

Shylock in the Ḥaḍramawt?: Adaptations of Shakespeare on the Yemeni Stage.

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Yemen and Shakespeare are not commonly associated with each other, yet a surprisingly rich and idiosyncratic history of Yemeni Shakespeare productions exists. This article traces that history, to contextualize a recent Yemeni adaptation of The Merchant of Venice, in which Portia appears as a masked Arab warrior, and Shylock as a Hadhrami cloth trader. In productions that range from a uniquely Yemeni Othello, its final scene re-written to punish Iago, to Yemen's variegated adaptations of Romeo and Juliet and Julius Caesar, Yemen's Shakespearean performances provide a powerful example of "glocalized" Shakespeare: that is, adaptations of the now globalized literary tradition of the Bard, refracted through distinctly local characteristics and concerns.

Masked Knight: The sentence that you have passed on this youth (*indicating* 'Aydārūs) is correct, but the execution of it is wrong.

Qāḍī (*stopping, his face flushed with anger*): How so? What do you mean?

Masked Knight: What I mean, your Excellency, is that the merchant wants a pound of flesh, and that is his right. But he must cut the flesh from 'Aydārūs without shedding any blood, since he has asked only for the flesh.

Qāḍī (*beaming with delight*): Well done, masked knight! How did that issue escape me? (*to the Merchant*) Did you hear that, 'Ayḍah? Take the knife and cut your pound of flesh, but without shedding 'Aydārūs's blood.

'Ayḍah (*confused, uncertain*): I can't. The blood must come out.

Masked Knight (*sternly, placing hand on sword*): By God, if one drop of 'Aydārūs's blood flows, I'll kill you!¹

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¹ 'Aysmir ma'īš al-sirāğ (2012), unpublished script, courtesy of Fāṭimah al-Bayḍānī and the Yemeni organization *Mīl al-ğahab*, recently renamed the "Idanūt Foundation for Folklore". This passage comes from p. 56 of the script, but was edited for performance, as this article will discuss.

This dialogue is taken from one of the pivotal moments of the Yemeni play *‘Aysmir ma ‘iš al-sirāġ* (Yem. Ar. *The Lamp Will Keep You Company*), as performed in November 2012 and March 2013 in Ṣan‘ā’. To pay the sum that Fitnah’s father requires as her dowry, ‘Aydarūs has borrowed two hundred dirham from ‘Ayḍah, a wealthy cloth merchant, despite the latter’s strange condition: that should ‘Aydarūs fail to repay the debt on time, he will owe the merchant a pound of his flesh (*raṭl min laḥmhu*)². But ‘Aydarūs’s newlywed happiness drives the thought of the debt from his mind. When he returns to pay it, ‘Ayḍah points out that the deadline has passed. ‘Aydarūs offers more money, but to no avail: ‘Ayḍah will accept nothing but the execution of the penalty.

In the scene quoted above, having listened attentively to the testimony of both men and of witnesses from the market, the *qāḍī* has reluctantly concluded that ‘Ayḍah’s claim is justified. Only the interpolation of the Masked Knight (*al-Fāris al-mulattam*), moments before the sentence is to be carried out, saves ‘Aydarūs from the knife. At the conclusion of the act, the relieved and grateful ‘Aydarūs is startled to discover the beautiful face of his wife Fitnah behind the Knight’s mask, and recognizes that he owes his bodily integrity to her intelligence and wit. The scene and the dialogue thus clearly draw on themes and tropes from Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*.

Adaptations of Shakespeare in the Arab world are by no means a novel phenomenon, and analysis of them has, over the last decade, flourished as a significant subset within the field of Shakespearean studies. In *Hamlet’s Arab Journey: Shakespeare’s Prince and Nasser’s Ghost*, Margaret Litvin situates the genesis of this subfield in the 1990s, with the convergence of varied lines of inquiry – translation theory, performance and postcolonial studies, Marxist analysis, global and cultural studies, etc. – regarding the deployment of Shakespearean texts across diverse linguistic, geographic, and economic contours³. Since that point, “globalized Shakespeare” has become a focus of intense academic scrutiny, as has “Arab Shakespeare”. Over the last decade in particular, scholars have traced Shakespearean legacies in Egyptian, Moroccan, and Tunisian theatre, investigated the history of the translation of Shakespeare into Arabic by Syro-Lebanese and Egyptian authors, and deconstructed modern performances of Shakespearean drama throughout the Arab and Islamic worlds, to cite just a few of the lines of scholarly inquiry⁴.

I have opted here to quote the segment as it was performed, rather than as it is contained in the playscript. Unless otherwise noted, all translations, from the script and the Yemeni theatre histories, are my own.

² A *raṭl* is a unit of weight measurement which, on the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa, varies in the range of 449 to 500g; since one pound weighs 454g, the translation is apt. *Raṭl* was commonly used in many parts of Yemen through the 1960s and 70s, as opposed to the contemporary usage of *nuṣf kīlū* (“a half kilo”).

³ Margaret Litvin, *Hamlet’s Arab Journey: Shakespeare’s Prince and Nasser’s Ghost*, Princeton UP, Princeton 2011, pp. 2-7.

⁴ See, for example, Ferial J. Ghazoul, *The Arabization of Othello*, in “Comparative Literature”, 50:1 (1998), pp. 1-31; Margaret Litvin, *When the Villain Steals the Show: The Character of Claudius in Post-1975 Arab(ic) Hamlet Adaptations*, in “The Journal of Arabic Literature”, 38:2 (2007), pp. 196-219, and her blog “Shakespeare in the Arab World”. Also Rafik Darragi, *The Tunisian Stage: Shakespeare’s Part in Question* (95-106), Khalid Amine, *Moroccan Shakespeare and the Celebration of Impasse: Nabil Lahlou’s ‘Ophelia Is Not Dead’* (55-73), and Sameh F. Hanna,

By now, investigations into Arab versions, adaptations, translations, and translocations of Shakespeare's plays have produced a large, wide-ranging, and generally impressive body of scholarly work. Yet one country – arguably the only country on the entire Arabian Peninsula with a documented century-long history of theatre and performance – remains conspicuously absent from these accounts.

Over the course of the twentieth century Yemen has produced talented and prolific playwrights, and gifted actors, actresses, and directors. Every major urban center in the country has had at least one theatre troupe; theatrical performances have taken place in public squares, schools, and cultural centers, on the radio and on television, and even within the ranks of the military. Yemeni plays by Yemeni authors on Yemeni themes exist along with adaptations of Arab playwrights like Tawfiq al-Hakīm and Sa'dallāh Wannūs, and of European authors like Brecht, Pirandello, and Racine, as well as Shakespeare. Contemporary Yemeni theatre continues to stage, often in provocative, even incendiary fashion, the dreams and the frustrations of Yemenis from all walks of life. Almost nothing of this, however, is known or discussed outside the borders of Yemen.

This article is thus intended as an intervention into the aforementioned nexus of scholarly debate and inquiry; it argues for the recognition of a long and unique tradition of Shakespearean adaptation on the Yemeni stage, and suggests that the history of Shakespeare in Yemen provides a fruitful complement and contrast to that of Shakespeare elsewhere in the Arab world. This article will explore the ways in which the Yemeni play *'Aysmir ma'is al-sirāġ* both parallels and diverges from Shakespeare's, refracting the concerns of young men and women in today's Yemen through the plot and characters of *The Merchant of Venice*. However, in recognition of the near-total dearth of information about the nature and history of Yemeni theatre outside of Yemen, this article will also outline a larger context for *'Aysmir ma'is al-sirāġ*: the context of 20th century Yemeni theatre, and in particular, Yemeni adaptations of Shakespeare⁵.

Shakespeare and Yemen

Given the repetitive stereotyping of Yemen in international media as poor, exotic, and dangerous – as a land of grinding poverty and illiteracy, a haven for terrorists and marauding tribesmen – it may come as something of a surprise to lift the veil on theatre in Yemen and see the face of Shakespeare. Yet as with 'Aydarūs

Decommercializing Shakespeare: Mutran's Translation of Othello (27-54), all included in "Critical Survey", 19:3 (2007), an issue dedicated to Arab adaptations of Shakespeare.

⁵The two most extensive histories of theatre in Yemen are *Saba'ūn 'ām^{an} min al-masrah fi 'l-Yaman*, Wizārat al-Ṭaqāfah wa 'l-Siyāḥah, 'Adan 1983, compiled by Yemeni author and theatre practitioner Sa'īd 'Awlaqī, and *al-Masrah fi 'l-Yaman: taġribah wa tumūḥ*, al-Manār al-'Arabī, Ġīzah, 1991, by Palestinian director Ḥusayn al-Asmar, who spent eight years working with the Ministry of Information and Culture in Ṣan'ā'. More recent studies of note include *Ālam al-adab wa 'l-fann al-masrahī fi 'l-Yaman*, al-Hay'ah al-'Āmmah li 'l-Kuttāb, Ṣan'ā' 2006, a biographical survey of 93 Yemeni playwrights by Yahyā Muḥammad Sayf; *Awwaliyyāt al-masrah fi 'l-Yaman*, al-Mu'assasah al-Ġāmi'iyyah li 'l-Dirāsāt wa 'l-Naṣr wa 'l-Ṭawābī', Bayrūt 1999, by 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Maḳālīh, and *Nuṣū' wa taṭawwur al-masrah fi 'l-Yaman 1910 ilā 2000*, Wizārat al-Ṭaqāfah, Ṣan'ā' 2010, by 'Abd al-Maġīd Muḥammad Sa'īd. This article is indebted in particular to 'Awlaqī's text, especially for the data regarding Shakespearean adaptations before 1980.

watching Fitnah discard her knight's mask, or Bassanio discovering that the young doctor of laws was Portia in disguise, the initial incredulity may eventually give way to the recognition of an underlying logic.

In a sense, Shakespeare and Yemeni theatre have been entwined from the beginning: as Graham Holderness and Bryan Loughrey note, one of the first performances of Shakespeare to occur outside of Europe took place on the island of Socotra (now Yemeni territory) in 1608. The play was Hamlet, performed by the crew of the Red Dragon, an East India Company ship bound for Java⁶.

Yet as Yemeni historians such as Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir Bā Maṭraf have argued, Yemen's oldest surviving example of dramatic writing predates this performance by nearly a century. The sixteenth-century text *Bayn Ḥaḍramawt wa 'bniḥā* (Between Ḥaḍramawt and Her Son), by Ṣayḥ Faqīḥ 'Abdallāh Ibn 'Umar Bā Maḥramah⁷ is, as its title implies, a dramatic dialogue between the Ḥaḍramawt⁸, personified as a mother, and her son, who wishes to emigrate to richer lands against his mother's wishes. Though no written accounts of performances of Bā Maḥramah's text have yet come to light, there is apparently at least one mention of an acting troupe from this time period, performing in the coastal Hadhrami city of Ṣiḥr, Bā Maḥramah's birthplace. Thus it is at least possible that this text was staged⁹.

The Hadhrami connection to drama is intriguing in part because Hadhramis have a long history of migration to Southeast Asia¹⁰, to many of the same regions

⁶ Graham Holderness and Bryan Loughrey, *Arabesque: Shakespeare and Globalization*, in *Globalization and its Discontents: Writing the Global Culture*, Boydell and Brewer, London 2006, pp. 36-96. See also the introduction by Holderness to *The Al-Hamlet Summit* by Sulaymān al-Bassām (University of Hertfordshire Press, Hatfield 2006).

⁷ Bā Maḥramah, nicknamed "al-Ṣāfi 'al-ṣaḡīr" ("the little Ṣāfi 'ī") for his contributions to Yemeni jurisprudence, lived ca. 1502-64. Sayf provides an approximate date of 1530 for this text, and both 'Awlaqī and Sayf cite a study of Bā Maḥramah's dialogue as it relates to the Yemeni diaspora, by Hadhrami historian Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir Bā Maṭraf: *al-Ḥiḡrah wa 'l-aḥwāl al-iḡtimā'iyah fī 'l-Ḥaḍramawt*, in "al-Taḡāfah al-Ġadīdah", pp. 33-73 ('Adan, published between 1974 and 1979; Sayf provides page numbers, but not the year of publication). See Sa'īd 'Awlaqī, *Saba 'ūn 'ām^m min al-masrah fī 'l-Yaman*, cit., pp. 18-26; Yahyā Muḥammad Sayf, *Ālam al-adab wa 'l-fann al-masrahī fī 'l-Yaman*, cit., p. 11); I have not yet been able to obtain a copy of this study. 'Abd al-Qādir Muḥammad al-Ṣabān provides a basic biography of Bā Maḥramah in *al-Ḥarakah al-adabiyah fī 'l-Ḥaḍramawt*, Wizārat al-Taḡāfah, al-Mukallā 2001, pp. 85-88, though he does not mention the dramatic dialogue.

⁸ In geographic terms, the Ḥaḍramawt is a region in the eastern part of today's Yemen. Before the re-unification of Yemen in 1990, the Ḥaḍramawt was part of the southern People's Democratic Republic of Yemen; it is culturally distinct from neighboring regions, at least in part due to a long tradition of Hadhrami migration to and integration within the littoral societies of the Indian Ocean.

⁹ In support of this assertion, 'Awlaqī cites 'Umar 'Awūḍ Bā Maṭraf's *Dirāsah 'an ta'rīḥ al-masrah fī ḡanūb al-Yaman*, for which no additional information is provided. See Sa'īd 'Awlaqī, *Saba 'ūn 'ām^m min al-masrah fī 'l-Yaman*, cit., p. 18.

¹⁰ The history of Hadhrami migration to Southeast Asia and throughout regions bordering the Indian Ocean from the mid-eighteenth century onwards has been well documented by historians like Ulrike Freitag, Syed Farid Alatas, Linda Boxberger, and Enseng Ho. Comparatively little information, however, is available for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, despite the fact that a Hadhrami presence in various parts of the region is noted as early as the 11th century. See *Hadhrami Traders, Scholars, and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750s-1960s*, ed. Ulrike Freitag and William Clarence-Smith, SEPSMEA 57 (1997); Freitag's *Indian Ocean Migrants and State Formation in the Hadhramaut: Reforming the Homeland*, SEPSMEA 87 (2003), and *The Hadhrami Diaspora in Southeast Asia: Identity Maintenance or Assimilation?*, ed. Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk and Has-

and cities that had piqued the pecuniary interests of the East India Company – Surat, Bantam, Java. It is therefore within the realm of possibility that early British expeditions to India and Indonesia would have interacted, directly or in more attenuated fashion, with members of the Hadhrami communities there¹¹, though exploring these connections (or the one between ‘Umar ‘Abdallāh Bā Maḥramah and 17th century Yemeni Jewish poet Sālim al-Šabazī, colloquially dubbed “the Shakespeare of Yemen”)¹² is beyond the scope of this article.

Moreover, returning to the realm of documented fact, we find a clear connection between Shakespeare and the history of Yemeni theatre: the first play performed by Yemeni actors was Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, put on in Arabic in 1910 by the first modern Yemeni acting troupe, which was established that same year by students at the Government School in Crater in the city of ‘Adan¹³. These and the other Yemeni performances of Shakespeare that we will examine are recorded by the Yemeni playwright, actor, and theatre historian Sa‘īd ‘Awlaqī in the seminal text *Saba‘ūn ‘āman min al-masrah fī ‘l-Yaman* (1983)¹⁴.

The following is a chart of Shakespearean performances in Yemen over the course of the 20th century, as documented by ‘Awlaqī and other Yemeni theatre historians. Fields are left blank if data are not available.

Year	Title	Translator/Adapter	Director	Troupe from
1910	<i>Julius Caesar</i>			‘Adan
1914 (?)	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>			‘Adan
1926 (?)	<i>Šuhadā’ al-garām</i> (<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>)	Naḡīb Ḥaddād		‘Adan
1941	<i>Othello</i>		Masrūr Mabruk	Laḡḡ
1941	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	‘Alī Aḥmad Bā Kafīr (?)	Faḡl ‘Ūzar	Laḡḡ
1946 (?)	<i>al-Ša‘b wa Qayṣar</i> (<i>Julius Caesar</i>)	‘Ūtmān Sūqī	Faḡl ‘Ūzar	Laḡḡ

san Ahmed Ibrahim (2009), all published by Brill in Leiden. Also Linda Boxberger, *On the Edge of Empire: Hadhramawt, Emigration, and the Indian Ocean 1880s-1930s*, SUNY, Albany 2002, and Enseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean*, University of California, Berkeley 2006.

¹¹ Scholars have begun to trace the reciprocal influence of Arab and British (and Arab and Dutch) communities in Southeast Asia, if not for the seventeenth century, at least in more recent ones (see for example Nurfadzilah Yahaya, *Tea and Company: Interactions Between the Arab Elite and the British in Cosmopolitan Singapore*, in *The Hadhrami Diaspora in Southeast Asia: Identity Maintenance or Assimilation?*, cit.

¹² ‘Umar ‘Abdallāh Bā Maḥramah, perhaps the father of ‘Abdallāh ‘Umar Bā Maḥramah, was a Sufi poet of the Ḥaḍramawt who lived ca. 1479-1545. In *Like Joseph in Beauty: Yemeni Vernacular Poetry and Arab-Jewish Symbiosis* (2009), Mark S. Wagner suggests that the poetry of the earlier Bā Maḥramah may have influenced that of Rabbi Sālim (or Shalom) al-Šabazī (ca. 1619-79), whom Wagner describes as drawing «upon the themes, motifs (and possibly musical arrangement) of contemporary Yemeni Sufi poetry, combining it with kabbalistic Hebrew phrasings to create a new art form». See Mark S. Wagner, *Like Joseph in Beauty: Yemeni Vernacular Poetry and Arab-Jewish Symbiosis*, Brill, Leiden 2009, pp. 170-171, 192-193.

¹³ Sa‘īd ‘Awlaqī, *Saba‘ūn ‘āman min al-masrah fī ‘l-Yaman*, cit., p. 35.

¹⁴ ‘Awlaqī’s is a fascinating text, and much of the information he has collected is repeated in subsequent studies; al-Asmar and Sayf, for example, use his material liberally in compiling their own histories. It is not easy to work with (it lacks an index, provides extremely basic citations and bibliographical data, and is not free of typographical errors) but it is by far the fullest source of information available on Yemeni theatre between 1904 and 1980.

Year	Title	Translator/Adapter	Director	Troupe from
Late 1950s	<i>Hamlet</i>			Ḥaḍramawt
1957	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>		‘Uṭmān Sūqī	‘Adan
1960s	<i>The Merchant of Venice, Hamlet, and Julius Caesar</i>		Muḥammad ‘Awūd Bā Ṣāliḥ	Ṣiḥr (Ḥaḍramawt)
1966	<i>Ġaḥīm al-ṣakk (Romeo and Juliet theme)</i>	‘Umār al-Raḥm	‘Umār al-Raḥm	‘Adan
1977	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	Ḥalīl Muṭrān		al-‘Abūs
ca. 1980 ¹⁵	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>			‘Adan

‘Awlaqī notes that, though the performances built upon a foundation of improvised dramatic spectacle in towns and villages throughout Yemen¹⁶, the early plays of the 20th century in Yemen were of foreign provenance: translations of British and Indian texts. In the context of early 20th century ‘Adan¹⁷, a cosmopolitan trading *entrepôt* occupied by Britain in 1839, with a large enclave of merchants and traders from the subcontinent, these would be obvious literary sources upon which to draw; however, even in these early decades Yemeni troupes also perform theatrical texts produced in Egypt.

Thus the genesis of the translation of *Julius Caesar* used in this Yemeni production is unclear: ‘Awlaqī does not provide an attribution, and the play is staged two years before the publication of the translations by Muḥammad Ḥamdī and Sāmī al-Ġuraydīnī (1912). British-established “Government” schools, like the one in Crater, and Catholic Mission schools, took root in ‘Adan in the second half of the 19th century; some offered instruction in English or «an English education», others a more traditional curriculum in Arabic, supplemented «with modern utilitarian subjects»¹⁸. *Julius Caesar* may well have been one of the texts the student

¹⁵ From 1980 onwards information on Shakespeare in Yemen becomes quite sparse. Yaḥyà Muḥammad Sayf assures me that other Shakespearean productions have taken place, but as of the time of writing I have no written documentation of this; the only other allusion to Shakespeare that I have found in Yemeni theatre histories is a play entitled *Akūn aw lā akūn (To Be or Not to Be)* by Wā’il ‘Abdallāh, performed by the National Theatre Troupe from ‘Adan at the third “Festival of Yemeni Theatre”, which was held in Ṣan‘ā’ in 1995. Cf. ‘Abd al-Maġīd Muḥammad Sa’īd, *Nuṣū’ wa taḥawwūr al-masraḥ fi ‘l-Yaman 1910 ilā 2000*, cit., p. 101. Unfortunately, no information is provided about the content of this play, and it is not listed as an adaptation of *Hamlet* or of Shakespeare; for these reasons I have not included it in the chart.

¹⁶ «Yemen, if it was not familiar with the theatre in the contemporary meaning of the word, in the five centuries leading up to the twentieth, nevertheless possessed primitive forms of theatre in numerous cities and villages, both north and south, and [...] these forms were part of various customs and events in which singing, dancing, and poetry recitals intermingled with acting.» See Sa’īd ‘Awlaqī, *Saba ‘in ‘ām^{am} min al-masraḥ fi ‘l-Yaman*, cit., p. 29.

¹⁷ For a detailed history of the British in early 20th century ‘Adan, see R.J. Gavin, *Aden Under British Rule 1839-1967*, Barnes and Noble, New York 1975. Gavin notes, among other things, that in the mid-1800s Arabs [Yemenis] in the city «were greatly outnumbered by the Indians», though by the 1890s an influx of migrants from the Yemeni highlands had increased the “Arab” portion of the population to close to 50%. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

actors had studied in the classroom, in English or in Arabic translation; if the former, it may have been translated locally for the purposes of the performance.

Sometime before the outbreak of World War I, a second Yemeni theatre troupe performs an Arabic-language *Romeo and Juliet*, about which information is similarly scant. After WWI concludes, a third Yemeni troupe stages a much-admired production of Nağīb Ḥaddād's adaptation of the same play, *Šuhadā' al-ğarām* (Martyrs for Love)¹⁹. Shakespeare's texts, translated and adapted, are thus a central facet of the early history of Yemeni theatre.

The development of theatre in Yemen is uneven; it begins with young, amateur groups looking for a means of socializing and entertainment, performing on makeshift stages in public spaces. Theatre is localized primarily in 'Adan in the early decades, with intermittent bursts of activity in other Yemeni provinces and cities, like Laḡ and Šihr²⁰. *Ad hoc* troupes form and fizzle, often established with the goal of a single production for an event or a holiday. *Ramaḍān* is especially popular in this regard, as groups gather in the evenings to rehearse, thus whiling away the hours before the *iftār* meal by preparing for an *Īd* performance.

Illiteracy is a significant obstacle for many of Yemen's early aspiring actors; 'Awlaqī cites the poignant example of 'Abd al-'Azīz Lalū, a blacksmith gifted with a prodigious memory and natural acting talent:

He made it his habit to take the script with him wherever he went, and to ask his friends to read him his role in a given scene twice or three times, which sufficed for him to memorize it permanently. And he loved acting, and did it with great artistry. He participated in many plays before his foot was injured, which resulted in the amputation of his leg, leaving him unable to appear on stage afterwards. He would sit backstage, watching his colleagues perform the roles that he loved and excelled in. And often tears would run down from his eyes from the sorrow of watching his roles, now entrusted to others²¹.

By the 1930s, Yemeni theatre sees the emergence of semi-professional actors and directors, with dedicated theatrical spaces and longer production runs. The Yemeni repertoire expands, with dramas drawn from Islamic history and literature becoming part of the canon: plays by 'Alī Aḥmad Bā Kaṭīr and Aḥmad Šawqī and dramatic adaptations of the novels by Ġūrğī Zaydān²² are staged, as are works by Yemeni authors like 'Awūḍ 'Abdallāh Šaraf, 'Uṭmān Sūqī, and 'Alī Muḥammad Luqmān.

Šaraf's *Yūsuf al-Šiddīq* (Joseph the Righteous, 1939) is of particular import in

¹⁹ al-Asmar dates both of the performances discussed in this paragraph to 1926 (see Ḥusayn al-Asmar, *al-Masrah fī 'l-Yaman: tağribah wa tumūh*, cit., p. 71), but 'Awlaqī states clearly that the first took place before the outbreak of WWI, the second in the post-war period (Sa'īd 'Awlaqī, *Saba'ūn 'ām^{an} min al-masrah fī 'l-Yaman*, cit., p. 35). I have ascribed the date provided by al-Asmar to the second performance. No names are provided for these troupes, though 'Awlaqī does mention that historian 'Abdallāh Ya'qūb was one of the first troupe's members, and that in addition to Shakespeare, the actors performed a number of short British plays. Given the timeframe, the former *Romeo and Juliet* text was likely Tanyūs 'Abduh's translation (1901), though it is not out of the question that the script was produced locally.

²⁰ Laḡ can refer either to the region to the north and west of 'Adan, or to the main city of that region, more commonly known today as al-Ḥawṭah. Both the region and the city had strong economic ties with 'Adan.

²¹ Sa'īd 'Awlaqī, *Saba'ūn 'ām^{an} min al-masrah fī 'l-Yaman*, cit., p. 132.

²² Yemeni actor-directors Muḥammad 'Abdallāh al-Šā'ig and Nayf Ḥusayn al-Sūqī are particularly interested in theatrical adaptations of Zaydān.

the history of Yemeni theatre. After its staging of the Qur'ānic tale of Joseph provoked a backlash from conservative Islamic leaders, who objected to the portrayal of religious figures on the stage, the British authorities required that all theatre texts be submitted for review before performance to prevent further such controversies. According to 'Awlaqī, this was the genesis of the censoring authority that later extended to newspapers, magazines, and other publications in the Protectorate²³, and which objected to one of the next Shakespearean productions we will discuss.

'Alī Aḥmad Bā Kaṭīr (1910-69) also deserves additional mention. Though born in Java, he was of Hadhrami parentage, and he spent about a decade of his youth in the Ḥadramawt, where by his late teens he had become an outspoken proponent of social reform²⁴. By the age of 24, however, he had moved to Egypt, where established himself as a prolific composer of both poetry and drama²⁵. Between 1934 and 1939 he worked at translating Shakespeare (*Romeo and Juliet* and a part of *Twelfth Night*), and in 1945 he penned *Šaylūk al-ḡadīd* (The New Shylock), an adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* set in Palestine on the eve of the expiration of the British Mandate²⁶. It is likely that Bā Kaṭīr's translation of *Romeo and Juliet* has been performed in Yemen, but as far as I know his *Šaylūk* has not²⁷.

The 1940s in Yemen witness a number of other Shakespearean adaptations: first, an *Othello* directed by Yemeni poet Masrūr Mabruk, and performed by the newly-established "Arūbah Acting Troupe" from Laḡ in 1941. The troupe's subsequent performances include a production of *Romeo and Juliet*²⁸, directed by Faḍl 'Ūzar, and a post-WWII adaptation of *Julius Caesar*, entitled *al-Ša'b wa Qayṣar* (The People and Caesar), by 'Uṭmān Sūqī²⁹.

Described in newspaper announcements as «the eternal patriotic play», the questions of tyranny, patriotism and revolt posed by *Julius Caesar* apparently rattled the British censorship authority, as a review by critic 'Abdallāh Bā Šahī in "Fatāt al-Ġazīrah" attests:

[*al-Ša'b wa Qayṣar*] should have been performed during the war [WWII], but the censor opposed it. Then the censor decided to strike from it those parts that were considered 'inappropriate' in wartime, after which he granted permission. When the troupe began rehearsals, its members disagreed with the cuts, and decided to re-adapt it, so that it might finally be performed as it should be³⁰.

²³ Sa'īd 'Awlaqī, *Saba' ūn 'ām^{an} min al-masraḥ fī 'l-Yaman*, cit., p. 40.

²⁴ Linda Boxberger, *On the Edge of Empire: Hadhramawt, Emigration, and the Indian Ocean 1880s-1930s*, cit., pp. 171-180.

²⁵ Whether Bā Kaṭīr should be counted among Yemeni dramatists is a long-running debate among Yemeni academics. Most prefer to claim him for the Yemeni canon, but a vocal minority, 'Awlaqī among them, set him squarely in the tradition of Egyptian drama.

²⁶ Mark Bayer provides a fascinating analysis of Bā Kaṭīr's play in *The Merchant of Venice, the Arab-Israeli Conflict, and the Perils of Shakespearean Appropriation*, in "Comparative Drama", 14:4 (2007-8), pp. 465-492.

²⁷ Sayf states that the 'Arūbah troupe performed Bā Kaṭīr's *Šaylūk al-ḡadīd* in 'Adan in 1941. See Yahyā Muḥammad Sayf, *A'lām al-adab wa 'l-fann al-masraḥī fī 'l-Yaman*, cit., p. 40, but given the respective years of publication, I suspect that he actually means Bā Kaṭīr's *Romeo and Juliet*.

²⁸ Possibly in Bā Kaṭīr's translation, as previously noted; the troupe's previous production was Bā Kaṭīr's *Qayṣar al-Hawdaḡ*, so they must have had access to at least some of his texts.

²⁹ Sa'īd 'Awlaqī, *Saba' ūn 'ām^{an} min al-masraḥ fī 'l-Yaman*, cit., pp. 45-46. Sayf dates the production to 1948, but may be confusing it with al-Duqmī's *Othello*.

³⁰ Quoted in *Ibid*, p. 77.

In his review Bā Ṣahī singles out for praise actor Maḥmūd Bā Ḥarībah, who played Mark Antony: «Tall in stature, elegant in Roman dress, artful in his speeches, with a booming voice and quick gestures», Bā Ḥarībah's declamation «filled the audience with overwhelming emotions.»³¹ Reviews such as Bā Ṣahī's also suggest that the paucity of available resources forced an austere simplicity of costume and set. To lighten and vary the mood, the tragedy was interspersed with music and improvised comedic sketches; this was common to much Yemeni theatre in the first half of the 20th century, especially in the staging of tragedies.

British censorship was not the greatest obstacle to the talent of theatre troupes of this period. The “‘Arūbah” lacked an adequate performance space (according to ‘Awlaqī, they staged their plays in an enclosure usually used for grazing donkeys), and faced dire consequences if they came into conflict with local despots. The Sulṭān of Laḡḡ³², for example, fearing that public performances would incite the populace against his rule, apparently gave a public order that all theatrical activity was to stop, and exiled prominent practitioners of theatre from his domain³³.

The Sulṭān's fears were not without foundation. Many Yemenis associated with the burgeoning theatre movement saw in it a potential force for socio-political change and progress, for increasing democratization and greater equality between the elite stratum of those with power and wealth, and the overwhelming majority of the Yemeni populace, who lived in conditions of squalor and ignorance. In a September 1948 interview with “Fatāt al-Ġazīrah”, ‘Uṭmān Sūqī called on “people of culture” to support and participate in Yemeni theatre, «by composing local plays, which touch on the daily lives of the people and their sufferings, so that theatre can be a tool for reform in country.»³⁴

But Yemeni theatre was no mere didactic tool. In fact, a Yemeni adaptation of Shakespeare from this period provides us with a striking example of audience members rejecting the content that they saw on stage, and demanding changes, not within their society, but rather within a theatrical production.

The adaptation in question is *Ġizā’ al-Ḥiyānah* (The Punishment of Treachery) by Yemeni actor and director Muḥammad ‘Abduh al-Duqmī, after Shakespeare's *Othello*. al-Duqmī was the founder of the “Ṣabāḡīn Acting Club”, which was active for almost a decade (1939-1948); in 1948 he established the “Acting Committee” in Ṣayḡ ‘Uṭmān in the city of ‘Adan. It was this latter troupe which staged, as one of their first productions, *Othello* in Arabic translation (most probably by Ḥalīl Muṭrān)³⁵. But Yemeni audiences did not respond with approbation:

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² ‘Awlaqī attributes this order to Faḍl ‘Abd al-Karīm, ruler between 1947 and 52 of the ‘Abdalī sultanate of Laḡḡ, the region to the north of the city of ‘Adan, capital of the Western Aden Protectorate as established by the British in 1937. However, other chronological information provided by ‘Awlaqī suggests that these orders may actually have been given by Faḍl ‘Abd al-Karīm's similarly-named predecessor, ‘Abd al-Karīm Faḍl (r. 1915-47). In fact, al-Asmar, who corroborates this story, calls the Sulṭān ‘Abd al-Karīm. See Ḥusayn al-Asmar *al-Masrah fī ‘l-Yaman: Taḡribah wa Ṭumūh*, cit., p. 73. The Sultanate was abolished after the British left ‘Adan in 1967.

³³ Sa‘īd ‘Awlaqī, *Saba’ ūn ‘ām’ min al-masrah fī ‘l-Yaman*, cit., p. 48.

³⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

³⁵ With regard to the source text(s): in his analysis of this play, ‘Awlaqī quotes a monologue of Iago's as translated by Ġabrā Ibrāhīm Ġabrā. But Ġabrā's translation, published in 1978, postdates this production by a quarter century. Though ‘Awlaqī does not cite a textual source for al-Duqmī's *Othello*, his discussion of the production strongly suggests that al-Duqmī was working

The audience disliked it; they returned from the performance in a state of agitation and vitriol. The fundamental reason for the audience's indignation, their dissatisfaction with *Othello*, was the overwhelming harshness of its tragedy—especially in its ending, with the deaths of the various protagonists who had played noble roles in the play. The audience could not fathom Shakespeare's rationale for putting an end to the lives of these heroes, while Iago, the malice-ridden criminal, was left alive³⁶.

In response, al-Duqmī re-wrote the final scene. In the new ending, Othello discovers Iago's plot against him; Iago is tried and sentenced to death, his head to be severed with a sword, and Othello and Desdemona reconcile and live happily ever after. al-Duqmī's version, staged in 1952 under the title *Ġizā' al-Ḥiyānah*, was highly successful.

'Awlaqī's extended discussion of this play provides a fascinating glimpse into Yemeni modes of interpreting Shakespeare. Sensitive to the racial tensions portrayed in the play (though less so to the interreligious ones), 'Awlaqī notes Othello's and Desdemona's contrasting complexions, but draws a stronger contrast between Othello's black skin and Iago's «black heart». More intriguingly, however, he explains the audience's dissatisfaction with Shakespeare's play not in terms of an abstract moral code, but rather as a reflection of their own quotidian experiences of hardship and injustice:

How could such an audience – one which had been seared by the flames of occupation and suffered the evils of colonialism and the tyranny of the Imams – accept such an ending? How could they accept the victory, the domination, of evil over good? This naïve audience, which tried to attain good and to flee from evil, which suffered injustice and wished to rid themselves of it, [...] how could they not wish for the hero's triumph, his victory, that they might also feel the thrill of victory, and share in the taste of success?³⁷

In 'Awlaqī's reading, Othello metonymically embodies the Yemeni people, universally downtrodden by their oppressive governments, be they the Imamate in the North or the occupying forces of the British Protectorate in the South. The “naïve” Yemeni audience expects theatre to provide a form of wish fulfillment, a vicarious triumph to stand in for the victories of which they can only dream. For this audience, Othello must be a conquering hero, a successful revolutionary against colonial or Imamic rule; martyrdom, however heroic, does not suffice. Hence al-Duqmī's revisions: a travesty of Shakespeare, as 'Awlaqī laments – but a successful one.

From 'Awlaqī we also know a bit about the actors who performed in this production: Ṣālīḥ 'Abd al-Raḥmān played Othello/Ūṭayl, and Ismā'īl Lāmbū, Iago/Ya'qūb. Lāmbū was «well-known for taking up the difficult roles of villains and criminals—his believability in character always elicited the spectators' wrath, and he met with verbal abuse and cries of condemnation when playing these

from Ḥalīl Muṭrān's 1912 translation. 'Awlaqī uses, for example, Muṭrān's “arabized” title *Ūṭayl*, and transliterates Desdemona as *Daydamūnah*, as does Muṭrān. When quoting the monologue as translated by Ḡabrā, 'Awlaqī refers to Iago as “Yāgo”; when referring to the villainous protagonist in al-Duqmī's production, however, 'Awlaqī calls him Ya'qūb, as did Muṭrān.

³⁶ Sa'īd 'Awlaqī, *Saba'ūn 'āmīn min al-masrah fi 'l-Yaman*, cit., p. 82.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

roles.»³⁸ Until 1956, when Nabībah ‘Azīm became the first woman to appear on the Yemeni stage, female roles were played by men, as they were, of course, in Shakespeare’s day; thus the role of Desdemona/Daydamūnah was recited by Ismā‘īl Sa‘īd Hādī.

In February 1957, a well-known Yemeni actor, Aḥmad Qāsim, played the protagonist in a new production of *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by ‘Uṭmān Sūqī. Since we know that Qāsim also composed music and sang, we can assume that this production drew upon *Šuhadā’ al-ġarām* for stylistic inspiration, even though it is not clear whether Haddād’s translation was used. An acting troupe called the “Nuḥbah min al-šabāb” (“Elite Youth”) provided the supporting cast for what was apparently the most popularly successful Yemeni *Romeo and Juliet* up to this point.

In 1966, Yemeni author and director ‘Umār al-Raḥm produced a play called *Ġaḥīm al-šakk* (The Fires of Doubt), which places the *Romeo and Juliet* theme of star-crossed lovers from warring families in a particularly Yemeni context: a blood feud between two branches of the same family, set in rural Yemen. When the young hero ‘Alī falls in love with Fāṭimah, daughter of his uncle Šayḥ Mubārak (played by al-Raḥm) heedless of the murderous conflict between members of the previous generation, tribal mediators see the opportunity to bring the feud to an end. Suspicious that the proposed marriage is a mere ploy on the part of the young man’s family, Mubārak refuses. Soon after, Mubārak discovers Fāṭimah talking to ‘Alī at a local wedding, unsheaths his *ġanbiyyah*, and threatens to kill her. To protect his beloved, ‘Alī wrests Mubārak’s dagger away and stabs him with it. As Mubārak lies bleeding, he commissions his son to avenge his death. Fortunately, however, Fāṭimah and a last-breath change of heart from Mubārak intervene to prevent more bloodshed; the families are reconciled, and the lovers happily married.

This play was broadcast live from the Aden television station, as part of a weekly program called *Masraḥ al-talfizyūn* (Television Theatre), which ran from 1965 to 1969³⁹.

Regional Variations

The majority of the Shakespearean adaptations we have discussed thus far took place in the city of ‘Adan, historically speaking the cradle of Yemeni theatre. It is important to note, however, that the province of the Ḥaḍramawt, already mentioned as the origin and the setting of the earliest surviving dramatic text from Yemen, becomes an important locus for Yemeni theatre in the 1940s and 50s. Hadhrami theatre of this period begins in schools, due at least in part to the cosmopolitan background of the instructors; many teachers were Sudanese, Egyptians, or Hadhramis who had returned to the province after studying and working in Southeast Asia⁴⁰.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

³⁹ For more on the history of this program which, under daunting conditions, produced and broadcast over two hundred Yemeni plays over the course of four years, see *Ibid.*, Ch. 9.

⁴⁰ In *Civil Society in Yemen*, Sheila Carapico cites a performance of «an Egyptian morality play» at the middle school in the Hadhrami town of Ġayl Bā Wazīr which «depicted slaves’ aspirations for freedom.» Objecting to the play and to the content of a politically-oriented speech by an Egyptian teacher, British authorities sacked school staff, sparking a student uprising. See Sheila

Theatre activity also took place in Hadhrami recreational clubs and associations. In the late 50s, one such association formed a touring company, which produced a version of *Hamlet* (along with an *Oedipus* and a number of plays drawn from Islamic history). In the late 60s, the Nādī Šabāb al-Ġanūb (the “Youth of the South” Club) from Šiḥr performed *The Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet*, and *Julius Caesar*, all directed by Muḥammad ‘Awūd Bā Šāliḥ⁴¹. Unfortunately, very little information is available about these productions.

Thus far we have not examined Shakespearean adaptations in Ṣan‘ā’ and the former North Yemen, for the simple reason that there is no record of them occurring. The Ḥamīd al-Dīn Imamate was axiomatically averse to foreign influence; towns and villages in the north had popular traditions of improvised dramatic spectacle, and small-scale dramatic scenes and sketches were staged publicly in the early decades of the 20th century, but these were almost always dramatizations of great events in Islamic history. Theatre in the schools of North Yemen, in Ṣan‘ā’, Ta‘izz, and Ḥudaydah, dates from the early 1940s, with Syrian, Egyptian, Palestinian, and Iraqi instructors as a driving force, but their activity was curtailed by limitations on free expression and public gatherings⁴². Only in the 1970s, after the 26th September revolution in 1962 and the subsequent civil war in the North, does theatre increase in prominence – but adaptations of Shakespeare are of less interest than, for instance, political propaganda plays about the tyranny, injustice, and retrograde nature of the Imamate, or the heroism and sacrifice of the 26th September revolutionaries⁴³. al-Asmar’s allusion to a 1977 performance of *The Merchant of Venice* at the al-Falāḥ School in the al-‘Abūs area is the only Shakespearean reference from the North of which I am currently aware⁴⁴.

Sayf traces a decline in theatre activity in Yemen beginning in the mid-1980s, and continuing through the mid-2000s⁴⁵; his book, which arranges Yemeni playwrights’ biographies by decade, clearly shows a decrease in the numbers of Yemeni authors writing for the theatre, with 22 in the 1960s, 33 in the 70s, but 7 in the 80s, and a mere 5 in the 90s. Economic and social factors undoubtedly play a role in this decline, including inflation and economic instability in the 1980s and the botched re-unification in 1990 and the civil war in 1994, with Islamist rhetoric increasing in stridency in the intervening years⁴⁶. The majority of the theatrical pro-

Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 1998, pp. 96-97.

⁴¹ Sa‘īd ‘Awlaqī, *Saba ‘ūn ‘ām^{an} min al-masraḥ fī ‘l-Yaman*, cit., p. 192.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁴³ In *The Calligraphic State*, Brinkley Messick provides two examples of such didactic theatrical sketches, performed during celebrations of public holidays in the post-revolutionary period: the first mocks the backwardness of the system of traditional Qur’anic education under the Imamate, the second excoriates both past and continuing corruption within Yemen’s *šarī‘ah* court system. See Messick, *The Calligraphic State*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1993, pp. 99-100, 197-200.

⁴⁴ Ḥusayn al-Asmar, *al-Masraḥ fī ‘l-Yaman: Taḡribah wa Ṭumūḥ*, cit., p. 61. al-‘Abūs is close to the town of al-Ḥuḡariyyah, to the south of the city of Ta‘izz.

⁴⁵ Yahyā Muḥammad Sayf, *‘Ālam al-adab wa ‘l-fann al-masraḥī fī ‘l-Yaman*, cit., p. 18.

⁴⁶ Chapter 6 of Paul Dresch’s *A History of Modern Yemen*, for example, highlights the vagaries of the economies of both North and South Yemen in the 1980s, noting among other things the steep decline in remittances from Yemeni expatriates, upon which both governments were heavily dependent, over the course of the decade. The subsequent chapter sheds light on the increasing influence of Islamist and Salafi movements in Yemen. See Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 2000, pp. 151-182.

ductions that Sayf has cataloged from these decades were performed in the context of dedicated theatre festivals, many in competitions outside of Yemen; the concept of theatre as a self-contained event, performed as a means of communication with a local audience, seems to be lost. Shakespeare is also missing: neither newspaper reviews nor recent academic studies, to the best of my knowledge, refer to Shakespearean adaptations on the Yemeni stage over the last three decades⁴⁷.

I have argued elsewhere that the first decade of the 21st century may in fact have witnessed the beginning of a renaissance in Yemeni theatre⁴⁸. In the years before the “Arab Spring”, Yemeni productions were staged with increasing frequency; they were more often staged independently of festivals and other celebrations; prominent Yemeni authors like novelist Waǧdī al-Ahdal penned dramatic works⁴⁹; theatre practitioners with talent and passion for the genre, like the gifted Adeni director ‘Amr Ġamāl, came to the fore. Perhaps most importantly, contemporary Yemeni theatre is characterized by a sharp focus on and an urgency to address Yemen’s myriad socio-political problems.

Amidst this backdrop, new Yemeni plays have appeared along with adaptations from the canon of world theatre, from George Bernard Shaw and Molière, among others. *‘Aysmir ma’iš al-sirāǧ*, however, may be the first Yemeni performance in nearly half a century to dramatize a Shakespearean plot⁵⁰. It is important to stress that this is not a full production of a Shakespearean drama. Rather, it is a play in five acts, of which only one has Shakespearean elements – the story of Fitnah and ‘Aydarūs, loosely based, as we have seen, on the plot of *The Merchant of Venice*.

‘Aysmir ma’iš al-sirāǧ: On the Page and On the Stage

This play is a dramatization of Yemeni folktales, collected from varied regions of Yemen by *Mīl al-dahab*. The mission of this organization, founded and directed by Fāṭimah al-Bayḍānī, is to preserve Yemen’s intangible cultural heritage in the form of songs, poetry, and short stories transmitted orally from generation to generation, especially those narrated by women. al-Bayḍānī and her colleagues have thus traveled the length and breadth of Yemen, seeking out poets and storytellers, and recording and transcribing their recitations.

⁴⁷ Anecdotally, my Yemeni colleagues confirm this; none of the Yemeni theatre practitioners that I have consulted remembers any productions of Shakespeare in Yemen taking place during this period. I should note, however, that in 2001 German anthropologist and filmmaker Michael Roes filmed an adaptation of *Macbeth* in Yemen: *Someone is Sleeping in My Pain*, subtitled *An East-West Macbeth*. Roes’s film is thoughtfully analyzed in Mark Thornton Burnett, *Shakespeare and World Cinema*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 2012, pp. 172-180. Also cf. note 16, on *Akūn aw lā akūn* by Wā’il ‘Abdallāh.

⁴⁸ Katherine Hennessey, *Staging a Protest: Socio-Political Critique in Contemporary Yemeni Theatre*, in *Doomed by Hope: Essays on Arab Theatre*, ed. Eyad Houssami, Pluto, London 2012, pp. 59-76.

⁴⁹ In addition to his collaboration on the script of *‘Aysmir ma’iš al-sirāǧ*, and his novels and collections of short stories, al-Ahdal has published the play *al-Suqūt min šurfat al-‘ālam* (Falling off the World, 2007). For more on al-Ahdal, see Susannah Tarbush’s blog at <http://thetanjara.blogspot.com/2011/10/garnet-secures-english-rights-to-yemeni.html>.

⁵⁰ I must stress that this statement is speculative, based on my having found no information thus far to the contrary; I hope, in fact, that further research will uncover evidence of Shakespearean productions in this period.



Panoramic view of Open-Air Stage and Audience; Bint al-‘Aṭṭār left, Sulṭān center.

In 2012, *Mīl al-ḍahab* decided to adapt several of their collected folktales for the stage, commissioning three Yemeni authors and playwrights, Waḡdī al-Ahdal, Samīr ‘Abd al-Fattāh, and ‘Abdallāh ‘Abbās, to collaborate on the script. In the playscript, four folktales tales are woven together by a framing device, in the manner of the Arabian Nights or the Decameron. The frame features a perplexed Sulṭān, enamored of a young woman, Bint al-‘Aṭṭār, who has given him an ultimatum: to marry her, he must give up his concubines. While the Sulṭān indicates his willingness to make this sacrifice, his Wazīr warns him that if he bows to the demands of a woman – and one from the lower classes, to boot – his people will lose all respect for him⁵¹.

The Sulṭān, being of a philosophical bent, decides to put this question to the people, in symbolic fashion: he encounters a young couple, a woodcutter and a shepherdess, and asks them, «Who loves more deeply, men or women?». Predictably, the woodcutter and the shepherdess take opposing positions on this issue, and each recounts two folktales illustrating the passion, wit, and selflessness of their heroes and heroines in the service of those they love.



Sulṭān left, Wazīr center, and guards.

In the script, the first folktale narrated is that of Bin Ṭālib Aḥmad, scion of generosity and courage, who wins the love of the beautiful Laylā Bint Ḡāmal al-Layl despite her father’s prohibitions. The second is that of ‘Aydārūs and Fitnah, which we will explore in more detail below. The third features the wily Ḥāmad

⁵¹ All photographs by Waḡdī al-Maqtarī, provided courtesy of YALI. The author would like to thank Suhayr Amrī and Akram Mubārak for their assistance.

al-Mahrī, whose marriage to Fāṭimah Bint ‘Aydah is prevented by her older brother ‘Alī on the grounds that Hāmad’s family are of lower social standing; Hāmad proceeds, by a series of clever ruses, to triumph over the older brother, exposing, among other things, ‘Alī’s attempts to win court cases by bribing the local *qāḍī*. And the final story is that of Ğawāhir, a young wife whose husband constantly leaves her alone in the house while he goes out on business and social calls. When she complains of boredom and loneliness, he responds sarcastically, «The lamp will keep you company», blissfully unaware that inside the *sirāġ* lives a garrulous *ġinnī*, who appears upon the husband’s exit and regales Ğawāhir with wondrous tales.

‘Aysmir ma’iš al-sirāġ is thus a play about storytelling; in a sense, it stages its own genesis as a collection of orally transmitted folktales by reproducing the narration on stage. As one character begins to recite the tale, others appear to perform it, embodying the alternate universe created through the narrator’s spoken word. At certain points, cleverly replicating the structure of the world’s greatest anthologies of short stories, the *Arabian Nights* and the *Decameron*, the play provides us with a story within a story within a story; it dramatizes the creation of multiple levels of signification.

With two stories recounted by a female narrator and two by a male, the script is the formal equivalent of the Sulṭān’s eventual conclusion, based on the “evidence” that the tales provide him: that men and women are equals in love, or, as the shepherdess puts it, «fī ‘l-Ḥubb, lā ġālib wa lā maġlūb» («In love, there is no victor and no vanquished»). The play ends with the revelation that the shepherdess is, in fact, Bint al-‘Atṭār in disguise, and that she has masterminded the entire performance so as to prove that she both loves and is a worthy match for the Sulṭān (a conclusion that, ironically, contradicts the verdict on gender equality somewhat by implying a victory for the female character).



Fitnah disguised as
Masked Knight

The story of ‘Aydarūs and Fitnah, a *Merchant of Venice* set in the Ḥaḍramawt, is dramatized within this larger context. Its protagonist is ‘Aydarūs bin Muḥammad al-Kindī, whose father’s deathbed injunction that he seek out the worthiest of Arab women to be his wife prompts him to visit one tribe after another until he meets the witty and alluring Fitnah. Her father informs ‘Aydarūs that Fitnah’s dowry is three hundred dirhams – the sum ‘Aydarūs took with him when he left his home, now depleted by generous gifts to the other tribes that hosted him. ‘Aydarūs must thus borrow money from the local merchants, but only Ya’īš, a rich Jewish cloth trader, has the required sum. Ya’īš requests a pound of flesh as surety, explaining that fear of the penalty will motivate ‘Aydarūs to repay his debt on time. When the happy circumstances of his wedding cause ‘Aydarūs to forget the deadline, Ya’īš takes him before the *qāḍī* and insists that the penalty be applied.

Disguised and armed, Fitnah enters and halts the proceedings; Ya’īš, confounded by her reasoning, admits that he cannot execute the penalty without loss of blood, so the *qāḍī* sets ‘Aydarūs free. Thanking the masked knight for saving him, ‘Aydarūs asks his name; Fitnah refuses to

reveal either her name or her face, but agrees to visit ‘Aydarūs in the coming days.

When she knocks on the door of their home, still in disguise, ‘Aydarūs rushes to show the masked knight his hospitality and gratitude, promising to give his guest anything he wishes, but is shocked when the masked knight asks to spend the night with Fitnah. He refuses angrily, stating that only the rules of hospitality prevent him from breaking the knight’s bones – to which



Fitnah reveals her identity to ‘Aydarūs

Fitnah, revealing her face, responds, «And by God, if you had agreed, I would have killed you!». To the incredulous ‘Aydarūs she explains that her actions were motivated by her desire to prove to ‘Aydarūs that she is the most intelligent person, male or female, that ‘Aydarūs has ever encountered; cognizant of the enormous debt that he owes her, ‘Aydarūs pardons the deception, and they exit happily.

Obviously, the story Fitnah and ‘Aydarūs differs from Shakespeare’s *Merchant* in important respects: the setting, of course, shifts from Venice to the Ḥadramawt⁵²; Bassanio and Antonio merge into the single character of ‘Aydarūs; Nerissa and Gratiano are missing, as are Lorenzo and Jessica, though Salario and Salarino survive as ‘Aydarūs’s companions Mabruk and Husayn. The great speeches, too, are lost: rather than speaking movingly of the quality of mercy, Fitnah simply threatens to kill Ya‘īš if he sheds ‘Aydarūs’s blood, and since Ya‘īš has no monologue equivalent to Shylock’s «Hath not a Jew eyes?» nor any pre-existing grudge against ‘Aydarūs, his actions seem motivated by innate cruelty rather than any more complex combination of social and psychological factors.

Intriguingly, however, the Yemeni script does retain a striking element from the final scene of Shakespeare’s play. *The Merchant of Venice* concludes with a test of fidelity, which takes the form of the rings which Portia and Nerissa give to Bassanio and Gratiano, and which the women, disguised as the doctor of laws and his clerk, later request as recompense for their service in saving Antonio from Shylock in the courtroom. In the final scene, having confounded their husbands by requesting that they produce the rings, Portia and Nerissa threaten, tongue-in-cheek, to revenge themselves by sleeping with the doctor and his clerk, before gleefully restoring the rings and revealing their deception⁵³. This scene is pared

⁵² In the preface to the previously-cited text *The Graves of Tarim*, Enseng Ho links Venice and the Ḥadramaut as «improbable places», pointing out that the two have more in common than may appear: «Hadramaut too fed from the sea, costumed itself with foreign fineries, and perfumed its halls of prayer with exotic incense from points east [...] Hadramaut’s economy echoed that of Venice and expressed the debt in the architecture of its gardens [...]». *Ibid.*, p. XX.

⁵³ See, for example, Portia’s lines: «Let not that doctor e’er come near my house: Since he hath got the jewel that I loved, / And that which you did swear to keep for me, / I will become as liberal as you; / I’ll not deny him anything I have, / No, not my body nor my husband’s bed: / Know him I shall, I am well sure of it.» (*Merchant*, V.1)

down in the Yemeni script to the Masked Knight's bald request that he be permitted to spend the night with Fitna. In its new context, the request places 'Aydarūs in an awkward position which parallels that of Bassanio and Gratiano, in which Yemeni constructs of *šaraf* (honor, distinction, nobility) pose conflicting demands. Firstly, like the Shakespearean duo, 'Aydarūs has promised to reward his benefactor with anything that the latter may ask for, and secondly, as a host he is forbidden to allow his guest to come to harm. And like Portia, Fitnah allows her husband to suffer the momentary discomfort of his conflicting loyalties before revealing her stratagem, and thus demonstrating conclusively that she should be their primary object.

It should be noted that the script of the Yemeni play is an embellishment of the oral tale of Fitnah, as transcribed by *Mīl al-ḡahab*. In *Fitnah*, as narrated by a 50-year old female storyteller named Zaynab from the city of Say'ūn in the Ḥaḍramawt, the title character is the only one to have a name. 'Aydarūs is referred to primarily as *al-walad* ("the boy") while Ya'īs is *al-yahūdī* ("the Jew"). The narration explicitly sets up a Jew vs. Arab conflict; Zaynab tells us that "the Jew" refers to "the boy" as *al-'arabī* ("the Arab"), as does the disguised Fitnah when she stands before the *qāḍī*. The oral tale posits this conflict in the most simplistic of terms; no explanation or motivation is provided for *al-yahūdī*'s desire to execute the violent penalty. Nor is there any character development beyond the general indication of *al-walad*'s generosity to the tribes he visits, nor a concluding reference to Fitnah's cleverness (though she does have the tale's final line: «Yes, I am Fitnah your wife, and if you had agreed to that request I would have cut your head off and fled!»).

The oral tale lays out the general lines of the Shakespearean plot. The playscript, however, provides the characters with names and imbues them with personality. 'Aydarūs is proud and reluctant to ask anyone for a loan, but speaks eloquently of Fitnah's beauty and wit; Fitnah is arch and self-assured, intimidating as the masked knight and charming in her revelation of her disguise; the *qāḍī* is perturbed by the case before him, his conviction that he should apply the letter of the law in conflict with his sympathy for 'Aydarūs's predicament. Certain details are changed: in the script, the Masked Knight is armed with a rifle (*bunduqiyyah*) rather than a sword, for example, perhaps in allusion to Shakespeare's title (Venice being *al-Bunduqiyyah* in Arabic). More importantly, Ya'īs is more villainous than he appears in the oral narration, delivering a gruesomely comic speech about which parts of 'Aydarūs's body he intends to take his *raḡl* from. Here the conflict is described not in terms of Jew vs. Arab but Jew vs. Muslim; 'Aydarūs protests Ya'īs's actions by calling on his co-religionists to assist him, «Yā nās, yā muslimīn šūfū ḥādā al-yahūdī al-zālim!» («People, Muslims, look at this unjust Jew!»). 'Aydarūs's attempt to invoke solidarity through an appeal to a common faith falls on deaf ears, however; the assembled crowd simply hauls the two men off to the *qāḍī*.

Happily, soon after rehearsals began for this play, the production administration decided to amend the script for performance⁵⁴. In an atmosphere already rife with sectarian tension between Houthis and Salafīs, the administration realized that the script was re-enforcing a parallel sectarian prejudice. Ya'īs's name was

⁵⁴ Familiar with my interest in Yemeni theatre, al-Bayḡanī invited me to attend rehearsals of the production and to provide the cast and director with any comments or suggestions that I might have; I was thus privy to numerous discussions about how the play should be performed.

changed to ‘Ayḍah⁵⁵, and all references to *al-yahūdī* were changed to *al-tāğīr* (“the merchant” or “the trader”). ‘Aydarūs’s line, as quoted above, remained, but in its new context communicated an invocation of religious principles rather than religious conflict.

The decision to make these changes was more fraught than it may appear: firstly, since the script was a performance of a tale from Yemen’s oral heritage, which had been painstakingly sought out and recorded, with the goal of preserving it for posterity and, through the play, communicating it to a new generation, there was legitimate discomfort regarding questions of authority and authorship. Would such changes devalue or falsify the tale as Zaynab had narrated it? For an organization like *Mīl al-ḡahab*, which had devoted so much time and energy to a precise documentation of Yemen’s oral narratives, this issue went to the core of their mission.

There was also a certain degree of anxiety about a potential backlash from religious conservatives – if any of these knew the story, whether via Shakespeare or the Yemeni oral tradition, might they not accuse *Mīl al-ḡahab* of pandering to Western organizations by removing the Jewish references? And finally, there was the issue of Shakespeare himself – after all, as one of those involved noted, «his Merchant was Jewish, as well». But in part because those familiar with *The Merchant of Venice* recognized the greater complexity of the presentation of Shylock relative to that of Ya‘īš, the changes were approved.

The script was also edited in other respects before the performance: most notably, the tale of Ḥāmad al-Mahrī was deleted, for reasons of length, and also because of numerous similarities between it and the tales of Bin Ṭālib Aḡmad and ‘Aydarūs and Fitnah. This left the female narrator with two tales while reducing the male narrator to one, reinforcing the contrast in the play between gender relationships as constructed in Yemen by tribal and patriarchal mores, and the more substantive public and private roles for women that the play envisions. It also meant that, although the play’s title and the story of *Ġawāhir* and the *ğinnī* come from the dialect and oral heritage of Ṣan‘ā’, the remainder of the play’s characters and stories were Hadhrami.

The play has been produced twice to date in Ṣan‘ā’: in November 2012, coinciding with the nationwide celebrations of *‘Īd al-Aḡḡā*, at the Cultural Center, and again in March 2013, at the Yemen America Language Institute. Both productions were directed by Amīn Hazābir, a Yemeni director whose work in the theatre has attained a notable degree of success. One of the most significant characteristics of Hazābir’s direction was his insistence on regional accuracy: he and his technicians researched traditional Hadhrami dress and jewelry as inspiration for the costumes, and replicated images of Hadhrami landscapes for backdrops. Hadhrami actor ‘Abd al-Ġanī al-Muṭawwa‘ served as the cast’s vocal coach; assisted by ‘Abdallāh ‘Awaḡ Yāsīn, a young Hadhrami actor from the play’s cast, al-Muṭawwa‘ trained all of the actors playing Hadhrami characters to recite in Hadhrami dialect. Similar efforts were made to highlight local character in the details of accent, costume, and set design in the San‘ani tale.

In performance, therefore, *‘Aysmir ma ‘īš al-sirāğ* took on additional levels of meaning. Visually, the script’s implied call for greater equality between the sexes

⁵⁵ Ya‘īš is not exclusively a Jewish name in Yemen, but it has been born by prominent members of the Yemeni Jewish community. ‘Ayḍah did not have the same connotations.

was emphasized by a mirror image of gender slippage as provided by the first and second tales: in the first, Bin Ṭālib Aḥmad disguises himself as a woman to escape detection by his lover's father, while in the second, more daringly, Fitnah disguises herself as the masked knight. The history of Yemeni theatre provides us numerous examples of male actors playing female roles--and this still occasionally occurs, at times for added comedic value, at others to avoid censure for socially inappropriate contact between male and female actors. For a Yemeni actress to step into a masculine role is much rarer, yet very much in keeping with the play's implied message that gender roles are largely a question of expectation and performance.

This theatrical production was – as many in Yemen are – characterized by strong audience engagement with and responses to what occurs on stage. Yemeni audiences often cheer the heroes and heroines, boo and whistle at the villains, and laugh uproariously at comedic lines. This degree of engagement often translates into personal investment in and interpretations of the action – in the case of this play, a “filtering” of Shakespeare through the terms of reference of the local environment, or “glocalized” Shakespeare⁵⁶.

For example, the fact that the second production took place at an English language institute, to an audience of young men and women in their late teens and twenties, gave additional resonance to one of the play's issues: the question of *mahr* (dowry), which many young Yemeni men lament has become so costly as to effectively prohibit them from being able to marry until later in life. That ‘Aydārūs must take out a large loan under threatening conditions in order to pay Fitnah's dowry is not merely a problem faced by Hadhramis of centuries past – it is one which many of the audience members had wrestled with in their personal lives.

Most importantly, however, on stage the play became a contemporary political allegory: a metaphor for Yemeni unity, at a moment of high tension between the central government in Ṣan‘ā’ and the southern secessionist movement. In its emphasis on characteristic regional details, the play effectively celebrates the uniqueness of both Hadhrami and San‘ani culture and heritage. This fact has significant political resonance, since one of the charges laid most vociferously at the door of the government in Ṣan‘ā’ by advocates of the southern movement is that the government has imposed San‘ani culture – language, architecture, educational systems, politics – on the south to the detriment of its own regional heritages. In parallel to its revision of gender roles, the performance of *‘Aysmir ma‘iš al-sirāġ* also stages a more egalitarian relationship between Yemen's north and south, one in which different regions, dialects, and traditions can coexist without either one undermining or dominating the other.

The play also addresses another common complaint by the secessionist movement – i.e. that wealth and power has been concentrated in the hands of the Ṣan‘ā’ - based government, to the detriment of the remainder of the country – by representing the ruling classes in the person of the Hadhrami Sulṭān whose dilemma provides the framing scenes. The Sulṭān is portrayed as an ideal leader: thoughtful, wise, willing to consider to multiple points of view, and above all, willing to sacrifice some of his own wealth, pleasure, and authority, as symbol-

⁵⁶ Cf. Anston Bosman's use of this term as it relates to a staging of *Love's Labour's Lost* in Kabul in *Shakespeare and Globalization*, in *The New Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, Margreta De Grazia and Stanley Wells, eds. Cambridge UP, Cambridge 2010, pp. 285-301.

ized by the concubines, in order to maintain and further his relationship with Bint al-‘Aṭṭār. In the context of the play, the story of Fitnah and ‘Aydarūs serves to reinforce this allegorical call for North-South cooperation and compromise as well, by emphasizing Fitnah’s unexpected role in delivering ‘Aydarūs from the executioner’s knife.

Neither the script nor the production attained the level of complexity and sophistication that characterize, for example, the Shakespearean trilogy of British-Kuwaiti playwright Sulaymān al-Bassām. Yet the performances of *‘Aysmir ma‘iš al-sirāġ* were undeniably colorful, energetic, provocative, and engaging, and opened the script up to multiple levels of signification and reflection of/on the challenges that contemporary Yemen must confront.

In the wake of these successful performances of *‘Aysmir ma‘iš al-sirāġ* I have asked a number of the Yemeni theatre practitioners of my acquaintance why it has been so long since the last full Shakespearean play was seen on a Yemeni stage. One of the various explanations and speculations I heard in response was that the towering reputation of Shakespeare is simply too intimidating, and that Yemeni actors and directors of the last decades have not had sufficient confidence in their own abilities to contemplate producing his plays. Conversely, one of the young Yemeni actors from the cast of *‘Aysmir ma‘iš al-sirāġ* told me that he had acted in *Lear* and *Hamlet* while training in Syria; his proposal for a Yemeni production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* languishes for lack of funding.

Contemplating from a vantage point outside the house a taper burning in her hall, Portia declares, «How far that little candle throws his beams! / So shines a good deed in a naughty world» (*Merchant*, V.1). As *‘Aysmir ma‘iš al-sirāġ* resoundingly demonstrates, Shakespeare’s plays can be cleverly adapted and compellingly performed in Yemen, in ways that aptly reference and reflect upon the problems that contemporary Yemeni society must confront. It is too early to tell whether and how this production may encourage and influence subsequent Yemeni performances. Yet it seems, at least for the moment, that the *sirāġ* has cast a light that may illuminate a path forward, both for the history of Yemeni theatre, and for productions of Shakespeare in Yemen.