

Seminar 40: Shakespeare and Islam

David Currell and Islam Issa

Abstracts

Jahidul Alam, “Islamic Identity in Shakespeare’s *Othello* and *Titus Andronicus*: Early Modern European Anxieties”

The representation of Islam in Shakespeare’s *Othello* and *Titus Andronicus* reflects the early modern European anxiety towards the Islamic world particularly in the context of the Ottoman Empire’s expansion and the legacy of the Crusades. We can see how Shakespeare’s “Moors” are created to depict “racialized Islam” (134) exhibiting “the strategies of white supremacy” (134) that upholds the imperial gaze of England.¹ In *Othello*, the title character, often identified as a “Moor,” is implicitly linked to Islamic identity due to the historical association of Moors with Islam. Othello’s racial and cultural otherness positions him as an outsider in Venetian society, and his internal conflict, fueled by jealousy and insecurity, is framed within Christian-Muslim tensions. Shakespeare’s portrayal taps into contemporary stereotypes of Muslims as passionate, volatile, and prone to violence, reflecting the period’s fears of Islamic influence and cultural difference. Similarly, *Titus Andronicus* features representations of Islam through the character of Aaron, the play’s villain. Aaron is a “Moor” who is associated with barbarism and treachery, embodying the fear of the Islamic “infidel” in Christian Europe. His relationship with Tamora and the atrocities he commits underscore the play’s exploration of racial and religious boundaries. Both plays engage with the rhetoric of Islam as a cultural and religious “other,” revealing Shakespeare’s engagement with the complex, often hostile, European view of Islam during his time.

Abdulhamit Arvas, “Was Othello a Eunuch?”

The first Shakespearean translations and productions in Ottoman Turkey emerged from the task of reforming the Turkish literary and cultural scene by introducing western theatre and dramatic literature in the 19th century. Shakespeare was particularly used to convey revolutionary ideas while also mediating Eurocentric discourses of civilisation and universal humanism to save the Ottoman Empire from collapsing. My paper will explore the history and popularity of Shakespeare in the nineteenth century Turkey within the socio-political cultural contexts to highlight how late Ottoman intellectual negotiated nationalism, Islamism, colonialism, and republicanism via Shakespeare. In diachronically tracing different Shakespearean experiences, I will finally (only if page limit allows) focus on the journeys of *Hamlet* in Turkey as a story of intellectual modernity with tensions between politically oriented literary agendas, state-induced literary aestheticism, secularism and Islamism, and reactionary minority appropriations—be it by Christians, women, leftists, or Kurds.

Mark Bayer, “Accommodating *Romeo and Juliet* For a Muslim Audience”

Sometime around 1890, *Romeo and Juliet* became the first Shakespeare play translated into Arabic and performed at a public theatre. *The Martyrs of Love*, as it was known, proved wildly

¹ Dadhabhoy, Ambereen. *Shakespeare Thorough Islamic Worlds*. Routledge, 2024.

popular and remained in repertory in Cairo for over twenty years. But the performance was unlike any version of Shakespeare's play that we're familiar with. The changes included multiple elements designed to make the play intelligible to an Arab and largely Muslim audience by accommodating the form of Shakespearean drama to traditional modes of acting and music already popular with Egyptian audiences while bringing certain elements of the content of the classic story in closer conformity with several noteworthy indigenous narratives and cultural traditions. These included several subtle (and some not-so-subtle) changes to the details of Shakespeare's narrative. Romeo, for instance, compares his beloved not to the sun but to the moon. Aspects of the performance were also changed to make the play more familiar to its Cairene audiences. Romeo was played by Sheikh Salama Hijazi—a former muezzin turned pop star, already beloved throughout the city. Ultimately, *Martyrs of Love* allowed Eastern and Western cultural traditions to meet somewhere in the middle—to the benefit of both a nascent Egyptian theatrical industry and Shakespeare's global popularity.

Fatima Ebrahim, "Shakespeare's Algerian Witch: Islamic Representation and Suppression in *The Tempest*"

Until recently (2016), critics have offered limited interpretations of "hoop" to signal either Sycorax's age (hunched over with a bent spine) or to reflect the cyclical nature of the play. However, an important amendment in *Notes and Queries* by Walter Evans and Blaire Zeiders has alerted us to the fact that "hoop" could also denote the bird, "hoopoe", especially considering the preceding adjective "foul", which appears as "fowle" in the First Folio. The avian metaphor, Evans and Zieders, argue, supplies a range of meanings rooted in European folklore traditions associated with witchcraft that could inform our reading of Sycorax. Likewise, others have looked to the classics (i.e. Medea and Circe) as possible sources for Shakespeare's banished witch. Enriching as these readings are, they center on Occidental sources that overlook Sycorax's Algerian heritage. For Shakespeare's audience in 1611, Algeria would have been known to be governed by "Mahometism"; we should thus open our interpretation of her by considering the Islamic tradition in which hoopoes are specifically linked to "magic" and spirits. While critics connect the play to Islam through its geographical and racial underpinnings of the play, in this paper, I hope to expose a deeper connection to Islam by focusing on Sycorax's relationship with the Islamic conception of black magic as it was understood through early modern travel literature. In doing so, this paper investigates how and why *The Tempest* negotiates the two seemingly opposite perceptions of Islam: a respectable, albeit feared, expansionist empire and devil-worshipping witchcraft.