way an Arab appropriator receives and interprets *Hamlet* and, later, the shape of the new version he or she ultimately produces. (My model is itself in dialogue with Bakhtin’s “dialogical” speech appropriated from a web of previous speech, H. R. Jauss’s idea of a dialectical question-answer relationship between context and text, and Paul Friedrich’s notion of a “parallax” in which the gifted individual language user negotiates and in turn helps reshape surrounding norms of grammar and culture.)²⁹

The first phase to notice is the reception. Many studies assume a simple one-on-one relationship between an “original” text and its (obedient or subversive) rewriter. But this assumption is unrealistic. Arab writers do not first encounter *Hamlet* just by sitting down and reading it. In general, the reception of a prestigious foreign literary work rarely entails a *tabula rasa*, a direct unmediated experience of an authoritative original. Instead, the would-be appropriator typically receives a text through a historically determined kaleidoscope of *indirect* experiences: some combination of the films, performances, conversations, articles, abridgments, translations, and other materials that happen to be available, along with or before the text itself. These materials come from multiple cultural traditions (not just the “original” source culture) and arrive in various languages. Their assortment and relative significance depends on the society’s current circumstances: international alignments, social tensions, cultural fashions, and so forth. They offer distinct and even conflicting interpretations from which the receiver must synthesize or choose.

This indeterminacy confers a limited freedom. The appropriator is free to choose his or her influences, but only from the options made available by the kaleidoscope configuration of the day. (It is similar to the way we speak of a musical group’s “influences”: there is a sense of freely choosing, albeit from a limited sphere of options, what to be influenced by.)

After forming a coherent idea of the received text, the appropriator must decide whether and how to redeploy it for an artistic and/or polemical purpose: poetic meditation, literal reproduction, political allegory, parody, quotation or allusion, or sloganization. This is another moment of free decision within a lim-

ited sphere of options. The new interpretation cannot be wholly arbitrary but is conditioned partly by the surrounding conversations about art, culture, politics, and, of course, Shakespeare.³⁰ So while open to imaginative play, the choice is also circumscribed by audience considerations: what would make sense lexically, resonate culturally, and pay off politically. Each generation's reception and reinterpretation then becomes part of the kaleidoscope for the generation that follows.

Recognizing this global kaleidoscope does not lead to any predictive claims about the purpose of rewriting a respected literary work or the direction such a rewriting might take. Instead, its main virtue is to provide a method (a set of questions) through which to consider the individual appropriator's political, artistic, and philosophical situation and concerns. In particular, it draws attention to the great variety of actual sources through which an appropriator acquires a "source" text. It points out that every rewriting occurs in dialogue with a wide range of competing interpretations and with the "horizon of expectations" of the rewriter's own audience. Thus this approach can help us extricate studies of literary appropriation from the vexed and self-reproducing dichotomy variously termed dominant/subversive, original/rewriting, Empire/colony, center/periphery, and West/East.

The case of Arab *Hamlet* appropriation illustrates the usefulness of the global kaleidoscope approach. For one thing, the Arab *Hamlet* differs somewhat from the cases of Arab *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Othello*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, which have all, for obvious reasons of plot, attracted more explicitly anticolonial rewritings.³¹ (However, a large number of *Othello* offshoots have instead raised other concerns, such as gender violence.)³² *Hamlet* is also not part of a second group of Shakespeare plays, those in which scholars have identified elements of Arab or Middle Eastern origin.³³ It heads the third and largest group of Shakespeare plays, those for which most Arab readers and writers have not raised the issue of Occidental or Oriental roots at all.³⁴ Other major plays in this group are *King Lear*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Richard III*—also, incidentally, plays that feature autocracies and their problems. Already this shows the futility of trying to generalize about the way Shakespeare will function in a given cultural context. Different plays, due to their particular resonances with local circumstances, are perceived and deployed very differently.

Further, *Hamlet's* reception history contravenes the postcolonial model. As we will see, British models were important but not decisive. Certainly there were British schools with required English classes; schoolchildren read abridgments (such as Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*) in both English and Arabic. But the earliest Arabic Shakespeare adaptations, written by

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Syro-Lebanese immigrants who knew French better than English, reflected mainly French Neoclassical theatre conventions and the tastes of Cairo's emerging middle class. At every moment, the geopolitical configuration helped determine which cultural models seemed most attractive. There were Italian acting styles, French and British traveling productions, Arab and international literary criticism, and, still later, American and Soviet productions and films. Arab students who pursued advanced degrees abroad (in Paris, Rome, London, Moscow, Sofia, Berlin, Prague, and Budapest or in various American cities) also returned with books and ideas. Thus, influential readings of Shakespeare came from Britain but also from France, Italy, Germany, the Soviet Union, the United States, and Eastern Europe. This was especially true of *Hamlet* because it obsessed so much of Europe and Russia throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Moreover, as the global kaleidoscope model would predict, younger Arab *Hamlet* appropriators have also responded to the interpretations of their elders. Each generation's political and cultural context includes the preceding Arab versions. Thus (to glance briefly at examples we will later examine in detail): Syrian director Riad Ismat's (Riyāḍ 'Iṣmat, b. 1947) freedom-fighter Hamlet, presented at a Damascus high school in 1973, responded in part to Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* and other Eastern European models of Shakespeare interpretation. Ismat's production helped inspire Syrian playwright Mamduh Adwan (Mamdūḥ 'Adwān) to write his 1976 play *Hamlet Wakes Up Late*, whose ineffectual protagonist satirizes glorified revolutionary portrayals like Ismat's. Adwan's satire was in turn invoked by later pundits writing for Syrian and pan-Arab audiences, including Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, who in a 2000 column urges his Arab readers not to oversleep and let "the Fortinbras of this world . . . win the day and have the final say."³⁵ And so on. To understand any of these borrowings, we need to hear the conversation in which they all participate. Simply taking one of these Syrian works and comparing it one-to-one with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* would fall far short of explaining what it means.

Hamlet and Political Agency

The main theme of the Arab *Hamlet* conversation, already evident in the three Syrian examples sketched above, is political agency: the desire to determine one's own fate, to be an actor in history rather than a victim of it, "to be" rather than "not to be." In the Arab context, such agency is usually imagined as collective. In political debate Hamlet's main contribution has been a slogan—"Shall we be or not be?"—an urgent, collective call to arms. In the Arab theatre, the archetypal Hamlet is a decisive political actor, a seeker of justice and righter of

wrongs. One observer has summarized him as “a romantic hero who sets out to fight corruption, and dies for the cause of justice.”³⁶ But it turns out that this archetypal Hamlet lasted less than a decade on the Arab stage. His style of political agency, then, is not the only style worth considering.

So let us listen to the conversation. First, let us explore how speakers of Arabic have chosen to “voice” the lexeme “Hamlet.”³⁷ These voicings have developed over time; several factors (political pressures, available models, gifted individual speakers, etc.) have shaped the social grammar that circumscribes acceptable new voicings. Then let us analyze Hamlet’s function diachronically: the changing addressees, tone, and rhetorical goals. My book approaches these two sets of questions in turn. The first chapter presents, basically, a phrasebook: a synchronic ordinary-language study of the way “Hamlet” works in today’s Arab political lexicon. The second focuses on the dramatic imagination of Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser (Jamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir; 1918–70), whose personality and policies did the most to shape the figure I will call the Arab Hero Hamlet. The rest of the book traces the stage history of this heroic Hamlet: his origins in a global kaleidoscope of Shakespeare versions, his brief heyday in the 1970s Arab theatre, and the long ironic afterlife that kept him in circulation for the following thirty years.

Chapter 1 explores Hamlet’s meaning in today’s Arabic political vocabulary. Hamlet has been invoked in reference to nearly every major and minor political crisis touching the Arab world in the past decade. Analyzing his function in recent polemical writings such as newspaper columns, speeches, and sermons, I show how Arab writers read “to be or not to be” not as a meditation on the individual’s place in the world but as an argument about collective political identity. Hamlet comes to represent a group: the Arab and/or Muslim community. (Some writers try to conflate the two.) Because “the time is out of joint,” the group’s continuous collective identity is under threat. Its existence is menaced at the very moment at which it comes into being. Other themes from *Hamlet*—words/deeds, sleep/waking, madness/wholeness—help reinforce the urgency of the crisis. However, these cries of outrage and alarm are not the only approach to the issue of historical agency. As a counterpoint I offer an instance of *Hamlet* rewriting by the important Palestinian-Iraqi writer Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā). Jabra’s protagonist Walid Masoud constitutes himself through “words, words, words,” pointing the way toward the more complex understandings of agency seen in the following chapters.

Turning to the stage history, we will find that Hamlet’s link to political agency has remained remarkably stable across five decades. In different periods, however, writers and directors have used Hamlet to pursue quite different types

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of agency, and in different ways. Their preoccupations with *Hamlet* fall into four main phases: international standards (1952–4), psychological depth (1964–67), political agitation (1970–75), and intertextual dramatic irony (1976–2002). Because Arab theatre people see their work as necessarily political and because *Hamlet* is read as a political play, these phases have largely corresponded to the prevailing political moods in the region: euphoric pride after the Egyptian Revolution of 1952; soul-searching and impatience for progress in the mid-1960s; anger and defiance after the disastrous June War of 1967 and Nasser's death in 1970; and a mixture of cynicism and nostalgia since the mid-1970s, as stale autocracies spread through the region and stifled its dreams of national awakening.

Our journey begins in Egypt in 1952. As chapter 2 explains, much of what matters for Arab *Hamlet* appropriation in the postcolonial period—the international sources, the way they were absorbed, and the concerns they help express—was shaped by the legacy of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Nasser's geopolitical and cultural priorities made a range of *Hamlets* available and conditioned how intellectuals received them. Beyond this, from the moment in 1954 when he declared to his people, “All of you are Gamal Abdel Nasser,” the Egyptian leader personally embodied his country's identity and acted out its drama of historical agency. Beyond Egypt's borders, he became (like his radio station) “the voice of the Arabs.” His defeat in the 1967 war and his death in 1970 meant a promise broken and an inheritance withdrawn. The problem of how to mourn him would create a hunger for the very works of art, including Shakespeare adaptations, that his policies had helped import.

Chapter 3 presents the global kaleidoscope theory as a much-needed revision to the Prospero-and-Caliban model of postcolonial rewriting. To this end, I summarize the actual kaleidoscope of *Hamlets* available to Egyptian theatre professionals and audiences by 1964. The powerful but atypical reminiscences of Arab students who suffered under British schoolmasters (here represented by filmmaker Youssef Chahine and critic Edward Said) tend to obscure the broader origins of Arab Shakespeare. In fact, these origins were varied; different sources gained importance in different periods. Nineteenth-century French sources, including the hitherto-unidentified version from which Tanyus 'Abdu (Ṭānyūs 'Abduh) cribbed the earliest surviving Arabic *Hamlet* (1901), helped plant the seeds of a decisive, heroic Hamlet in pursuit of justice. Direct-from-English translations, with a greater commitment to treating Shakespeare's plays as written texts, became part of the kaleidoscope by the 1980s, as did German-inspired Romantic readings of Hamlet's introspective depths. A transformative addition was Grigori Kozintsev's edgy and politically allusive

Hamlet film (1964), which became a Cairo sensation, although it was not imitated until the 1970s. At the juncture of these competing approaches, we will consider a high-profile Egyptian production of *Hamlet* in 1964–65: an effort to mediate between the British and Soviet readings of *Hamlet* and a bid to claim Egypt's place on the world stage by showing mastery of the "world classics."

Chapter 4 examines a related bid for political agency (1964–67): the pursuit of interiorized subjectivity as proof of moral personhood. As the Egyptian theatre grew more ambitious, playwrights strove to create dramatic exemplars of authentic Arab political action. This in turn required characters who were "deep" enough to qualify as fully fledged moral subjects and hence modern political agents. Here *Hamlet* was still the gold standard. Looking at two landmark plays in which critics have heard Hamletian echoes, *Sulayman of Aleppo* by Alfred Farag (Alfrid Faraj) and *The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj* by Salah Abdel Sabur (Ṣalāḥ ʿAbd al-Ṣabūr), I argue that the "Hamletization" of their Muslim protagonists is neither subversive in spirit nor driven by any desire to seize mastery of a colonizer's text. Rather, *Hamlet* serves as a model and even an emblem of psychological interiority. But because both Farag's seminarian and Abdel Sabur's Sufi were read as brave opponents of a tyrannical regime, these two Muslim heroes helped cement the link in the Arab audience's imagination between *Hamlet* and the theme of earthly justice.

Such appeals for recognition largely stopped after the Arab defeat by Israel in the June War of 1967. (The defeat also ended Egypt's unquestioned dominance of Arab culture. Therefore, starting in this period, we will begin to look at plays from Syria, Jordan, and elsewhere.) Chapter 5 begins with the cultural impact of the June War and its coda, Nasser's death in 1970. As we will see, the defeat fundamentally altered Arab conceptions of political theatre's role. A well-developed high culture was no longer considered enough to guarantee the world's respect. Psychological interiority was irrelevant: what mattered was not deserving agentive power but seizing it. Disillusioned with their regimes, dramatists stopped addressing subtly allegorical plays to the government; instead, they appealed directly to audiences, trying to rouse them to participate in political life. Analyzing two early 1970s *Hamlet* adaptations from Egypt and Syria, we will see how the 1970s *Hamlet* became a Che Guevara in doublet and hose. Guilt and sadness over his father's death only sharpened his anger; his fierce pursuit of justice left no room for introspection or doubt.

But this agitprop effort, too, quickly hit a dead end. Rejecting activist theatre, the Egyptian, Syrian, and Iraqi dramatists of the past thirty-five years have instead deployed *Hamlet* for dramatic irony. Chapter 6 examines six Arab *Hamlet* offshoot plays performed between 1976 and 2002. The most recent of

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these plays, written in English, stands on the margins of the Arab *Hamlet* tradition. But the rest, aware of their predecessors' heroic Hamlet, turn him into a foil for their own pointedly inarticulate and ineffectual protagonists. These new antiheroes are "not Prince Hamlet, nor were meant to be"; most lack even the eloquence of a Prufrock.³⁸ Meanwhile Claudius becomes a protean and all-powerful force who dominates the play; the ghost of Nasserism, discredited but not replaced, settles into the role of Hamlet's father's ghost. These bitter, often hilarious plays criticize the political situation, but they are at their best in mocking allegorical political theatre. The only real political agency available, they suggest, is the power to set oneself above one's circumstances through ironic laughter.

These plays highlight Hamlet's work as a political rewriter, one of the important themes *Hamlet* has offered Arab dramatists in recent years. For although he preaches against ad-libbing and clowning,³⁹ Hamlet is not averse to adapting a foreign play when the need arises. When "benetted round with villainies,"⁴⁰ he is quick to turn a trope into a trap. Hamlet's timely staging of *The Murder of Gonzago*, "the image of a murder done in Vienna,"⁴¹ has provided first a model and more recently an anti-model to politically engaged Arab playwrights and directors.

As we will see, by 1990 the obvious failure of political drama on Hamlet's terms—its failure, that is, to spark concrete change in Arab regimes or societies—had pushed some younger Arab playwrights away from Hamlet's instrumental view of political theatre. In a comic or ironic mode, their work dramatized its own inefficacy as political art. Thus their Hamlets came to resemble the dreamy hesitators of the Anglo-American tradition, but carrying a different valence resulting from their particular historical trajectory. With their unavenged fathers and their betrayed revolutionary convictions, these Hamlets were not simply unheroic but post-heroic. Whether they will again find their voice in response to changing political circumstances in Egypt and elsewhere in the region remains to be seen.