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Eroll Kuhn

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Sulayman Al-Bassam's *The Al-Hamlet Summit*: Allegorical anti-Orientalism in the Shadow of 9/11

Eroll Kuhn

Class of 2014

Advised by Professor Donald Wayne Foster

On March 26th, 2014, the Vassar Islamic Society (VIS) hosted an event called "Unpacking Jihad" in a second floor corner-room of Rockefeller Hall. The workshop started with an interactive exercise: the speakers wrote '*jihad*' – capitalized and eight feet wide – across a blackboard. Volunteers from the audience were asked to describe *jihad* in their own words. Almost half the audience participated in the word association exercise. Soon the blackboard was covered with familiar terminology: 'violence,' 'war,' 'foreign,' 'Other,' 'enemies,' 'distorted,' 'fear,' 'Islam.' When the room fell into an uncomfortable silence a VIS member stepped forward and reminded everyone that the classroom was a safe space. Next, the three speakers, all Muslim women of color, provided the audience with a cursory history of Islam. Again and again their narratives dissociated contemporary connotations of *jihad* from the personal and historical significance of the term. For one of the presenters, *jihad* meant going to the gym every day. Another speaker described the conflicting demands of her American and Muslim identities. The event's final exercise asked audience members to think about their own daily struggles of faith.

Sulayman Al-Bassam's *The Al-Hamlet Summit* – an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – functions much like the VIS workshop. First performed in 2002, the play challenges European and American assumptions about the inherent violence, Otherness, and pre-modernity of Islamic and/or Arab societies by representing the political experiences of Arab and Muslim characters. Al-Bassam's play is a commentary on a decidedly post-9/11 orientalism, on age-old assumptions about the Arab/Muslim Other inflected by the turbulent politics of the twenty-first century. Unlike the VIS workshop, *The Al-Hamlet Summit* does not shy away from unsavory associations. Rather than dispel anxiety about jihad, Al-Bassam contextualizes (violent) political movements steeped in Islam within a historical framework. The play casts empire and resistance(s) as

walking metaphors, and uses the power dynamics between these allegorical characters to illuminate and explore the anti-colonial struggle that undergirds political Islam.

Orientalism: the Micro- and Macro-Politics of Representation

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1979) traces the elision and misrepresentation of Arabs in western culture through the colonial era to the present, and illuminates the ways in which misrepresentation has conditioned the international political order. By Orientalism, Said means "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (1). Orientalism is, in other words, a crystallized oppositional identity. "The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other" (1). The Occident (Europe, America) is at the cultural core while societies to the East are inherently marginal. The alienness of the Orient is not loosely defined, is not "a free subject of thought or action" (3). Rather, the Occident understands the Orient through academic Orientalism. Orientalism is akin to a behavioral science: it can describe as well as prescribe.

Orientalism begets two positivistic conclusions, one micro-political and descriptive, the other macro-political and prescriptive. The micro-political conclusion concerns the "Oriental," the Other as an individual. Said provides a snapshot of this imagined individual:

> Along with all other peoples variously designated as backward, degenerate, uncivilized, and retarded, the Orientals were viewed in a framework constructed out of the biological determinism and moral-political admonishment. The Oriental was linked thus to elements in western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien (207).

The Oriental is uncivilized, irrational, weak. The Oriental, most importantly, cannot govern. The Orientalist derives a macro-political plan of action from this oppositional hypothesis. Since the Occidental is strong, civilized and capable – the opposite of the Oriental – the former must rule over the latter. "Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined or – as the colonial powers openly coveted their territories – taken over" (Said 207). Orientalism describes the Orient as ripe for the taking and thereby prescribes institutional action, namely empire building and cultural domination.

Said reckons with centuries of imperialism, with "the long and slow process of appropriation by which Europe, or the European awareness of the Orient, transformed itself from being textual and contemplative into being administrative economic, and even military" (210). The *Al-Hamlet Summit*, meanwhile, addresses contemporary Orientalism. Sulayman Al-Bassam speaks to understandings of Arabs, Muslims, and the Middle East that gained currency in the postcolonial era, and thereby challenges the American imperialism substantiated by such contemporary postulations about the Oriental. Twenty-first century Orientalism occurs under a number of guises, but retains hallmarks that Said identified in eighteenth and nineteenth century European thought. News media maligns Arabs (imagined as a static ethnic group) as uncivilized and violent. El Hamamsy and Soliman (2013) for example note that media coverage frames Palestinians as "heartless" and "ruthless." "[The] same old colonial 'savage/'savior' binary" is reproduced in Western news media coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict (6). "By emphasizing…one monolithic representation of Arabs to the exclusion of others, mainstream media simultaneously draw the lines of what is acceptable and what is not" (ibid). Again, subhuman representation of the Oriental individual apologizes for the Occident's violence. The

implication that Palestine is empty, populated only by ‘ruthless savages,’ excuses violence committed by (implicitly civilized) Israel and America.

in 1993 Huntington famously claimed that “Islam has Bloody Borders” (33). Huntington located something essentially anti-modern and violent within the Islamic faith or religion to explain cultural tensions between (implicitly oppositional) East and West. His civilizational thesis assumes that Islamic culture and society is unitary and static, that no dialogue exists about norms and practices, and that political theory derived from an Islamic worldview will be equally pre-modern and irrational. Islam’s inherent pre-modernity and irrationality justifies western meddling in the political and affairs of Islamic societies. In Huntington’s formulation, Islam is a proxy for the Oriental described by Said. Again orientalism justifies empire and violence against Muslims and Arabs.

Cultural theorists have also substituted Political Islam as a proxy for the irrational Oriental. Akbarzadeh describes clashing political worldviews in which “Islamists have defined themselves in contrast to the status quo, whether responding to socialism, nationalism, or the cultural and political hegemony of the United States” (1). Akbarzadeh frames Islamism as oppositional to its core and denies the existence of intellectual dynamism within political movements inflected by Islamic doctrine. “This binary view of the rational versus the irrational, the Western versus the Islamic, the modern versus the traditional, [has] led to isolation and detachment in contemporary analysis of Islamic political movements” (Abdelkader 2). Such oppositional frameworks ignore the historical context in which contemporary political Islam emerged. Founding figures of Islamic political thought were profoundly anti-colonial. Al-Afghani, an early pan-Islamic thinker, wrote about the relationship between “European aggression” and the dominance of western modernity (which he cast as “science”) (“An Islamic

Response" 14). Al-Afghani believed that Islamic societies could regain the power to determine their own cultural destiny only though Pan-Islamic resistance to the European colonial powers' imposed modernity ("Islamic Solidarity" 17). Sayyid Qutb, another central Islamist thinker, was even more explicitly opposed to cultural colonialism: "Islam is a declaration of the freedom of man from servitude to other men…[which] strives from the beginning to abolish all those systems and governments which are based the rule of man over men and the servitude of one human being to another" (Qutb 410-11). Emancipating the Muslim world from lingering imperialism and establishing Islamic system of governances in Muslim societies were, to Qutb, interconnected challenges. He identified *jihad* as the ideal means by which the dual struggles could be realized.

Huntington's "bloody borders" thesis also conflates Islamic culture with military strategy. Gerges highlights that "[instead] of considering the use of terrorism by militant Islamists as a common tool in asymmetric warfare…observers portray [violent Islamist groups] as warriors in a cultural war against the West and the liberal rationalist narrative of history" (76). Terrorism as a military strategy is effective in low-intensity conflicts against technologically superior colonial or state armies. Jihadi movements resort to acts of indiscriminate violence because their political goals are unachievable with their available mainstream political means or military assets. Huntington mistakes political violence for cultural essence. He also takes the rhetoric of transnational jihadi groups at face value, and fails to distinguish strategy from ideology. Islamist groups entice constituents by harnessing the idea of *jihad* in the same way that nation-states utilize national pride to recruit soldiers. Bin Laden's fatwa against the United States interweaves calls for the removal of American troops from Saudi soil with deeply religious, often apocalyptic, language (Bin Laden 431). Al Qaeda's transnational jihad is anti-colonial and rooted

in the regional politics of the Arabian Peninsula, but dressed in the cloth of pan-Islamism to entice potential fighters from Islamic communities around the world. (Young) men join Islamic groups committed to violent action because they are drawn to a narrative rather than out of a deep-rooted hatred for the United States. Misreading this narrative in civilizational rather than political terms – in terms of Islam fighting Christianity rather than colonized resisting colonizer – allows news media to sensationalize the Arab/Muslim Other as blood thirsty and barbaric.

Rowe explores the process by which American Orientalism interacted with the shock of 9/11 to kick-start an entirely new imperial project. In part the American reaction was to strengthen already extant 'secular,' tyrannical oligarchies and dictatorships in the Middle East (183). The US rewarded states that spouted the rhetoric of national security and secular modernity, as long as national security and modernity excluded, or actively combatted, political Islam. "The creation of the Mubarak icon in Arab media as this 'fatherly, benevolent, peace-loving' leader [served] precisely this purpose while all the time masking Mubarak's self-serving economic and political interactions with the West" (El Hamamsy and Soliman 7). Active American military, economic, and political maneuverings in the Middle East represents the other manifestation of post-9/11 American Orientalism. After the attacks on New York, the interconnected specters of Islam, Islamist movements, and uncivilized Orientals haunted American society. Assumptions about the Other's intent (micro-politics) called for state action (macro-politics). "US state policy makers assumed popular ignorance of the Middle East, relying instead on their own Orientalist expertise" to start two wars (Rowe 183).

Towards A New Representation: *The Al-Hamlet Summit*

On September 16th, 2001, President George W. Bush spoke about an impending "crusade against terrorism" and thereby summoned the ghost of a millennia old civilizational conflict (Ford). *The Al-Hamlet Summit* was first performed in August of 2002, less than a year after 9/11 and Bush's speech. The attack – and the awakening of the American military juggernaut it spurned – influenced Al-Bassam's writing of the play. In the aftermath of the tragedy, Al-Bassam realized that, "The hell in New York today will bring hell to Ramallah tomorrow" that globalization and orientalism would merge to the detriment of Arabs everywhere ("Am I Mad?" 85). Al Qaeda's campaign of terror reinforced assumptions about Arabs, Muslims, and Political Islam deeply embedded within systems of power, and allowed western states to devalue "dangerous" bodies and communities. Rather than combat Al Qaeda (a transnational militant organization), the United States and its allies launched a regional (or civilizational) conflict with implications for Muslim communities from Yemen to Indonesia, from Mali to Iran. In other words, the echoes of 9/11 forced Al-Bassam to reckon with an Orientalist hierarchy in the international political system. Sulayman Al-Bassam's wrote *The Al-Hamlet Summit* to illuminate this structure, and to challenge a contemporary globalized world order that had integrated colonial-era Orientalist assumptions.

Al-Bassam was born in Kuwait City to a British mother and a Kuwaiti father, but was raised in England ("Signifiers" 106). In an essay on his Arab Shakespeare Trilogy, Al-Bassam explains how 9/11 complicated the lived experience of his British Arab identity and thereby altered the trajectory of his creative output:

> It wasn't until the magnesium flash of 9/11 that I saw that alienness. In the fallout of the terrorist attacks on Manhattan, lines were drawn into cities and ethnicities across the Western world. Overnight, my looks, my language, my name became sources of interrogation and suspicion. I was poised between two cultures with a sense of identity defined as much as much by non-assimilation and non-belonging as by any unified narrative of tribe, culture, language, or history. I began to make tentative descriptions of

> the Arab world, in English, presenting this work in Kuwait, in Tunis, in London. I was being drawn back in. By the time I presented the first, fully conceived version of The Al-Hamlet Summit at the Edinburgh Festival in the summer of 2002, I was already back living in Kuwait… ("Debris" 124)

The fraying of European social fabrics along ethnic lines after 9/11 forced the Kuwaiti-British playwright to confront his own "alienness." Although biracial, Al-Bassam's visible superficial characteristics – his name and physical appearance – ensured that was he categorized as suspect and Other. He "began to make tentative descriptions of the Arab world in English," to reconcile tensions within his own identity as well as to dispel Orientalist myths.

Al-Bassam describes his plays as "cross-cultural construction," as liminal works that transfer inaccessible, foreign experiences across cultural chasms (Holderness and Loughrey 15). "[My pieces] seek to engage with the expectations and prejudices of non-Arab audiences in order to entangle them in a programmatic subversion of their own prejudices," Al-Bassam says of his own intentions ("Debris" 131). Specifically, Al-Bassam humanizes and complicates Islamic/anti-colonial political movements, movements that western media frame as inherently nihilistic and irrational. Holderness and Loughrey summarize his ends:

> Though he does not speak for Islamic fundamentalism or terrorist violence, Al-Bassam shows them as the inevitable consequences of an alliance between native Arab totalitarianism and the economic machinations of the West. In Shakespeare Hamlet is driven reluctantly towards revenge, and in Al-Hamlet Hamlet and Ophelia seem to have no option but the bloody and suicidal course they undertake (20)

In *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, Hamlet's worldview becomes increasingly radical in response to American meddling in Elsinore's affairs. The prince's right to exercise autonomy over his kingdom is suppressed by the nexus of Claudius (an autocratic dictator) and the Arms Dealer (American imperial interests). Hamlet's options for ridding Elsinore of this conjoined abomination dwindle as the play nears its conclusion, and drive him to political Islam and asymmetrical warfare against the regime. While Al-Bassam doesn't justify Hamlet's terrorism

(or, implicitly, the indiscriminate violence of Islamist groups), Holderness believes that the protagonist's transformation is portrayed in a way that allows a western audience to understand Islamist strategies and worldviews in a human way.

Litvin resists Holderness and Loughrey's analysis and questions the play's efficacy as an anti-Orientalist piece. "The script both ironizes and reinforces the flat media discourses it echoes, but it is basically parasitic on that discourse," Litvin argues ("Signifiers" 112). While Al-Bassam generates empathy for a 'terrorist,' he also relies on the word's connotations to make a point. The playwright critiques empire with its own rhetoric, and thus fails to provide a new vocabulary through which to represent a maligned group. According to Litvin's reasoning, a rational terrorist still exists within an oppositional framework. A western audience might reconcile Al-Bassam's Hamlet with a political cause rather than a civilizational tension, but the political cause remains amorphous and context-less.

Litvin also argues that Al-Bassam intended the play to be received "post-politically," in line with the Arab World's rich tradition of adapting Hamlet (*Journey* 181). Whereas Arabic-adaptations of *Hamlet* in the 1960s and 70s exposed regime hypocrisies and called for action, rewrites from the mid-1970s onwards generally abandoned prescriptive messages and serious political critique in favor of dark humor. The "justice-seeking Arab revolutionary heros" that flourished under President Nasser's pan-Arabic revolution made way for hapless blunderering Hamlets in the autocratic and stagnant 1970s (144). Once symbolic of political virility, Arab Hamlets began to signify the futility of action:

> [Sophisticated Arab theatergoers aware of the 60s/70s Arab Hamlet tradition] would understand, either through personal experience or inherited theatrical lore, the irrelevance of Mousetrap-like performance to President Hosni Mubarak's regime and its counterparts across the Arab world. They would know all too well that their theatre-making and theater-watching "action could not change anything in the [seemingly] eternal nature of things." Their laughter, then, watching a British cast enact Arab-style political turmoil in

> a crowded theatre in the middle of the night, would be a genuinely carefree, no longer bitter Dionysian laughter. (182)

Litvin thinks that Al-Bassam expects too much from the audience that he is writing for. Most western viewers encounter *The Al-Hamlet Summit* without any idea about Hamlet's genealogy on the Middle Eastern stage. The post-political themes of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* are, thus, likely lost on play's target audience.

The *Al-Hamlet Summit* sometimes even actively works against its objectives. According to Litvin, cross-cultural theater is often counterproductive:

> [an ethnographically curious audience] can misread an individual's creative choices as mere cultural habit, perhaps something typical of people from that background. It can mistake a stylized or even ironic *appropriation* of a certain cultural tradition…for a straightforward part of the tradition. Metaphors are literalized. Satire is misread as fact ("Doomed" 165-66).

Representing the Other to a western audience forces a playwright to juggle accessibility and unfamiliarity. A familiar text risks reaffirming stereotypes while a more honest representation of an alternative subjectivity may beget pushback from the audience. To navigate this challenge, *The Al-Hamlet Summit* "offers a channel-flipping mix of al-Jazeera, CNN, BBC, democracy rhetoric, terrorism, and Arab music and poetry" ("Signifiers" 113). Al-Bassam complements (familiar) ironized news media coverage of the Middle East with (novel/unfamiliar) cultural artifacts and subjectivities.

Reviewers of the play, though, have fallen into some of the Orientalist pitfalls that Al-Bassam intended to dispel. On the cover of the published version *The Al Hamlet Summit*, an excerpt of a review claims that the material within "[fits] the current explosive state of politics in the Middle East like a silk glove." Before a reader can even open the text, a parallel is drawn between explosive violence and a region. A number of reviewers laud Al-Bassam for reminding audiences of the inextricable link between Arab culture and violence, war, and fanaticism (see:

Smith 2004; Culshaw 2004). Referencing, Peter Culshaw's review, Al-Bassam ("Debris" 132) admits that "[*The Al-Hamlet Summit*] served to reaffirm general impressions of an over-stereotyped region without enabling audiences to get beyond their ignorance."

Al-Bassam's desire to cultivate "interpretive openness" partially explains the play's failures ("Debris" 132). In the 'Director's Notes' handed out during English-language productions of the play, Al-Bassam claimed to represent "a composite of many Arab concerns that affect peoples from the Arabian Gulf to the Atlantic and beyond" ("Signifiers" 104). A decade later, in an essay on his Arab Shakespeare Trilogy, Al-Bassam expanded on the 'Note': "The plays deal with issues that are systemic to more than one Arab society. As a result, the plays consciously seek to position themselves outside the contingencies of localized, national politics and within a more universal framework of regional concerns" ("Debris" 128). Litvin's distinguishes between those cross-cultural plays that present thematized history and those that represent culture ("Doomed" 166). *The Al-Hamlet Summit's* represents an example of the latter. Rather than attempt to explain a historical event from an alternate viewpoint, Al-Bassam aspires to communicate the nuances of Arab cultural subjectivity to curious Americans and Europeans.

In order to substantiate his claim of being a spokesperson for peoples from a huge geographic region, and from a diverse array of political and cultural bodies, Al-Bassam conveniently redefines identity and space in *The Al-Hamlet Summit*. The play's Elsinore is situated within an unnamed, amalgam state populated by (Muslim) Arabs. Claudius appears to be Sunni, as he is politically aligned against an explicitly Shi'a oppositional group. Hamlet appears, at one point, to be aligned with said Shi'a group, but his sectarian identity is otherwise unclear. Whether non-Muslim Arabs reside in the country is ambiguous. Litvin calls this spatio-cultural flexibility "delocalization" ("Signifiers" 114). I would posit that translocalization is a more

suitable term; while the setting is a delocalized Arab polity, Al-Bassam peppers the state with numerous distinguishable and real local place markers. The unnamed state hints at a number of simultaneous, real physical locations rather than categorically elide all labels; thus, the setting is impossible according to space-time rather than simply a delocalized fantasy space.

Although Al-Bassam purports to balance "systemic issues" and "regional concerns" of Arabs with "localized, national politics," the local aspects of the trans-localization are often subsumed by global/regional hallmarks. Locality manifests itself in explosive, macro-political brushstrokes. 'Local' signifiers in *The Al-Hamlet Summit* often point lazily to well-known sectarian and interstate conflicts, and thereby echo orientalist 'regional' associations seen in the news media's coverage of The Middle East. Shi'a strongholds in the unnamed country's south imply Lebanon and Iraq. Late in the play, the invading Fortinbras obliquely reveals himself to be a metaphor for "Greater Iz…[rael]" (*The Al-Hamlet Summit* 85).[1] Even though these signifiers are local and unique, they operate in a way that defines the Arab world by its sectarian divisions, instability, and violence. Litvin points out that Al-Bassam "collapse[s] the whole category of "Middle East politics" into a single vortex of catchphrases and images, most of them already known or accessible to the western and expatriate Arab viewer" ("Signifiers" 113). Some "catchphrases" and "images" might be rooted in the history of specific space – such as Israeli Merkava tanks on the Southern border – but they fail to dispel regional political associations with turbulent politics

Although sometimes poetic, *The Al-Hamlet Summit*'s few local *cultural* references are often tied to "explosive signifiers" that counteract successful moments of translocalization. In 4.5, Ophelia quotes Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish ("The one who has turned me into a

[1] Al-Bassam substantiates this claim in the "Author's Note of *The Al Hamlet Summit*.

[2] In Kuwait, the play in question was *Hamlet in Kuwait*. In Iran, the censor examined *The Al-*

refugee has made a bomb of me") and thereby meditates upon a specific loss of land, a half-century of displacement, and the art that arose from the Nakba (*The Al-Hamlet Summit* 78). Ophelia, but a few lines later, blows herself up in a suicide bombing and replaces the poetry derived from Palestinian displacement with the tired, over-used trope of self-destructive Arab violence. In 3.2 another moment of beautiful local nuance is eclipsed by allusions to a global symbol of unspeakable horror. Hamlet's call for a cleansing of the land still echoes when Ophelia sings a Bosnian folk ditty a few lines later (*The Al-Hamlet Summit* 61-2). While Bosniaks are not Arabs, Al-Bassam again forces his audience to observe a Muslim group through a lens tempered by sectarian divisions, political instability and violence. Hamlet's brusque reference to the ethnic cleansing of Bosnians during the 1990s overshadows Ophelia's subtle inclusion of a local cultural artifact.

Al-Bassam's Means: Shakespearean Adaptation, Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt,* and Walking Metaphors

Questions of efficacy aside, Al-Bassam's ends are clear. *The Al-Hamlet Summit* responds to a strand of Orientalism that emerged from the aftermath of 9/11 and asks its audience to recognize humanity where the West has been taught to see barbarism. Breeding familiarity is key to the dramatist's cross-cultural product. To salvage political Islam from narratives about the ideology's pre-modern origins and inherent irrationality, Al-Bassam utilizes literary and dramatic devices accessible to western audiences, namely Shakespearean adaptation and a form of allegorical characterization that facilitates the *Verfremdungseffekt*.

Loomba points out that theater's can interweave the personal with the historical/political and that drama is an inherently suitable medium for political representation and commentary:

> theater contributes to the language of the extraordinary (spectacular, dramatic), and provides metaphors for violent confrontation (the arena or theater of war), besides being the site for the reproduction of violence, as practice it belongs to everyday life rather than to what historians call extraordinary moments. (228)

Dramaturgy can represent the extraordinary and the ordinary, the lived experiences of individuals reckoning with change as well as the arcs of history that usher in new eras. Loomba, in other words, highlights theater's ability to thematize history at the micro- and macro-political levels. The medium's hybridity allows a playwright to reframe a contested political event from an unfamiliar viewpoint, thereby forcing an audience to engage with an alternate interpretation of history. By coupling Hamlet's political radicalization with the imperial meddling that begets the massacre in Elsinore, Al-Bassam reframes political Islam as anti-colonial.

The Al-Hamlet Summit is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Al-Bassam's text loosely follows the plot and structure of the Bard's play, and reconstructs iconic scenes to fit the contemporary Middle Eastern setting. Al-Bassam's decision to appropriate a Shakespearean text cannot be divorced from the playwright's objective of presenting a western audience with a complex message wrapped in familiar cloth. Billington presents Shakespeare's words as the ideal template for any human experience. Shakespeare's messages are supposedly universal; his narratives representative of everyone but rooted nowhere. "Shakespeare," Billington claims, is much "like a vast global mirror in which we see our own reflections" (17). Each new interpretation, especially by "foreign [presumably meaning non-British] eyes," layers the texts with "a new patina of meaning" (25). Billington, though, fails to identify Shakespeare's baggage. Rather than localize and historicize Shakespeare, Billington forces turn-of-the-seventeenth-century-London onto the world. The dialogical possibilities of adaptation – and the means by which adapters respond to and deconstruct Shakespeare's beliefs – are absent from Billington's analysis. Singh categorizes this oversight within the "the tradition of Burkhardt that viewed the

Renaissance as the heroic, originary moment of modern [implicitly Western] individualism…[in which it discovered] the origins of permanent qualities, if not of human, then at least of humanist nature" (40).

Ironically, *Hamlet* – described by Hallward as "directly valid for all relations within a particular situation" (xxi) – is one of Shakespeare's most essentially European pieces. Holderness and Loughrey point out that "*Hamlet* is a play that seems to trade in whiteness, especially theatrically: ghosts, white faces in the darkness, the pallor of melancholy, the bleached candour of the exhumated skull" (11). Unlike *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, plays that delight in (mis)representing the Other, *Hamlet*'s cast of characters is comprehensively Danish. Yet, paradoxically, *Hamlet* "has the largest pretensions to universality" of Shakespeare's plays (Holderness and Loughrey 11).

Unlike their multifaceted and dynamic European counterparts, Arab characters in Shakespeare's plays are often "uncivilized, gauche, loud and overbearing" (Holderness 5). On the rare occasion that Arabs are given a legitimate voice, their "suffering is quarantined" or negated through humor (ibid). Shakespeare thus presented his audience with a representational binary. The Arab is either reduced to a stock caricature that the audience can ridicule or given a history and personality but denied the audience's empathy. Shakespeare's representational binary mirrors the Orientalist depictions of the Arab Other that Said found again and again in European high culture. "The Oriental [is] linked thus to elements in western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien" (Said 207). Although Elizabethan ideas about race help explain Shakespeare's systematic lampooning of Arab (as well Jewish and Black) characters, contemporary directorial decisions perpetuate misrepresentation. Ambitious recent adaptations of *Othello*, *The Taming of the Shrew*,

and *The Merchant of Venice* complicated, and maybe even redeemed, Othello, Kate, and Shylock through omission, addition, and reinterpretation of dialogue. Meanwhile, "parodies and language assigned to the Arab Muslim [are] left intact" (Holderness 5). The burden of Orientalism rests heavy on Shakespearean theater.

Singh, Loomba, and Holderness, amongst others, have pointed out that Shakespeare's contemporary global reach is a product of British colonial history. Rather than render global themes accessible, the mechanisms that circulate Shakespeare's plays can impose European norms and perpetuate imperial power dynamics. "Culture critics worry specifically about the way in which technology, including the technologies by which Shakespeare is disseminated to a wide audience, eradicates the "human" – the personal, the local, the different" (Desmet 5). Since Shakespeare's global reach is partially a product of British military expansion and colonial education policies, the supposed universality of Shakespeare's plays often masks countless erasures of local culture. The Empire exported Britain's proudest cultural artifacts to its colonies: native students read British literature in schools while productions of Othello were put on in English-language theaters in Calcutta (Chatterjee and Singh 66). Exporting Shakespeare was intended to consolidate imperial power dynamics by reproducing European culture and values in elite colonial subjects. "[The] primary aim of staging plays by…Shakespeare was to keep alive the myth of English cultural superiority, a myth that was crucial to British political interests in India" (Singh 32). Providing uncivilized subjects access to British high culture was also used to apologize for empire at home, to "confer cultural legitimacy on the project of capitalist empire building" (Holderness 1). The British Empire, in other words, used the distribution of Shakespeare to consolidate military, political, and economic power.

Why would Al-Bassam adapt a play with colonial and Oriental hang-ups to counter Orientalist conceptions? For one, the history that Singh and Loomba discuss – in which Shakespeare is imposed on colonized societies for strategic reasons – is rooted in the Indian context. Whereas Shakespeare was forced upon the Indian subcontinent by centuries of colonial rule, the bard's plays arrived in the Arab World prior to the era of European colonialism, and via a less problematic route. According to Holderness and Loughrey, East India Company sailors caught in the doldrums on the island of Socotra (in modern day Yemen) were responsible for the earliest 'production' of Hamlet in the Middle East, in 1608 (2). The play, however, did not establish roots in the region until much later. In the late 1800s, Arab translators and directors brought the text to Egypt. In 1893 the play was first produced in the Arabic language. According to Holderness, "[the 1893 adaptation] was radically adapted…converted from Shakespeare's tragedy into a historical romance, in which Hamlet defeats his uncle, ascends the throne, and reigns with the Ghost's blessing" (2-3). The play was well received by Egyptian audiences, which spurned Cairo's theatrical community to retranslate, readapt, and reproduce Shakespeare's narrative. The earliest surviving Arabic translation was, according to Litvin, "Arabized" by Tanyus Abdu, in 1901 ("French Source" 1). Not only were colonial bureaucrats uninvolved in this cultural transaction but Abdu, who did not speak English, never actually read Shakespeare's version of *Hamlet*. Instead, the Egyptian playwright used Alexandre Dumas' 1840 French text as a template for his adaptation (ibid).

In *Hamlet's Arab Journey*, Litvin provides a comprehensive stage history of *Hamlet* in the Arab World. Her analysis shows that Hamlet transformed drastically as political symbol over the course of the volatile second half of the 20th century. Empowered, fair, and optimistic princes roamed the stage during the early, hopeful years Nasser's pan-Arabism. After the shock and

disappointment of 1967, a new generation of Hamlets – embittered and critical of the authoritative and inefficient Claudius – served as icons of dissidence and resistance against tyrannical governments. Between 1976 and the commencement of the Arab Spring, a slew of libido-less and inarticulate Hamlets haplessly struggled against the allegorical tyrannies of Mubarak, Assad, and company (142-179).

The Al-Hamlet Summit responds to, and is part of, *Hamlet*'s Middle Eastern stage history. According to Litvin, Al-Bassam's play is best understood as a post-1976 "Mousetrap" *Hamlet* (*Journey* 147). Mousetrap *Hamlets* are distinguishable by the strategy (and futility) of the Prince's struggle against Claudius; in these adaptations, Claudius is forced by Hamlet to witness and respond to his own hypocrisy and oppression. Claudius, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, is confronted by a reenactment of his own tyranny (*The Murder of Gonzago*), and loses his calculated cool. Arab Mousetrap *Hamlet*s depict the Prince utilizing this ploy but failing to elicit a reaction from Claudius. "Exposing the emperor's nudity in public was not enough; he remained on the throne, his power obscene in its nakedness. To dwell on his abuses would just flatter the regime, reaffirming its power to outlast its brightest critics" (*Journey* 147). Mousetrap Hamlets meditate upon the futility of depicting truth or pursuing justice in an unaccountable tyrannical society, and represent a specific politico-cultural context. Hamlet/*Hamlet*'s unique symbolism in the Arab World complicates Singh and Loomba's claims about the inherent relationship between Shakespeare and colonial dynamics.

Hutcheon highlights that texts can be transplanted to new soils. "Adapters of traveling stories," she claims, "exert power over what they adapt" (150). Transplanted adaptations with local roots can, according to Loomba, initiate "a genuine dialogue between…the ex-colonizer and the ex-colonized" (231). The "genuine dialogue" is accessible to western audiences due to

Shakespeare's cultural capital, but does not pander to the assumptions of such an audience. *Hamlet*, in Arab theater, is a narrative with roots, a story with accrued cultural associations unique to Egypt, Syria and Jordan. Arab adapters and directors of the play addressed, wrangled with, and reconceived Shakespeare's orientalist baggage throughout the 20th century.

Since Al-Bassam was not responsible for transplanting and redeeming the play, the playwright was actually able to take advantage of western audiences' familiarity with *Hamlet*. Al-Bassam makes the most of the "modern tendency…to treat Shakespearean tragedy as a perpetually authoritative frame of reference for modern abuses of political power" (Martin and Schell 13). The playwright uses Shakespeare's eminence to add legitimacy and weight to his political analysis. Alternately, Al-Bassam has described how he used and manipulated Elizabethan conceptions of race, class and gender embedded within *Hamlet* to his own benefit ("Debris" 129). Blatantly bringing latent baggage to the forefront sensitizes an audience to political commentary and belies the myths of universality attributed to Shakespeare.

Al-Bassam has discussed another, more practical reason for adapting a Shakespearean text. The playwright highlights that "[theatre] makers operating under censorship have long adopted the mask of [Shakespeare] to make pointed critique of their societies without exposing themselves directly to censure and punishment" ("Debris" 129). In 2001, Al-Bassam wrote and directed two plays – *Hamlet in Kuwait* and *The Arab League Hamlet* – that served as prototypes for *The Al-Hamlet Summit* ("Signifiers" 106). The two shows, performed in Kuwait and Tunisia respectively, shared a number of political themes with *The Al-Hamlet Summit,* most notably a critique of authoritarian Arab governments. On at least two occasions – once in Kuwait, once in

Iran[2] – government censors scrutinized Al-Bassam's work prior to a performance (Culshaw; *The Al-Hamlet Summit* 22-23). Both censors insisted on mild changes (one concerning the recitation of a verse from the Quran, the other concerning touching between characters of opposite gender), but neither demanded changes to political topics. Placing subversive content within a Shakespearean framework – associated with apolitical high culture – allowed Al-Bassam to circumnavigate restrictive censorship laws.

In addition to taking advantage of Shakespeare's unthreatening familiarity, Al-Bassam utilizes the *Verfremdungseffekt* and archetypal characterization to ensure that western audiences engage critically with anti-Orientalist concepts. In "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," Bertolt Brecht claims to have discovered a striking stylistic difference between Chinese and Western performance art.[3] While the European or American actor attempts to establish an empathic relationship with his or her audience, Chinese theater is more interested in representing an experience to the audience. According to Brecht, "the [Chinese] artist's object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work. As a result everything put forward by him has a touch of the amazing" (92). The audience's failure to empathize with characters allows it to think critically about a play's message. Empathy is generated in western theater so an audience can identify with characters, but identification stifles analysis. Chinese plays, according to Brecht, are performed "in such a way that the audience [is] hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances as meant to take place on a conscious

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[2] In Kuwait, the play in question was *Hamlet in Kuwait*. In Iran, the censor examined *The Al-Hamlet Summit*.

[3] The irony is not lost on me, but Brecht's earliest mention of the *Verfremdungseffekt* occurs in this Orientalist piece.

plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's subconscious" (91). Brecht calls this phenomenon the *Verfremdungseffekt,* a term which Willet translated to "the alienation effect."[4]

According to Brecht, alienating an audience from a play's characters can help "underline the historical aspect of a specific social condition" (98). Both performed and textual characterization can help alienate an audience. By stopping short of accurately recreating human experience or writing characters that lack a certain depth of subjectivity, actors and playwrights rob dramatic roles of humanity. But erasure of the nuances of personality facilitates critical thinking about contexts. Alienated audiences engage with characters as political symbols or allegories rather than individuals: a cigar-smoking, top-hat-wearing industrialist represents the bourgeoisie elite, while a struggling factory-sweeper is the mouthpiece for the proletariat. Each character represents an experience dictated by class (or race, gender, sexuality, etc.), and dialogue/contact between allegorical characters mirrors the moments, spaces, and ways in which groups intersect and interact. Brecht, in other words, understood the *Verfremdungseffekt* as a useful tool for making accessible (Marxist) political theater.

The Al-Hamlet Summit deploys the *Verfremdungseffekt* to poke holes in the West's orientalist narratives about Arab identity and Political Islam. To distance his spectators and readers, Al-Bassam fuses characters with easily recognizable political symbols. The Arms Dealer represents the nexus of empire and global capitalism. Hamlet is a walking metaphor for political Islam and radical resistance to empire. Claudius is the face of Middle Eastern tyranny propped up by western governments. The actions and speech of these walking metaphors are

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[4] While "Alienation" is one interpretation of *verfremdung,* Willet's translation doesn't fully capture the word's complexity in German. *Fremd* also means "Other" or "foreign;" *Verfremdung,* thus, describes becoming Other or Foreign. The V*erfredumgseffekt* also implies a process by which someone is rendered foreign, beyond the pale, culturally incomprehensible.

representative of political identity rather than reflective of personal whim. Hamlet speaks for all proponents of political Islam while the Arms Dealer mirrors the machinations of empire's numerous businessmen and government staffers.

Interactions between character-metaphors in *The Al-Hamlet Summit* reveal more about tensions between representative institutions and ideologies than lived experiences or emotional lives of individuals. When Claudius admits to needing the Arms Dealer's acceptance, Al-Bassam depicts a relationship between empire, local leadership, and the legacy of cultural colonialism. Hamlet and Claudius' eventual clash echoes countless historical clashes between tyrannical postcolonial governments and resistance movements, and places these conflicts into an alternative interpretative framework. Allegorical thematization of history is risky, since clumsily reducing characters to stale, freighted metaphors can perpetuate orientalist ideas. An audience member that leaves a performance of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* having failed to either identify with characters or follow the playwright's allegorical argument would simply have been exposed to ninety minutes of evidence that political Islam is a destabilizing force. Albeit dehumanized, Al-Bassam's allegories engage in nuanced symbolic dialogue; their conversations and struggles force western audiences and readers to reexamine the media frameworks that dehumanize political Islam and excuse violence against Arab and Muslim bodies.

In the four case studies that follow, I explore how *The Al-Hamlet Summit* uses allegorical characters and allusions to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to represent and redeem resistance(s) to empire rooted in Political Islam

Case Study One: Fate, Futility, and Empire:

In Alan Moore and David Lloyd's 1984 graphic novel *V for Vendetta*, an authoritarian, fascist state rules over Britain with the help of a supercomputer called 'Fate.' 'Fate,' hooked up to ubiquitous surveillance devices that render privacy impossible, senses everything. One man – a reclusive dictator by the name of Mr. Susan – monitors the computer and takes action when necessary. Dissent is snuffed out before it can materialize, minorities are eradicated, and the people cower in fear. Citizens are encouraged to listen to The Voice of Fate (the state's radio program) and to trust in fate's arc towards justice. 'Fate' and fate are really just crude metaphors for power, for the ability of immensely powerful political systems to craft destiny by controlling narrative. The state defines the future and thereby convinces citizens that political struggle is futile. Near the end of the graphic novel, the protagonist – a teenage girl named Evey – finds out that the V, a masked anarchist revolutionary of unknown origin, has access to 'Fate.' The state, comfortable that it alone could craft the future, failed to detect V an infiltrate the computer's power-center. V publicly dismantles the myth of 'Fate'/fate's impenetrability via some strategic broadcasting, which allows the public to recognize its agency. Britain's leaders realize too late that V's hack and the nascent revolution in London are inextricably tied together. Soon the center can no longer hold and the authoritarian government is overthrown. What follows liberation is unclear.

In 5.1 of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* another state collapses. A power struggle, seemingly initiated by Claudius' murder of his predecessor, turns Elsinore's New Democracy into a blood-soaked farce. Tit-for-tat arguments and accusations escalate until we find Hamlet "firing mortars from the Mosque and Claudius…firing from the palace" (*The Al-Hamlet Summit* 85).[5] Laertes, too, has a dog in the fight. Hamlet, after all, murdered Polonius and drove Ophelia to insanity.

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[5] For the remainder of the paper all in-text references to *The Al-Hamlet Summit* are omitted. All page numbers in parentheses will refer to the play, unless mentioned otherwise.

Laertes controls an army and threatens to capture the throne if his conditions are not met. Fortinbras, lurking on the border with a large army, is the regime's scapegoat; he is blamed for initiating the panic and fomenting civil war. When Hamlet and Claudius finally eradicate one another, Fortinbras strides across the stage and declares the "the birth of the Greater Is…" before white noise cuts him off (85). Political differences and lust for power, it seems, drove a previously peaceful (or at least secure) unnamed Middle Eastern state to the brink of chaos.

Just prior to the bloodbath in 5.1, the Arms Dealer provides a fatalistic assessment of the causes of Elsinore's chaos. The Arms Dealer's political analysis conflates power and destiny, fate and the future of politics:

> *Hamlet*: I will make you regret your assistance.
> *Arms Dealer*: Destiny makes dark plans.
> *Hamlet*: Get out.
> *Arms Dealer*: However we curse and spit, kick and writhe –
> *Hamlet*: Out!
> *Arms Dealer*: We nudge each other towards its manifestation.
> *Hamlet*: Out! (81-2)

Like the authoritarian regime in *V for Vendetta*, the Arms Dealer emphasizes the futility of action against divine forces. The Arms Dealer implicitly critiques Hamlet's decision to rebel against Claudius and emphasizes that no amount of nudging, spitting or cursing could derail "destiny." He casts Elsinore's internal divisions as irredeemable, and the opportunistic Fortinbras' invasion as inevitable. Hamlet never had the agency to reconcile tensions or overthrow Claudius. The eventual massacre in Elsinore was unavoidable. Like Mr. Susan's daily call to trust in fate, the Arms Dealer anesthetizes Hamlet's hunger for change with rhetoric about destiny; he reduces Hamlet to a scripted actor.

Hamlet, though, rejects the Arms Dealer's assessment of political realities and individual agency. Hamlet *is* meek, and conscious of his weakness. He begs the Arms Dealer to leave, to

shut up, to stop expounding upon helplessness (Out...Out!...Out!). And even in this he fails. Nevertheless, Hamlet resists the Arms Dealer's narrative, and in this resistance reveals a deeper understanding of the Arms Dealer's role in Elsinore's politics. The Arms Dealer begot the very chaos that Hamlet, ultimately unsuccessfully, struggled against. Just as the narrative of fate/'Fate' keeps the masses docile and consolidates regime power in *V for Vendetta*, the Arms Dealer's claim about destiny is a device to silence dissent and stifle resistance.

The Arms Dealer – Al-Bassam's embodied metaphor for the imperial-capitalist nexus in the Middle East – conveniently disregards and shrouds his own role in stoking political tension. To be clear, the Arms Dealer deliberately estranged Elsinore's inhabitants from one another to weaken resistance against his intrusive actions. Contrary to the narrative of destiny, the death of Elsinore's inhabitants should, along with Fortinbras' invasion, be attributed directly to strategic empire building. The Arms Dealer's insidious influence can be traced back to 1.5, to a scene in which Hamlet, vulnerable and in search of direction, prays at the tomb of his father. Hamlet begs his creator to "Let the skies fall and the seas be set ablaze" and to "inspire me with your command" (42). Recently returned after years of cavorting in Europe, Hamlet resents Claudius and the state of immorality that paralyzes Elsinore but has yet to reconcile his opinions with a sense of political direction. The Arms Dealer, meanwhile, needs a wedge, a political actor that can split the country and drive conflict. The livelihood of an Arms Dealer depends on the ending of other livelihoods, on the sale of weapons to belligerents, and on perpetual conflict. The warmonger stays relevant and holds onto power only so long as he can continue to hawk his wares. Aware of Hamlet's discontent, faith, and political influence, the Arms Dealer takes advantage of an opportunity.

First contact between the two characters hardly seems insidious. “Who’s there? Who is it?” Hamlet calls into the night after hearing a twig crack or a pebble ping off a gravestone. “A friend,” the Arms Dealer retorts before Hamlet can see him (42). The interaction echoes the very first scene of the very first act of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. “Who’s there?” Bernardo calls into the darkness in Shakespeare’s text. He knows that a Ghost roams the castle ramparts at night, and anxiously anticipates the specter. The parallel between the scenes in *Hamlet* and The *Al-Hamlet Summit* is unmistakable: two overwhelmed men ask a murky figure to identify itself on a dangerous night. To Shakespeare’s guardsmen, the appearance of the roaming ghost implies an unpredictable, morbid political future. Horatio ominously foreshadows the Ghost’s impact: “And even like precurse of feared events/as harbingers preceding still the fates/And prologue to the omen coming on/Have heaven and earth together demonstrated/Unto our climatures and countrymen” (Shakespeare 1.1120-124). They know that the ghost will affect change, but wonder ‘whither Denmark?’ In 1.5 of *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, Hamlet also wants to identify what lies in the darkness, beyond his (political) vision.

The Arms Dealer differs from Shakespeare’s Ghost. He is a man made of flesh and blood, not an armored apparition. He does not represent (or even look like) the deceased King Hamlet. Finally, the Arms Dealer is visible to all other characters in the play, including Gertrude, who in Shakespeare’s play fails to see the Ghost. Yet parallels between Shakespeare’s Ghost’s and Al-Bassam’s Arms Dealer are extensive. When Hamlet and the Arms Dealer next meet, the latter is quick to admit that he “prefers[s] being in the shadows” (50). The spatial boundaries that constrict normal human beings do not really apply to the Arms Dealer; he moves across borders at will, and appears arbitrarily in obscure locations.[6] His sway over the political life of a

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[6] In an earlier draft of the play, the Arms Dealer describes *her* own wraithlike existence:

translocalized Middle Eastern state, like the Ghost's power over Denmark, is rooted in the faith that several characters have in him. The Arms Dealer/pseudo-Ghost is immune to extraction, assassination or coup – and moves between regimes courtesy of language fluency, shady ties, and the universal need for weapons. One day he visits Fortinbras, the next he shamelessly sells weapons to Claudius. The Arms Dealer makes himself visible to Hamlet in the desert and the graveyard, and then evades the Prince's suspicious question about being followed. Like the Ghost, the Arms Dealer finds rather than lets himself be found, and utilizes ghostlike mobility to exercise power. The Arms Dealer, then, is (loosely) analogous to Shakespeare's Ghost, and an audience familiar with *Hamlet* will understand Al-Bassam's character as a pseudo-Ghost. Such an audience will also remember that Hamlet has a tendency to follow ghosts' orders, and that this tendency allowed a ghostlike figure to drive Shakespeare's Elsinore to ruin over a grudge.

The Arms Dealer, too, has an agenda that he needs Hamlet to fulfill. In order to leverage the young Prince, the Arms Dealer conjures and performs monarch's memory. First he honors the dead King's legacy. "Your father was a great man. The world is not the same for his loss." This seems mere formality; they do, after all, meet by a regent's grave. Hamlet is confused though, since the mysterious apparition has not introduced himself. "Are you American?" Hamlet asks. Instead of revealing anything about his identity,[7] the Arms Dealer embodies the lionized former leader of Elsinore. "Vast Oceans of savagery consume the world, false authority towers from Mecca to Jerusalem, from Jerusalem to the Americas and man is on the brink of a

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"Glimpsed in the corridors of power, blurred in the backdrop of official state photographs, faceless at parties, anonymous at airports, trained as a banker, conversant in Pashtun, Arabic, Farsi, and Hebrew, feeding off desire: I am an Arms Dealer ("Summit")"She, then, exists in the same matrix as Hamlet Sr.'s Ghost (she is "glimpsed" and "blurred"), and exercises her power away from the spotlight/court.

[7] The Arms Dealer's nationality is never mentioned again, but I operate under the assumption that he is American

great precipice," the American bellows into the night. Hamlet immediately recognizes the words, since his father first uttered them ("Those are his words.") The Arms Dealer, thus, obliquely performs fatherhood for a character who, just moments earlier, had overtly asked for guidance and direction.

Ever the opportunist, the Arms Dealer hands Hamlet literature to fuel political transformation. Hamlet reads the leaflet and learns that Claudius killed Hamlet Sr. Somehow Hamlet continues to read aloud after learning of his father's murder, thereby divulging information that foreshadows the trajectory of Hamlet's character development. The People's Liberation Brigade (PLB), the organization responsible for the leaflet, promises to "avenge this sickening murder, and claim that "the evil forces of imperialism have found a willing agent in the figure of Claudius" (43). While the audience learns of Claudius' murder from Hamlet's mouth, the Arms Dealer is responsible for making the truth available to Hamlet. As in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, an ersatz father-figure reveals, to Hamlet, that he was murdered by Claudius, and then obliquely proposes a means to avenge the injustice.

The Arms Dealer's strategic performance in 1.5 embodies a second political actor. The quote that Hamlet attributes to King Hamlet is actually a translated excerpt from Sayyid Qutb's 1964 book *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq (Milestones),* a seminal work in Islamist political theory. The irony of an American warmonger quoting Qutb for political ends can not be overstated. The Arms Dealer represents the very "false authority" that Qutb derides. An ardent anti-imperialist, Qutb recognized an intellectual and cultural framework undergirded and apologized for western hegemony. "Qutb's critique of modernity arises out of a widely shared experience of colonialism and cultural imperialism whereby modernization and modern political thought were intimately intertwined with the experience of foreign domination" (Euben 8-9). Qutb, most of all, reveled in

the possibility of escaping European empire through autonomous and Islamic systems of governance. Although the Arms Dealer conjures Qutb/Hamlet Sr. in order to convince Hamlet to overthrow a tyrant, the American is not inspired by Qutb's vision of resistance and liberation. Although complicit, Claudius, contrary to the PLBs claims, is not the true agent of imperialism. The Arms Dealer is the puppet master; he pits Claudius and Hamlet against each by offering the former power and the latter revenge. The contradictory objectives embroil the unnamed state in a civil war, which allows the Arms Dealer to maintain his empire. In 5.1 these clashing goals, scripted by imperial business interests, result in a massacre. Fortinbras takes advantage of the resulting power vacuum and usurps the throne vacated by Claudius. A more direct (apparently Israeli) colonialism supplants, or at least supplements, the extant American hegemony. Qutb would turn in his grave if he knew that his words were mobilized to mold such a reality.

The short interactions between the Arms Dealer and Hamlet in 1.5 and 5.1 demonstrate how Al-Bassam places allegorical identities and ideologies in conversation with one another, and how this structure allows an audience to engage with analytically with thematized history. The Arms Dealer is a walking metaphor for contemporary American imperialism in the Middle East. The Arms Dealer's lack of accountability to boundaries, as well as his business interests (oil and arms) and tendency to co-opt tyrannical governments and resistance movements reflect his archetypical identity as empire/imperialist. He is also corporeal violence; he subsists on selling tools of death and *is* because others cease to be. El Hamamsy and Soliman point out that dictators dependent on American military aid are responsible for safeguarding American interests in the Middle East (7). Dependent on "petro-dollars," Claudius is an allegory for American-backed oligarchic government. Hamlet, meanwhile, resists the nexus of empire (the Arms Dealer) and local tyranny (Claudius). He is an allegory for political Islam and Islamist

groups – in Egypt, Algeria, Palestine, and Syria – that struggle against the near enemy (Claudius/self-serving dictatorship) to weaken the far enemy (empire). Transforming the characters into archetypes hinders the audience from identifying with them as individuals. Instead, characters represent accessible symbols that interact and speak to put a specific political spin on history.

The metaphorical interplay between Hamlet and the Arms Dealer implies that (American) empire often provokes violence and division to further objectives. Opportunistic US behavior and cooptation has been especially common in conflicts between Islamic movements and state governments. In the 1980s, in Afghanistan, the US funded a transnational array of anti-Soviet mujahedin fighters (including a young Saudi Prince by the name of Bin Laden) in a bid to counter their cold war rivals (Mamdani 20). When these fighters returned to their homes with weapons, CIA-training, and a vendetta against tyranny, the US sold weapons to Egyptian and Algerian state governments that promised to keep a lid on Islamic organization (Gerges 70). US technology and aid limit political self-determination in the name of imperial interests, and render laughable the struggle for self-determination.

The Arms Dealer's allusion to fate also represents the dishonest, orientalist narratives used to justify pursuits of imperial objectives. Islamist groups are maligned as irrational, pre-modern, and violent by dominant voices in western media. On a piece on the Iraq war, Thomas Friedman once claimed the Arab world was "broken, it seems, by 1,000 years of Arab-Muslim authoritarianism." Certain that Iraqis were intrinsically incapable of ruling, Friedman implied that it was America's duty to "crush the dark forces in Iraq and properly rebuild [the country]." He may as well have recited the White Man's Burden at the top of his lungs. The Arms Dealer's fatalistic reading of civil strife mirrors Friedman's argument. Attributing conflict to destiny not

only assumes that Arab leaders are not capable of thinking critically or acting decisively but also strategically ignores the means by which the Arms Dealer (and, for that matter, American belligerency in Iraq) actually begets conflict in the first place.

Whether Al-Bassam's "cross-cultural construction" succeeded in rendering the insidious cooptation's and evasions of empire is up for debate. A number of reviewers have taken the Arms Dealer's claims about fate at face value. According to Lyn Gardner, "Sulayman Al-Bassam's reworking of Shakespeare's play is a brilliantly simple theatrical conjuring trick that has Elsinore fitting the current explosive state of Middle East politics like a silk glove" (Gardner 20). Her position is even a step more deterministic than the Arms Dealer's political analysis: Gardner assumes that the inherent "explosiveness" of the Middle East *causes* the turmoil in Elsinore. According to Gardner's reading, the play mirrors reality rather than point out problematic power dynamics between postcolonial states and meddlesome American agents of empire. While not all reviews of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* demonstrate the failure of audiences to engage with political themes (see: Jafaar), Gardner's review indicates that Al-Bassam *Verfremdungeffekt* may have alienated certain viewers in counterproductive ways.

Case Study Two: Resistance

In 1.1 of *The Al Hamlet Summit*, Hamlet expresses outrage at the immoral state of affairs in Elsinore. "There are many more whores than in my father's time, he complains. Next he tells Gertrude to "take a stroll outside, look at the tall buildings, lit with neon; brothels, brothels" (33). Hamlet's assessment is partially a jibe at Gertrude, whom he despises for getting into bed with Claudius far too soon after Hamlet Sr.'s death. Alluding to brothels, Hamlet hopes, will make Gertrude feel guilty or uncomfortable. But Hamlet's is not just being petty. He is also providing commentary on the political state of affairs, as he sees them. The homeland is in decline.

Claudius' rule has unhinged a latent immorality that lay dormant – or was actively repressed – under Hamlet Sr. 'Whither Denmark?' Shakespeare's *Hamlet* wanted to know. Al-Bassam's Hamlet is "dazed by the stench of rot," outraged at a cultural shift and resultant political decline. He shudders at where his polity is heading. As in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the Prince believes that Gertrude's sexual indiscretions are central to Elsinore's state of decay. But Al-Bassam's Hamlet is far less interested in avenging his father's murder and micro-managing his mother's sex life than usurping the throne and setting the nation on an alternative course. Much later in the play, as Claudius prays for forgiveness to the God Petro-dollars, Hamlet – poised to shoot and avenge – speaks of "changing the geography of a conflict" and "firing bullets into flesh" (72). He contemplates states and bodies, not his father's legacy. He wants a dynamic future, not an ideal past or a stagnant present. His need to act is not personal, but political.

After Hamlet finishes his admonition of nation and family in 1.1, Laertes ironically welcomes his prince back home by asking Allah to "increase [Hamlet's] wages in heaven" (33). Laertes – having never left Elsinore – follows Hamlet's thinking: he sees the decay that Hamlet sees, and implies that setting a new course is worth martyrdom. The two young men connect for a second over a sad state of affairs, even if Hamlet's next statement is to implicate Laertes in immorality and decline ("And [your wages] in brothels, Laertes") (34). A freighted dialogue and a strained friendship emerge from Laertes and Hamlet's brief exchange in 1.1. The two characters are walking metaphors for divergent strains of anti-imperial resistance. Hamlet is an allegory for political Islam. Laertes, meanwhile, represents state or nation-oriented autonomy: he is nationalism. Hamlet and Laertes' conversation continues haphazardly throughout the play, and allows Al-Bassam to engage his audience in an allegorical meditation upon the nature of

imperialism and resistance, the limits of the nation, and the history/future of political thought in the Middle East.

Hamlet and Laertes agree that Elsinore is in peril, both from within and beyond its borders. But in 1.1 the external force is sensed rather than fully recognized. Neither young man is confident enough in his political worldview to identify imperialism as the prime source of turmoil – or to act in accordance with ideas of nationalist or Islamist thinkers. Hamlet does not recognize Claudius's relationship to imperialism until well after the Arms Dealer surreptitiously pushes him towards political Islam. Meanwhile, Laertes's time at the front helps fuels a love of nation. Initially both characters seem even to identify with Claudius' New Democracy, since they contribute to state dialogue and vote on key issues. A number of later scenes depict the two characters mature. Hamlet's radical transformation eradicates all ties between the Prince and Claudius' new regime. Initially, though, Hamlet and Laertes seem to buy into the New Democracy's understanding of homeland as a feminized body that must be protected. Their respective resistances are oriented against the immediate threat of Fortinbras and the latent danger of female sexuality

Hamlet and Laertes – as well as other politicians in *The Al-Hamlet Summit* – link Elsinore's penetration and decay to the female body. Gertrude's desire for Claudius disgusts Hamlet to no end. Ophelia's love for Hamlet is a source of stress for Laertes and Polonius, both of whom anxiously govern and influence her sex life. Male characters attempt to resist the political rot by taming the female body. Before he rushes off to "join the ranks of the valiant defenders of our nation's sovereignty," Laertes insists that Ophelia must "tame" her love (or lust) for Hamlet (38; 40). Laertes promises Ophelia to "tame it for you" in case she fails to avoid Hamlet (40). As he turns to political Islam, Hamlet voices disgust at his mother's sexuality and

seems to play a part in Ophelia's decision to wear a headscarf. Inversely, male characters believe that protecting the purity and traditional role of the female body strengthens social fabric. Members of the national committee, which includes Hamlet and Laertes, jointly decide to marry Ophelia and Hamlet before "seeds of scandal…are blasted to the wind" (39). Interestingly enough, Gertrude is the most adamant about uniting Hamlet and Ophelia in matrimony. Through state control of the female body, especially a traditional form of control (marriage), Elsinore's politicians hope to create a symbol of the New Democracy and "[a] sense of shared responsibility" (39). As Elsinore careens towards chaos and disunity, male leaders tie down the female body in an attempt to harness the state.

Hamlet and Laertes' anxieties about the purity of the female body echo the broader unease in Elsinore political penetration. To male leaders, the state is a body under siege from masculine external forces. Claudius speaks of "vigilant," "scurrying" enemies on the border (38). Laertes, back from the front, warns Claudius of a "15 mile column of Merkava and British Centurion tanks – three tanks abreast – moving towards at 15mph towards the border…as if Fortinbras's entire army was advancing as one giant armored centipede" (52). A militarized phallus approaches the body politic's apertures, thereby causing an anxiety that is not strictly political. Unease about the territorial-sexual integrity of Elsinore's land initially drove both Hamlet and Laertes to get involved in Elsinore's political life.

Hamlet's eventual disavowal of nationalism and the New Democracy is a result of recognizing how Claudius self-servingly deploys political anxieties to consolidate the regime's power. Claudius and Polonius insist that acting violently in the name of the state – waging war and quashing internal revolt – protects the besieged political body. A number of instances, though, demonstrate that the regime's/the body's violence against the Other is self-serving. In

3.1.1, when Polonius reads some propagandistic excerpts to the Arms Dealer: "The treacherous enemy are dwarves. They spit at the giant, but the giant picks them up and crushes them" (55). The body has a mind and a central nervous system, and the ability to protect itself against agitators. Most importantly, the body is not acting in the name of its constituents, but in its own interest. The New Democracy insists on regulating all facets of the body's inner life, and frames disunity as pathogenic. Polonius burns the Townships when opposition arises within the social body and represses the Other before s/he can transform the nation with his/her desires. Hamlet becomes increasingly aware of Claudius' self-serving grip on power and loses faith in national politics.

Hamlet and Laertes' ongoing – although oft interrupted – conversation depicts how an emerging cognizance of imperialism can lead to widely divergent reactions. Although both characters want self-determination for Elsinore, the strategies by which Hamlet and Laertes pursue autonomy forces them into conflict with one another. Act Four is watershed moment for Laertes and Hamlets' relationship. Hamlet kills Polonius and appears to be complicit in Ophelia's suicide bombing. Superficially the two deaths explain the culmination of the play. Laertes and Hamlet come to blows in 5.1. Laertes calls Hamlet a "bastard," "strikes" him, and never speaks directly to him again (81). Instead Laertes aligns himself with Claudius. Polonius' murder and Ophelia's suicide are sufficient fodder for a personal vendetta, but Hamlet is surprised at Laertes's political reaction. "Is this fidelity, Laertes? Standing next to the King in your father's very shoes – you are not the shadow of the dead, you are death's double," Hamlet asks his former friend (81). Al-Bassam's Hamlet can only see things in political terms, and therefore can not empathize with Laertes' anger and desire for vengeance. He is not driven by a desire for vengeance; he, rather, wants to usurp the throne and instate revolutionary governance.

Hamlet always assumed that Laertes also shared these sentiments, even if his imagined means to this end were different. By aligning with Claudius – the puppet of America, the tyrant, the corrupt lecher – Laertes has, in Hamlet's eyes, committed a cardinal sin.

Two arguments between Laertes and Hamlet show that the political disagreements between the characters had already become insurmountable by Act Three, that Hamlet and Laertes' political differences set them on course for collision long before Hamlet killed Polonius and drove Ophelia to suicide. In 3.1.2 Hamlet and Laertes discuss Claudius. Laertes calls him "Our supreme and sovereign leader," but also acknowledges the murderous excesses of his reign. He claims that "the People need a God," a strongman to match Fortinbras; if strength comes at the price of some self-determination, so be it. To Laertes, Claudius is an anti-imperial symbol and the only viable tool against Fortinbras' encroaching army. Hamlet's anti-regime stance, in contrast, is "political suicide: the strategy of an angry child." Moreover, Laertes establishes an oppositional understanding of belonging. Fortinbras – outside the nation's borders – is the "enemy" that must be countered to revitalize the nation. Most importantly, Laertes' interpretation of power dynamics ignores how powerful but shady entities such as the Arms Dealer perpetuate empire (56).

Hamlet rejects Laertes's reasoning in 3.1.2. Hamlet recognizes the long arms of empire within Elsinore and rubbishes any form of resistance steeped in the coopted logic of nationalism. Fortinbras' sable rattling does not faze Hamlet. "I want you with me here, Laertes, the real fight is here," Hamlet tells his friend. Claudius must be fought be all else. By burning townships to appease foreign investors Claudius has forsaken the social body and ceded autonomy to external agents of imperialism. The oppositional logic of nations to which Laertes subscribes is but a smokescreen. Fortinbras is an illusion of danger, an arbiter of anxiety who allows the far enemy

(the Arms Dealer) to maintain control over Claudius (the near enemy). Claudius, like Laertes, anxiously safeguards arbitrary national borders from the pathogenic invader. To maintain secure borders, Claudius requires tanks, airplanes, and grenades. Of course the Arms Dealer provides for security needs, at a cost. But he also arms Fortinbras and thereby fuels a conflict that promises an unending stream of dividends. As Hamlet becomes more radical, he ceases to worry about Fortinbras. Instead, Hamlet seeks cultural change and the forgetting of political vocabulary and logic that keeps Elsinore tied to imperial interests. Hamlet urges Laertes to focus on the near enemy, to understand Fortinbras' belligerency as a facade erected by empire. Hamlet does not realize that his own resistance is also coopted, that attempting to dethrone Claudius plays into the Arms Dealer's hand. Laertes fails to perceive the political complexities that Hamlet comes to recognize and remains committed to Claudius (56).

In 3.1.4, Hamlet again talks politics with Laertes. By this point the two young envision irreconcilable strategies. "The real enemy is here, in the palace, among us," Hamlet tells Laertes. The body politic is rotting from within. Claudius has set society on the wrong course. Immorality and a tacit approvable of global capitalism threaten the integrity of the state. The only antidote is internal reform through Islamic governance. He tries to show Laertes that the threat of Fortinbras is illusory. "The enemy on the border is the illusion they feed you, the illusion they want you to believe." Borders in the Middle East – drawn (often arbitrarily) by French and British mapmakers in the early twentieth century – create enemies where they do not exist. Hamlet recognizes that imperialism rests like dust on culture and political thought, and that nationalism and national boundaries are part of this legacy (58).

Laertes again fails to digest Hamlet's analysis. "There will be no nation to fight over unless we defeat Fortinbras," Laertes says. In 3.1.4 Laertes believes even more strongly in the

myth of nation, in the oppositional nature of national belonging. Fortinbras is an external pathogen that threatens illness for the social body. An Other lurks on the border, probing for weaknesses. Invasion marks a sort of rape and defending borders is tantamount to protecting sovereignty and national health. Laertes, like Hamlet, is opposed to empire. But unlike Hamlet – who recognizes that the nation as an idea that furthers empire's ability to divide and conquer – Laertes does not recognize the extent of the Arms Dealer's power over thought and action (58).

The exchange between Laertes and Hamlet in 3.1.4 is practically identical to their dialogue in 3.1.2. The argument again ends with one character admonishing the other for his blindness. The difference between the conversations lies in tone. Both men realize that their strategies are irreconcilable, but also understand that failure to find common ground spells certain doom. The urgent need for reconciliation forces both characters to compromise their stances, or at least to soften their rhetoric. "We'll have no nation to lose unless we destroy the rot that devours it from within," Hamlet tells his friend (58). Hamlet is not a nationalist. He usually speaks in broader strokes, of pan-Islamic unity, of anti-imperial resistance that also contests the borders imposed by an imperial past. Hamlet seems, for a desperate second, to shed his usual vocabulary and couch his argument in language that Laertes – the nationally oriented anti-imperialist – can understand. The two men have the same goals. They want sovereignty, as individuals and for their polity. The moment reeks of desperation. Hamlet wants to reconnect to the man who, in 1.1, shared his concerns and envisioned a similar future.

Hamlet fails to carve out sufficient middle ground for both men to stand on. Hamlet and Laertes suddenly find themselves on opposing sides of a political crisis. Laertes loyally stands by Claudius. Hamlet is uninterested in Fortinbras but refuses to further empower Elsinore's junta. Claudius, unwilling to tolerate dissent, marks Hamlet for annihilation. Laertes is a General in

Claudius' army, and therefore tasked with carrying out the order. Hamlet's watershed inability to reconcile their differences sows the seeds of destruction in Elsinore long before Polonius or Ophelia dies. Hamlet may recoil at seeing Laertes at Claudius' side in 5.1, but personal grievances only sped up the inevitable alliance. Hamlet and Laertes both understand that Elsinore is being slowly dismantled by empire but choose to fight different battles, battles that eventually pit them against one another.

Analogy between The *Al-Hamlet Summit* and Middle Eastern history is imperfect, not least because Al-Bassam's trans-localized setting is coupled with an attempt to represent "a composite of many Arab concerns that affect peoples from the Arabian Gulf to the Atlantic and beyond" ("Signifiers" 104). The play does not meditate upon a specific set of events, and instead conflates numerous conflicts between empire, nation, and political Islam. The Arms Dealer is a metaphor for 21st century American meddling as well as direct 20th century French and British colonialism. Laertes and Hamlet are sweeping metaphors for potent ideologies. Laertes, to some extent, represents numerous 20th and 21st century nationalisms, while Hamlet call for Islamic struggle echoes the rhetoric of movements in Palestine, Egypt, Algeria and beyond. Although vague, the allegorical dialogue between signifier-characters offers a meditation on the efficacy and limits of Middle Eastern anti-imperial resistance movements in the 20th and 21st century.

Faced with a lack of autonomy and a highly efficient imperial presence, Hamlet – representative of Political Islam – understands to eschew to resist tyrannical regimes. Laertes wants autonomy, too. But he does not resist, or not in a way that meaningfully challenges a system of power. Eventually Laertes aligns himself with empire. Hamlet and Laertes's doomed friendship delineates the limits of resistance and the means by which empire can crush the drive for autonomy. Neither character could ever have extracted the Arms Dealer from Elsinore.

Moreover, Hamlet's violent resistance against the regime and empire alienated him from Laertes and strengthened ties between the Arms Dealer and the entrenched Claudius. If anything, Hamlet's resistance consolidated the American's grip on Elsinore.

While Hamlet unknowingly plays into the Arms Dealer's plans, he *does* attempt to resist empire. Political Islam may not be an effective antidote against empire in the play, but it does provide the lens to understand the imperial relationships – between far enemy and near enemy, between capitalism and political bodies – that restrict the lives of postcolonial subjects. "Though he does not speak for Islamic fundamentalism or terrorist violence, Al- Bassam shows them as the inevitable consequences of an alliance between native Arab totalitarianism and the economic machinations of the West" (Holderness and Loughrey 20). The allegorical discussion between political Islam and nationalism – two forms of resistance to empire – forces a western audience to reconceive to look at political history through an analytical lens that is not normatively orientalist.

The Al-Hamlet Summit does not propose a conclusion about political history or effectively resisting empire. Al-Bassam's commentary on resistance is descriptive, not prescriptive. The play humanizes and illuminates political Islam – an ideology that media and political rhetoric has rendered irrational and pre-modern – but also demonstrates ample ambivalence about the ideology. Al-Bassam does not apologize for violence in the name of political Islam. Ophelia's suicide is tragic, divisive and ultimately fruitless, not glorious. Hamlet's transformation to political Islam is not cast as a viable mode of resistance but as a trajectory followed by a rational actor. Rather than perpetuate ideas about the inherent barbarism of Islamic political movements, however, the playwright demonstrates that anti-imperial intent and a nuanced analytical framework undergird political Islam.

Case Study Three: Elsinore's Elite and Cultural Colonialism

The Arms Dealer interacts with every inhabitant of Elsinore. Each of these relationships comes with a unique, allegorical power dynamic. Polonius and Claudius are corrupt, vulnerable statesmen on the defensive. "The pipeline is on the rocks" due to domestic uprisings, and Fortinbras is waiting on the border (52). The two politicians rely on the Arms Dealer for hard power assets. The Arms Dealer's shipments of "500 howitzers, 12 B-2's, 4 stealths, 5 submarines, 500 centurions" props up a regime that has little claim to legitimacy and is guilty of human rights abuses under international law (76). Polonius and Claudius have everything to gain from a cordial relationship with empire; the New Democracy depends on weapons to crush the restive Shi'a communities in the country's south. Yet the real winner in the relationship is the Arms Dealer, as Claudius' dependency allows the American to act with utter impunity and harvest profits. The Arms Dealer, aware that Elsinore has alternative source of security, exploits Claudius' weak bargaining position. The American starts selling weapons to Fortinbras and thereby starts a lucrative arms race.

In 2.2, the Arms Dealer lets slip that he has recently met with Fortinbras (46). The revelation shocks Claudius. "Who's this?" he asks distraughtly, questioning the American's loyalty. Claudius realizes that he is being double-crossed, that his political interests – stability, sovereignty, and survival – are threatened by the Arms Dealer's greed. Suddenly Claudius pushes back against a manipulative system. But pushback from the elite of a dependent state does not faze empire. Empire is multi-pronged, flexible, and well aware that hard power assets are fallible. Empire does not maintain hegemony solely through the exchange of petro-dollars for arms. Another currency is traded, a cultural one that the Arms Dealer dangles in front of the two

leaders' noses in order to extract favors. He entices Claudius and Polonius with promises of modernity and global prestige. Sensing resistance, the American salesman changes tack by targeting Claudius' Achilles heel: cultural self-perception. "He's so endearing, so forward looking, so modern somehow," the Arms Dealer says of Fortinbras, in response to Claudius' interrogation (46). Insinuated in this portrait is that Claudius' – and, for that matter, the country over which Claudius rules – is not endearing, forward looking, or modern.

The Arms Dealer's cultural critique has currency. In 1.1, Elsinore's leaders proudly usher in the New Democracy; Claudius speaks of "[riding] on the crest of a great wave, born of the will of the people and needs of History" (34). Polonius loudly claims that "the press, the people, the world awaits" this new polity (36). Buzzwords abound: progress, democracy, and modernity. Corrupt and violent as they may be, the local elite has a vision of the future: one in which Elsinore's cultural and political vitality is recognized on the international stage, one in which entrance is granted and historical power dynamics – between empire and colony – are banished from memory. The Arms Dealer, in 2.2, demonstrates the power of naming. By exercising (abusing) his power over the definition of modernity, the American also threatens to rob Claudius of an imagined future. Claudius fears headlines that brand his kingdom as traditional, pre-modern, or backward. These buzzwords have currency, too. International institutions exclude 'pre-modern' states from power structures, for example. The labels, in other words, help reproduce and maintain hierarchies within the Westphalian system, hierarchies that powerful states claim do not exist. Claudius anxiously attempts to dispel the Arms Dealer's insinutated pre-modernity; "I'll send you a crate of – what is it you like – Bordeaux?" the King stutters in a panic after the American's remarks in 2.2 (47). Next Claudius promises to throw a party for his

guest of honor, thereby enviously preforming the role of a western elite, of a ‘modern’ leader in a ‘modern’ land.

Polonius may not be king, but he is heavily invested in the New Democracy. He burns townships and tortures dissidents when they threaten the regime; his son becomes a general courtesy of nepotism; his daughter is to marry Hamlet. Unsurprisingly Polonius is uneasy when a bomb disrupts the opening of Parliament. In 3.1.1, he discusses Elsinore’s instability with the Arms Dealer:

> *Arms Dealer*: Parliament opened with a bang!
> *Polonius*: Listen to this (Opens a folder and reads.) “The treacherous enemy are dwarves. They spit at the giant, but the giant picks them up and crushes them. They are traitors, pirates, and mercenaries.”
> *Arms Dealer*: We call them terrorists.
> *Polonius*: I like this word. Will you write it for me? (Offering him a pen.) (55)

The exchange sheds light on the interplay between naming and power, on how imperial control over language consolidates control over bodies. Part of the body politic does not recognize a farcical parliament, since the parliament conveniently hides tyranny behind a façade of democracy; hence the bombing. Polonius understands the bombing as a threat to his regime, and frames the problem in the antiquated body politic metaphor. His device is clunky and ineffective though. If anything, the dwarves are sympathetic and the giant vulgar.

The Arms Dealer provides an alternative name for Polonius’ problem: terrorism. Polonius eagerly adopts the new vocabulary, and thereby erases an inconvenient gray area. A terrorist is irrational, pre-modern, beyond the pale, has no political objectives rooted in experience. He or she is driven by nihilistic desires and an apocalyptic worldview. A terrorist does not empire, but modernity itself. A terrorist is subhuman, and state actions against terrorists are not subject to moral scrutiny. Polonius embraces and deploys the new word because doing so empowers the New Democracy. A state fighting a war on terror can bend the laws and abuse its powers in the

name of security and modernity. A state embroiled in a civilizational battle against nihilistic terrorists can start dual wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, deploy drones against faceless targets, and keep suspects for years without charge. "Terrorist! Excellent word, much money in this word," an exuberant Polonius reiterates to the Arms Dealer (55). Both men will benefit from Polonius's reframing of rhetoric. The term protects the Arms Dealer imperial interests – exploitative oil projects and arms sales – for which Polonius will be generously rewarded with limited local power and averted eyes.

The eagerness with which Polonius adopts "terrorist" in the aforementioned exchange is misleading, and indicates the extents to which the politician will go to curry favor with the Arms Dealer. Contrary to what his reaction would indicate, Polonius does not actually learn the word from the American. In 2.1 Polonius accuses Ophelia, who is wearing a headscarf, of looking like a terrorist. He asks his daughter if she knows "how many photographers are out there?" and attempts to dissuade her from wearing the headscarf (45). Polonius, like Claudius, has a vision of Elsinore that corresponds with western notions of modernity. Symbols associated with Islam threaten to compromise the New Democracy's progressive sheen.

In 2.3, Polonius again demonstrates that he is aware of the gravity that accompanies using "terrorist" as a label. Upon hearing Hamlet's poetry ("When Hell fires consume the light/And Paradise is brought nearer this earth/On that day, know that I am looking for you") Polonius begins to gauge the scope of the Prince's political ambition. "Note the yearning for violent and comprehensive change to the world order. I have studies that will elucidate further on the links between this sort of fantasy and terrorist activities" (48). Polonius correctly senses that Hamlet doesn't just seek revenge for his father's murder. Hamlet's political objectives are far broader: regime change, Islamic government, and an end to imperial meddling. Conjuring empirical

(modern) studies, Polonius brands Hamlet as a terrorist to dehumanize him and discredit his political objectives. Branding Hamlet as a terrorist empowers Polonius to take whatever action necessary to safeguard Elsinore. The Arms Dealer, in 3.1.1, teaches Polonius to use the word that the politician already knows. Polonius flatters the American and performs the role of a submissive student. Why, though, does Polonius play dumb and purposely mispronounce "terrorist" three times? Maybe Polonius is trying to establish a cordial relationship with a powerful ally. Maybe he thinks that empire likes to be flattered.

Either way, his spiel backfires. Polonius's decision to adopt imperial vocabulary robs him of the autonomy to define contentious political conflicts. The Arms Dealer uses Polonius' pen to write down "terrorist," so that the latter can better pronounce the word. When their conversation comes to a close, the American pockets the pen and exits. Polonius is dumbfounded: "My pen…Terrorist" he calls after the petty thief (56). Aside from metaphorically castrating Polonius, the Arms Dealer's theft of the pen also concerns the relationship between political power and truth/narration. Simply put, the pen is a symbol for writing, communication, and the accessibility of subjectivity. Having a pen allows Polonius to express himself, to message his polity, to define conflicts as he sees fits. When the Arms Dealer steals the pen he also symbolically denies Polonius the right to name and interpret contentious issues. Once the bombing of parliament is labeled an act of terror it ceases to be all else.

A state can only respond to "terrorist" violence with anti-terrorist violence. In 2006, Bin Laden proposed a truce between Al Qaeda and the United States; Dick Cheney rejected the idea outright and claimed that "we don't negotiate with terrorists" (Fattah). A state can not address the political objectives of a 'terrorist' group. Instead, a state must focus solely on expunging

subhuman terrorists. Whitbeck describes how states label opposition groups "terrorists" to excuse the use indiscriminate violence:

> It is increasingly understood that the word "terrorist", which has no agreed definition, is so subjective as to be devoid of any inherent meaning and that it is commonly abused by governments and others who apply it to whomever or whatever they hate in the hope of demonizing their adversaries, thereby discouraging and avoiding rational thought and discussion and, frequently, excusing their own illegal and immoral behavior.

Polonius similarly integrates imperial vocabulary into his own political vernacular to demonize Hamlet and the PLB. However, doing so also closes off avenues to peace and reconciliation. Negotiating with Hamlet, who has legitimate political concerns, is rendered impossible by a label. The impossibility of internal dialogue within Elsinore suits empire just fine, though. The Arms Dealer can continue to sell weapons to all belligerents.

Aside from reframing dialogue and language for his own ends, the Arms Dealer buffers his influence over Claudius by taking advantage of the King's deeply embedded need for cultural acceptance. Claudius lengthy monologue in 3.7 reveals the extent to which he worships a cultural deity – which he endearingly labels the "God of petro-dollars – and the depths he will plumb to gain entrance into an oppressive global elite. Claudius' speech in 3.7 of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* is roughly analogous to the confession scene (3.3) in Shakespeare's *Hamle*t. Claudius, in Shakespeare's text, admits to having murdered King Hamlet: "O, my offence is rank it smells to heaven/It hath the primal eldest curse upon't/A brother's murder" (3.3.36-8). Claudius expresses guilt, regret, and asks for forgiveness, even if his final words ("My words fly up, my thoughts remain below/Words without thoughts never to heaven go") seem to belie the authenticity of his performance (Shakespeare 3.3.97-8). The scene humanizes the fratricidal despot. Even an eavesdropping Hamlet is moved enough to delay killing Claudius, albeit out of fear that Claudius's may be sent to heaven for his honesty. In *The Al-Hamlet Summit,* Claudius's

monologue is neither a confession nor sympathetic. If anything, the king explicitly dehumanizes himself by emphasizing his identity's inextricable tie to violence, extortion, and power.

Whereas Shakespeare's Claudius prays to a conventional God, Al-Bassam's reincarnation of the character begs at the feet of global capital. "Oh God: Petro dollars. Teach me the meaning of petro dollars," he begs after offering the deity an open "briefcase full of dollars" (70). The petro dollar is an amorphous, misleading metaphor. Claudius does not simply want to be rich, and oil is only tangentially connected to his deity. Later in the speech Claudius actually admits to "forgoing billions to worship you" (the you being God/petro dollars). The deity that Claudius worships is, rather, an "All Seeing…All knowing aster of Worlds, Prosperity and Order," an omniscient and temporal structure of power that controls the world (70). Rather than money, Claudius wants the influence and stature that accompanies wealth for some. He seeks inclusion into a power structure, into a global elite that defines the vocabulary of power – that mints words such as "modern" and terrorist – and thereby controls the worlds. Like the Arms Dealer, Claudius wishes to become fully unaccountable: an agent of imperialism, a disciple of capitalism, a "partner for your gluttony and filth" (71). He asks to be recognized, and – rather than admit to *just* one case of fratricide – lists all the atrocious acts he has committed. The "mounds of human bodies, sacrifices to your glory" are provided as evidence of his suitability, as proof that he lacks scruples (71).

The concrete political commentary that underlies Claudius' imagery-laden, hyper-figurative monologue crystallizes in the speech's penultimate paragraph. In a final ploy to leverage entry into an imagined imperial elite, Claudius aligns his political objectives with existing institutions of international politics:

> Your Plutonium, your loans, your democratic filth that drips off your ecstatic crowds – I want them all, oh God; I want your Vaseline smiles and I want your pimp-ridden

> plutocracies; I want your world-shafting bank; I want it shafting me now – offer me the shafting hand of redemption – oh God, let us be dirty together, won't you? (71)

Claudius wants plutonium, loans, and democracy, the items to which powerful states and international bodies attach strings and thereby meddle in the affairs of weaker countries. He wants to get "shafted" by a World Bank that provides loans at the price of budgetary sovereignty in order to, decades down the line, shaft the leaders of other countries seeking inclusion. He wants to pull Elsinore into a debt spiral by taking out loans that can never be repaid to finance unattainable and illogical state benchmarks – infrastructure, growth rates, political organization, military power – set unreachably high by the institutions that give out the loans. He wants, in other words, to be hoodwinked, cheated and stripped of agency.

And why does he want to be included in a system that treats him as an expendable vessel for profits? His need for acceptance is rooted in a sense of inferiority tied to a hierarchical understanding of culture, belonging, and modernity. The final line of the speech reveals that the Arms Dealer has colonized Claudius' very soul. "Without you [God/petro dollars], I cannot bear to be myself, cannot, cannot bear it," Claudius moans (71). He envisions a world with a center, and positions himself away from said center. "Agents of imperialism," like the Arms Dealer in 2.2, construct this center by dangling notions of modernity in front of postcolonial leaders. Maybe Claudius, unlike Hamlet, does not recognize this insidious process. Maybe his bearings are lost within a haze of cognitive dissonance. Either way, the tyrant internalizes empire and thereby becomes the Arms Dealer's tool.

Case Study Four: Gender, Empire, and the Limits of the Walking Metaphor?

Whereas Polonius, Claudius, Laertes and Hamlet are primarily interested in accruing or resisting the abstract, politico-cultural "goods" that empire offers to a polity, Gertrude and

Ophelia must wrestle with the corporeal interests of empire. The Arms Dealer is interested in the physical bodies of female characters, and abuses his power for sexual purposes. Both Ophelia and Gertrude resist imperia power. Unlike Hamlet and Laertes, who focus on protecting borders and socio-political bodies from military and cultural invasions, the two female characters fight back against the Arms Dealer's designs on their physical bodies. The tactics that the two characters deploy to protect themselves from the empire's lust are direct and efficient: Ophelia stabs back while Gertrude flatters the Arms Dealer to gain access to weapons and surveillance technology.

In 3.3, Ophelia meets with the Arms Dealer to purchase a bomb intended for Claudius. The interaction between the two characters provides insight into gendered sexual aesthetics that underlie the process by which individuals are drawn into empire's orbit. Their conversation wavers between violence and desire:

> *Ophelia*: Are you the devil?
> *Arms Dealer*: Are you attracted to me, young lady?
> *Ophelia*: If I am?
> *Arms Dealer*: Have you ever been with a man before? Alone in the dark?
> *Ophelia*: *(Silence.)*
> *Arms Dealer*: You are trembling, come closer.
> *Ophelia*: Lean your face towards me, close your eyes.
> (*She pulls out a knife.)* (64)

The physical/sexual contact that the Arms Dealer seeks is not simply carnal. Sex between Ophelia and the Arms Dealer would signal the former's rejection of resistance, and her acceptance of empire's unaccountability. The American wants to create another Claudius, another obedient mind. Like Laertes, he wants to tame Ophelia's resistance to norms and power dynamics. Empire's attempted penetration of a female political body, then, is an example of means rather than ends.

Ophelia's resistance is also more concerned with her political body than an abstract body politic. Ophelia fights back against the Arms Dealer's sexual with equally penetrative means.. Although she cannot overpower him, Ophelia, unlike Hamlet, finds weakness in the Arms Dealer's lust and hunger for power. Ophelia uses language to trick the Arms dealer. "If I am" does not indicate concrete sexual interests, but Ophelia knows that the lecherous Arms Dealer will read into the vacuum. He interprets lust, and drops his guard; the Arms Dealer takes a risk to conquer a (political) body. Ophelia builds on his misplaced trust; "Lean your face towards me, close your eyes," she tells him. He obliges and only narrowly avoids being skewered. That Ophelia's blade fails to inflict damage is unimportant. Ophelia's deceptive strategy produces the only moment in *The Al-Hamlet Summit* that the Arms Dealer is genuinely vulnerable. Hamlet's resistance movement is coopted from inception, and plays into the Arms Dealer's plans. Ophelia, meanwhile, uses empire's lust for (sexualized) power over female bodies to gain the leverage to stab back.

Gertrude seems to enjoy a cordial rapport with the warmonger. Like her husband, the Queen values the hard power assets that the Arms Dealer can provide; like Ophelia, Gertrude's sexualized body plays a large part in achieving political goals. In 3.1.3 – the only scene in which the two characters are onstage alone together – the Arms Dealer directly asks Gertrude if he can provide her with some weapons or security services. "You're so cavalier. I don't want to trouble you, but I have a farm in the South – my private retreat. It needs some work and I was wondering if you might –," Gertrude responds politely (57). Her invitation is simply a precursor to actually discussing business. She wants her seaside mansion reinforced, buffered, made secure from rebels and unwelcome intruders. Gertrude's close ties to Claudius regime maker her vulnerable to violence – especially in the rebel-held south. Yet the Arms Dealer has also intruded upon

Gertrude's privacy; he shows Gertrude some photos of the property, in which the Queen looks magnificent in her "natural state." Although shocked at the Arms Dealer's voyeuristic betrayal of trust, Gertrude senses an opportunity. She allows the Arms Dealer to keep the nude photos and again invites him to stay at her seaside resort with her. The job offer is sweetened by an oblique hint at a romantic/sexual getaway. The lecherous Arms Dealer is excited by the prospect – "I smell [the sea] from here" – and agrees to provide his service: protection (57).

Gertrude does not fight against empire's injustice. Her interests are aligned with those of her husband, who extorts and murders his constituents to please the Arms Dealer. Gertrude only needs the Arms Dealer protect the eroding New Democracy. Yet, like Ophelia, Gertrude uses her politicized-sexualized body to achieve political objectives. Empire has a blind spot: lust. Empire's lust is not purely sexual. Rather, the Arms Dealer and Claudius fetishize power, especially the power to act violently. In his pseudo-confession in 3.7, Claudius admits to adoring "the stench of rotting peasants gassed with your technology" (71). When Ophelia asks for a bomb in Arabic ("Qumbila"), the Arms Dealer hears the word 'kiss' ("Qubla") (64-65). Female characters manipulate empire by taking advantage of an Achilles Heel. No male character is able to force the hand of empire this way. Yet, whether the Arms Dealer is aware of this weakness is unclear. He prevents Ophelia from stabbing him. He installs the necessary surveillance and defense mechanisms in Gertrude's mansion, but presumably for a profit. Is he really caught blind-sided, or is he playing dumb in order to elicit a reaction?

Extra-textual details complicate the gendered relationship between resistance and empire. *The Al-Hamlet Summit* does not exist in definitive form. My textual analysis thus far has been derived from the 2006, English-language version of the play published by the University of Hertfordshire Press. However, the play exists in at least four alternate incarnations; one of these

versions, an Arabic language text, was also published in the aforementioned 2006 book. The Arms Dealer's gender transforms drastically across the numerous versions of *The Al-Hamlet Summit*. Additionally, details included in the published versions – information on the play's production history as well as photographs of stage productions – further confound the Arms Dealer's identity.

Unlike the majority of characters in *The Al-Hamlet Summit,* the Arms Dealer is not an adapted Shakespearean creation. He has not accrued centuries of stage history; he has not been romanticized and psychoanalyzed by preeminent literary and cultural critics. He is not a literary or cultural symbol in the mold of Hamlet or Ophelia. Al-Bassam's only original character enters the stage baggage-less, surrounded by question marks that do not dissipate by the play's end. Possibly the most confounding questions concern the character's gender. The English-language version of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* published in 2006 indirectly genders the Arms Dealer. In an attempt to extract a kiss from her, the American asks Ophelia whether she's "ever been with a man before? Alone in the dark?" (64). The question's wording implies that the Arms Dealer is man. But the complicated stage history of the play renders such text-based assumptions about the Arms Dealer's gender meaningless. The 'Production History' page of the book shows that Al-Bassam has cast the Arms Dealer as both male and female (26-27). In the Arabic-language production, a Nigel Barrett (who also played Claudius in the earlier English-language productions) played the Arms Dealer. In the English-language version of the play, which premiered at the 2002 Edinburgh International Fringe Festival, Marlene Kaminsky performed the role.

The inclusion of photographs in the published text also complicates Al-Bassam's gendering of the role. The English-language text is peppered with photos from the stage

production directed by Al-Bassam. Strangely, though, the English-language section of the published play contains only photos from the Arabic-language production. Nigel Barrett's reoccurring face implicitly reinforces the text's meek gendering of the character. Marlene Kaminsky, the original female Arms Dealer in English-language performances, isn't pictured. The Arabic-language text, strangely enough, contains no photos at all, whether of the English- or Arabic-language productions. Al-Bassam's drafting process also indicates that the Arms Dealer underwent a transformation at some point in the play's genealogy. In an earlier, unpublished English-language draft of the play published online by Al-Bassam in 2004, the Arms Dealer is female. "It's not often I have the pleasure of entertaining intelligent females," Gertrude tells her American friend in 3.1, as they plan their vacation to the southern seaside ("The Al-Hamlet Summit" 99). When Ophelia buys a bomb from the Arms Dealer, the American again makes a sexual advance but does not identify as a man (101).

The Arms Dealer, thus, started out as a female character. In the first performances of the play, a woman named Marlene Kaminsky played the role. Which script she used is unclear, but presumably her character was still explicitly female. When the Arabic-language version of the play premiered in Tokyo in 2004, the Arms Dealer, played by Nigel Barrett, was unequivocally male. When exactly the transformation took – and what factors influenced Al-Bassam to make the change – I have not been able to determine. Al-Bassam did not only stick with this decision, but attempted to eradicate earlier, feminine representations of/metaphors for empire. The published English-language text uses photographs from the Arabic-language performance to cement the Arms Dealer's masculinity or, alternatively, to hide the femininity of an allegory for empire.

Conclusion: Instability and the Limits of Textual Analysis

The relationship between female characters and the Arms Dealer strain the limits of what textual analysis can reveal about *The Al-Hamlet Summit*. Al-Bassam does not explain why he decides to subtly change the Arms Dealer's gender over the course of the play's development. As a matter of fact, Al-Bassam even seems to have engaged in a process of hiding his decision to cast empire as a female character in earlier drafts of the play. To some extent, changing realities on the ground must have inflected the playwright's editing process. Sulayman Al-Bassam wrote his Arab Shakespeare Trilogy in response "the events and currents that informed the period between 2001 and 2011" ("Debris" 126). *The Al-Hamlet Summit* offers western audiences a way to engage with post-9/11 orientalism. But orientalism is not a static concept, and in the first decade of the twenty-first century a new American empire was built upon anxieties about Arabs, Muslims, and political Islam. The Arms Dealer transformed into a male allegory as American actions in the Middle East became more belligerent, as rhetoric grew increasingly polarized and uncompromising. Maybe Al-Bassam's rendered empire masculine in response to what he perceived as normatively masculine empire building. Alternatively, Al-Bassam may have noted that the resistance of Arab women to American and European militarism differed markedly from the political action of men.

Al-Bassam's numerous rewrites of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* have not been fully documented, which confines the efficacy of textual analysis. While Litvin also notes the significance of the Arms Dealer's re-gendering, she is equally unsure about the decision's context ("Signifiers 119). Speculating on the significance of Al-Bassam's decision to turn a female allegory for empire into a man without information about a motivating event, or even a date, will only yield speculative answers. The case of the Arms Dealer is not unique. Al-Bassam

has written extensively about his tendency to edit and tinker with works, but rarely explains his edits. *The Al-Hamlet Summit* was published in 2006, but existed in numerous textual and performed incarnations prior to publication. Aside from the published English and Arabic versions, Al-Bassam directed at least three other English-language editions of the play between 2001 and 2004. Al-Bassam has also written about his constant directorial tampering. During the play's travels across Europe and Asia, the director regularly rewrote scenes on the fly and altered language in translated supertitles. The playwright's editing process was also inflected by feedback from reviewers and audiences. According to Al-Bassam "there were shows when it felt like the piece served to reaffirm general impressions of an over stereotyped region without enabling audiences to get beyond their ignorance" ("Debris" 132). *The Al-Hamlet Summit's* primary objective is to challenge the orientalist assumptions of western audiences; when the goal was compromised by the text or performance, Al-Bassam amended his work.

The Al-Hamlet Summit's instability as a text is also the result of Al-Bassam attempt to avoid being labeled as a native informant. In 2004, the playwright translated the play into Arabic in response to critics who felt that the play reifies an understanding of the Arab Other and excluded Arabs from providing feedback. Although Al-Bassam claims that an "imagined Arab spectator…led [him] through the rewrite of the play," Litvin highlights that even the Arabic-language version of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* is not intended for Arab audiences ("Signifiers" 114). Unburdened by a need to be accessible to western audiences, the Arabic-language text "heightens the critique of the West" (ibid 119). Yet, after premiering in Tokyo in 2004, the play went on a lengthy tour of Europe and Asia that did not include a stop in a single Arabic-speaking country.

The Al-Hamlet Summit is an unstable text, a meditation on the 21st century nexus between empire and orientalism that evolved along with its subject. Al-Bassam has directed the play in eight countries, two languages, using at least five alternatives texts. Although *The Al-Hamlet Summit* does not exist in a definitive form, Al-Bassam's five year undertaking culminated in a 'final' version of the text published, in 2006, by the University of Hertfordshire Press. Using the familiarity of Shakespeare's narratives as well as accessible allegories for political ideologies and identities, the 2006 version of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* responds to a strand of Orientalism that emerged from the aftermath of 9/11. While nuances in Al-Bassam's argument about empire and resistance shifted in response to changing realities on the ground between 2001 and 2006, the play's primary objective was always to illuminate humanity where Western audiences have been taught to see barbarism.

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