

Mutran's Othello: Re-packaging Shakespeare to promote a Pan-Arabist agenda

By Sameh Fekry Hanna

In a series of satirical narrative articles published in 1920 in the Egyptian literary weekly, *al-Sufur*, playwright and theatre critic Muhammad Taymur (1892-1921) describes a play he watched, not in reality, but in a dream. In a humorous style that oscillates between the language of fiction and the language of drama, Taymur elaborates in these articles, entitled 'Trial of the Playwrights' (Muhakamat Mu'alifi al-Riwayat al-Tamthiliyya), on the practices of both playwrights and theatre translators at the time.

The defendants in this imagined, dream-like trial included theatre directors, actors, playwrights and a couple of theatre translators. Significantly, members of the jury were the foreign writers whose work theatremakers in Egypt drew on for their performances. They included Shakespeare, Corneille, Racine and Goethe. Two of the defendants, Farah Antun and Khalil Mutran, were known to have practised theatre translation and were thus tried on that basis. Farah Antun was found guilty of 'translation malpractice'. According to the prosecutor in this imaginary trial, Antun 'picked the old vaudeville plays and rendered

them in a strange, astounding and distorted translation that is half colloquial, half classical, and mixed it with some Syrian jokes . . . to make the audience laugh'. For this commercially oriented translation practice, the jury ordered Antun to suspend his translation activity for ten years to allow the Egyptian audience enough time to forget his uninspiring translations. But as for Khalil Mutran (1872-1949), the renowned poet and Shakespeare translator, the jury commended him for his 'prestigious' translations of Shakespeare's dramatic work, and only blamed him for not producing enough of them.

Taymur's praise of Mutran's translations was not without reason. For him, and for many historians and scholars of Egyptian theatre, Mutran established new norms of theatre translation in Egypt. His Arabic translation of *Othello*, staged and then published in 1912, marked the beginning of what Taymur himself later called 'serious theatre' (*al-masrah al-jaddi*). This to distinguish the kind of theatre Mutran helped create, together with other theatremakers, from what was regarded by theatre historians as blatantly commercial theatre. Early Shakespeare translators in Egypt, who started up



Khalil Mutran



Jurj Abyad



roughly around the 1890s, were at the forefront of 'commercially oriented' theatre. Aware that theatre was seen as a foreign genre by Egyptians, early theatre translators endeavoured to make their versions as widely accessible as possible to the mainstream consumers of culture in Egypt. These translators did everything they could to make Shakespeare part of a popular culture industry. No wonder, then, that the first translation of *Romeo and Juliet*, done by Najib al-Haddad (1867-1899) and first staged in 1890, was appropriated for Egyptian theatregoers as a musical melodrama, with a famous singer of the day, Salama Hijazi, playing Romeo. The play was even given a happy ending, with Romeo getting married to Juliet in a typically Egyptian wedding ceremony, accompanied by oriental singing and belly dancing. In a similar vein, Tanyus Abdu's translation of *Hamlet* into Arabic, staged in 1901 and published a year later, had a different ending from Shakespeare's, where Hamlet is kept alive and given back the throne after the death of his mother and uncle. Again, the fact that popular singer Salama Hijazi played the leading role made it difficult for the translator to kill Hamlet and made it imperative to use a versified, rhythmic Arabic that would lend itself to singing.

For better or worse, it was Mutran, aided by theatre director, manager and actor Jurj Abyad, who divorced Shakespeare from Egyptian popular culture and re-packaged him so that his work would appeal

to the upper-middle-class Egyptian consumers of culture. This group of elitist theatregoers needed to be reassured that the Arabic translations of Shakespeare they were offered, whether in their staged or published versions, were the *real* Shakespeare and not some cheaply tailored versions that pandered to the vulgar tastes of the masses. In all of his published translations of Shakespeare's work, Mutran always called attention to the fact that his versions were the exact Arabic images of the Bard's texts. However, it was obvious that he used his translations to promote his Pan-Arabist political agenda. The preface to his translation of *Othello* is interesting in that it points up the dilemma of a translator: on the one hand, he sought to reassure his readers (and potential spectators of staged versions based on this translation) that what he gave them was nothing but Shakespeare; and on the other hand, he was aware that he was using Shakespeare's *Othello* to serve a political end that had nothing to do with Shakespeare.

In the preface to his Arabic *Othello*, Mutran stresses his strategic use of classical Arabic as the language of his translation. The style of Arabic he used was pre-Islamic Arabic, which was distinct and free of Quranic diction. Mutran was a Christian Lebanese who emigrated to Egypt in the late 19th century, along with many other fellow Levantines. He fled from an oppressive Ottoman regime in the Levant that he opposed. Many Christian

Levantines emigrated to Egypt, mainly because of the inter-faith violence that erupted in 1860 between Christians and both Muslims and Druze. Mutran's Pan-Arabism was secular in the sense that he wanted the Arabic language to be the essential bond bringing Arabs together, regardless of their religious affiliation. No wonder, then, that he left out all references to religion, whether Christian or heathen mythologies, from his translation.

The fact that the Arab world was at that time not only in confrontation with a declining Ottoman Empire, but also with Western imperialism, motivated Mutran's political investment in Shakespeare's text. The confrontational situation between Shakespeare's Moor and the Venetians was ideal

for Mutran to promote his Pan-Arabist agenda. This was clear in the highly poetic and stylized language he used for *Othello*, as if he wanted to say that classical Arabic was the only way for the Arabs to win their battle against imperialism. To reassure his readers that he was still not betraying Shakespeare, he claimed that the plot in *Othello* originally came from an Arabic story that Shakespeare must have read somewhere and that what he, Mutran, was doing was simply reclaiming the story. He even went a step further when he said that there was something of an

Arab in Shakespeare, and that his language echoed the free soul of a 'bedouin'. Mutran not only arabized the plot and the title role, giving it the Arabic name 'Utayl' he also arabized Shakespeare himself. That was how he solved the paradox that arose from the need to stay close to Shakespeare's text while at the same time making that text say something Shakespeare didn't say; for Mutran, Shakespeare, his hero and his story, are most likely of Arabic origin. It is not surprising, then, that when the cultural committee of the Arab League planned an authoritative translation of Shakespeare's complete dramatic works in the mid 1950s, they did not commission a translation of *Othello*. For them, Mutran's version was the clearest possible manifestation of the Pan-Arabist agenda. ▀

