Multicultural Shakespeare:
Translation, Appropriation and Performance vol. 27 (42), 2023
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-8530.27.05

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Shakespeare Studies in Iran: The British Knight for Persia[1]

Abstract: Shakespeare's travels into Persia started in the middle of the nineteenth century when modern socio-political forces and the need for a powerful army were fomenting important changes in the traditional structure of government, production, and culture alike. Shakespeare appeared in Persia at a time when the country was experiencing a fundamental transition from older traditions into a western-like government, infrastructure, education, and ideas. Shakespeare was important to this process in two ways. He was enlisted to enrich the cultural property of the country and therefore became ensconced in the educational system. Perhaps more importantly, his plays were used to critique the ruling political system and the prevailing habits of the people. *Hamlet* has always been a favorite play for the translators and the intellectuals because it starts with regicide and ends with murdering a monarch and replacing him with a just king. *Othello*, another favorite, was frequently retranslated partly because there were similar themes in Persian culture with which readers could easily connect. Thus, Shakespeare became a Persian Knight and moved from one historical era to another to function as a mirror to reflect the aspirations of the elite, if not those of the common folk. This paper traces Shakespeare's steps in Persia chronologically, expounding the socio-political context in which Shakespeare and his plays operated not only within the context of academia, but also without in society amongst the people and the elites as political allegories to sidestep censorship and to attack the despotic monarchs and ruling power.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Shakespeare Studies, Modern Theatre, Persia/Iran, Qajar Dynasty, Constitutional Revolution, Pahlavi Dynasty, Censorship, 1979 Revolution, Islamization

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[1] I would like to thank my friends without whose invaluable help this paper would not have been completed: Dr Abdullah Bageri Hamidi, Dr Asgar Izadi Jeiran, Banafsheh Ansari, Mojtaba Motamedi, Masoud Shahri, and Shahin Maaleki.

Overview

> It would seem as if it were yesterday when Gholam-Hossein Saedi's *Othello in Wonderland* was acted out abroad. Saedi had pictured the state cultural monitoring and censorship, as well as Islamization of everything in the Islamic republic [of Iran] in the form of a play. The film of the performance was brought into Iran. Then Mr. Khatami [a mullah] was the Minister of [the Ministry of Culture and Islamic] Guidance. One of the characters in the play also was the Minister of [the Ministry of Culture and Islamic] Guidance who was interpreting [*Othello*'s text] and enacting odd orders. One or two consultants were accompanying him. We were joking with Mr. Khatami that the play mockingly displays him. He replied: "No, it refers to Moadikhah, the former Minister, because the person who plays the role has a white turban on his head and mine is black!"[2]

Located on the 'Silk Road', Persia, now called Iran, has continuously acted as a crossroads between East and West. Iranian people have always welcomed other cultures and freely adapted whatever they considered useful and, therefore, "an eclectic cultural elasticity has been said to be one of the key defining characteristics of the Persian [Iranian] spirit and a clue to its historic longevity" (Milani, *Lost Wisdom: Rethinking Modernity in Iran* 15).[3] During the Qajar dynasty (1789-1925) Persia first became exposed to the industrialized west and its cultures and languages, which initiated a unique period in its modern history. Christophe Balay and Michel Cuypers claim, "by the end of the 19th century Iranians were exposed to a movement that had no counterpart in their history before: the flow of Western Culture" (7). William Shakespeare's importance in this cultural interchange is not surprising. Shakespeare's constant journeys along the Silk Road between his homeland and the Middle East and Asia for the last four centuries are by now well-known. Shakespeare who never travelled abroad in real life was an important witness to the crucial social and political changes in Iran. Since the late nineteenth century Shakespeare's name and words have magically evolved and endlessly mutated, constantly reinvented to fit the rapidly changing Iranian cultural and political context. Throughout the turbulent modern history of Iran, Shakespeare has evolved to meet the social needs for change and

[2] Mohammad-Ali Abtahi's memoir, Vice President of Mohammad Khatami for Legal and Parliamentary Affairs (2 September 2001 – 12 October 2004), mentioned in the following website: https://www.isna.ir/news/8311-00954/. Accessed 12 May 2021.

[3] Professor Peter Avery claims that, from Herodotus onwards, "Iranian adaptability and quickness to borrow from others have frequently been commented on. But rarely has this been done with enough emphasis on the original genius and absolute and unchanging characteristics distinctly Iranian, to make "borrowing fresh, hitherto unthought-of development, mere imitation being out of the question" (qtd. in Partovi 30).

evolution, making him firmly entrenched not just in modern Iranian art, literary history and education, but also as an important political touchstone.

Shakespeare has taken different roles in successive periods in contemporary Iran, shifting according to the political motives on the ground. Even in post-revolutionary Iran, where we might expect that English as "the language of the 'enemies', the United States of America (a.k.a. 'the Great Satan'), and its closest ally, the United Kingdom" (Borjian, *English in Post-Revolutionary Iran: From Indigenization to Internationalization* xiii) and all the related symbols of the western culture and literature would have been severely curtailed, Shakespeare accomplished his mission successfully, becoming institutionalized in the Iranian cultural and educational spheres. However, despite the fact that "one of the most prevalent cases of countering global forces and Westernized versions of modernity and development today is the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI)" (Garcia ix), the result of all these complex and frequent ebbs and flows with regard to English and Shakespeare in Iran is that indigenized, and adapted English and Shakespeare co-exist today.

Shakespeare Meets the Qajar Dynasty (1789-1925)

Shakespeare Studies in Iranian education has always mirrored cultural change and revolution. Not surprisingly, Shakespeare's name and works in Iran first appear in the diaries and memoirs of elites and intellectuals. The Persians' first encounter with Shakespeare as one of the influential figures in the European theatre was through the travel notes of Mirza Saleh Shirazi[4] who, for the first time, wrote Shakespeare's name in Persian after apparently attending "a performance of Shakespeare's *King Lear* at Covent Garden" (Ganjeh 91). In his *Travelogue* on 16 June 1816, Mirza Saleh writes a succinct history of England and the Elizabethan era, then he points out that: "Shakespeare is one of the well-known poets of the [Elizabethan] era who has appeared in that era" (*Travelogues* 349). As early as the nineteenth century, Shakespeare was familiar to some Persian travellers; but his works had yet to permeate academic and educational culture. This is largely because the concept of 'theatre' was not yet well-known or received among the Iranian public. Rev. Justin Perkins reported on April 11, 1835, "The Persians are not very fond of such (i.e. theatrical) entertainments. A German ventriloquist was here, not long ago, and the people ascribed his performance to the direct agency of the devil and treated him with corresponding abhorrence" (208).

[4] Mirza Saleh Shirazi was among the second group of students sent to Europe by Abbas Mirza to study the new sciences. He was in England during 1815-1819 and his *Travelogue* was eventually published in Tehran in 1968.

To set the stage for "theatre" and Shakespeare to enter into Iran, one of the most renowned intellectuals of his time, Abbas Mirza (1789-1833), the Qajari crown prince, was the first to imagine a modern college based on European models. His idea was something of a preparatory school for students who were then sent to Europe to study modern sciences in European universities and return to start conveying their knowledge to the next generation of students in a modern college in Iran (Balay and Cuypers 14-5). In 1851, the first such organized institution of higher education, called Dar a1-Funun was founded by Amir Kabir (1807-1852),[5] the chief minister to Nasir al-Din Shah (1831-1896). Dar al-Funun was a technical school when it started, but gradually for the purpose of facilitating communication, included instruction in foreign languages such as French, English, Arabic as well as Persian and foreign literatures and dramatic arts (Balay and Cuypers 17). Thus the students educated in Europe and later in Dar al-Funun facilitated a productive cultural exchange with the west in the coming years.

The advent of the Persian western-style theatre might also be traced back to the reign of Nasir a1-Din Shah who visited Europe on diplomatic trips three times in 1873, 1878, and 1889. Nasir al-Din Shah recorded in his diary on his journey of 1873 to Europe that he was particularly impressed by performances of circuses, operas, and theaters (Nasir al-Din Shah 95). Upon returning from his second trip to the Europe, Nasir al-Din Shah ordered the building of a European-style auditorium in the main premises of Dar al-Funun suggesting that theatre and higher education were from their inception closely intertwined. In March 1886 the construction of the first theatre hall was complete, managed by Mirza Ali Akbar Khan, Mozayen al-Dowleh (1843-1932), who had studied painting in France, and Monsieur Lemaire, the French music professor.[6] Moliere's *Misanthrope* (Sargozasht-e Mardomgoriz), translated by Mirza Habib Esfahani (printed in Constantinople in 1869), and some of Moliere's other plays were the first performed in this Hall (Gaffary 376; Emami 14; Ganjeh 96; Jannati 59).

Although there is no record of Shakespeare translation and performance in Farsi before 1900, the Iranian-Azerbaijani Turks and Iranian-Armenians had translated his plays into their own native languages, and staged them in Tabriz and Tehran since the 1870s. Even Azadeh Ganjeh maintains that, "Since the 1850s there have been at least 50 translators of Shakespearean drama, but to this day the translator whose excellence is still unmatched is the Iranian-born, Paris-educated career diplomat, Hovaness Khan Massehian" (53) who translated Shakespeare's plays into Armenian. Massehian's translation of *Hamlet* was

[5] Mirza Taghi Khan-e Farahani known as Amir Kabir.

[6] On Mozayan al-Dowle and Lemaire see: R. A. Khaleqi. *The History of Iranian Music* (Sargozasht-e musigi-ye Iran). 2nd ed. Tehran, 1974, Vol. 1.

printed in 1894 by the Armenian publishing society (Ganjeh 85). Later to become the Persian Ambassador to the Great Britain, in 1916, Hovannes Massehian was invited to participate in the 300th anniversary of Shakespeare's death in Stratford-upon-Avon. He explained the challenges and joys in interpreting Shakespeare plays and the culture woven in them in the context of Persian culture and traditions:

> […] an educated Iranian person in the first encounter with this great poet-playwright will become subdued and stunned by his greatness. […] little by little when he gets to know him more, he will feel in Shakespeare the soul of story-telling of his national poet Ferdowsi, and philosophy and belief of Rumi, the breeze of Sa'adi and Hafez poems and wisdom of Omar Khayyam. (qtd. in Ganjeh 54-55)

It was in 1900, through the translation of *The Taming of the Shrew* (Majliseh Tamashakhan: Be Tarbiat Avardaneh Dokhtareh Tondkhuy) by Hosseinqoli Mirza Saloor (Emad a'saltaneh), that Iranians got their first glimpse of Shakespeare in Persian. Thanks to the efforts of the elites and intellectuals during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "theatre" was gaining popularity in Iranian society—especially at educational institutions. Shakespeare's works were among the leading plays which were acted out in theatres. In 1880, the Armenian community started to integrate the theatre into education and built a school, and next to it a theatre with a stage. The theatrical group was managed by the principal of the school and in 1881 spawned a "Club of Theatre Lovers" (Anjoman-e Dustdaran-e Te'yatr), the purpose of which was the education of the young, the artistic development of theatre, and pecuniary support for the school (Ganjeh 157). The only well documented Shakespeare performance at this institution was a staging of *Othello* in Turkish in Tabriz in 1888. A document in Akhtar newspaper, no. 16, vol. 15, on 26 December 1888, was mentioned in the *Quarterly Journal of Theatre*. It remarks that in 1888, Mr. Safrazian and his wife Alma had come from Tbilisi with other Russian subjects to give a performance of *Othello*. This is also the first documented female theatre performance in Iran mentioning one of the star actors, Shushanik Tessian, who was a teacher at the Armenian girls' school (Ganjeh 155-56). By 1897, it became customary for women to play female roles.[7]

The first performances of Shakespeare's works in Tehran took place in the declining years of the Qajar dynasty: *The Merchant of Venice* and *Much Ado*

[7] In that year, Mrs. Babayan, the wife of Gabriel Babayan, the principal of the Armenian school, performed in *Scapin*. A great improvement occurred in women's theatrical activities when in 1902 two sisters from Tabriz, Vartir and Haranush Faligian came to Tehran and created the "Tehran Women's Theater Group" (goruh-e te'yatr-e banovan-e Tehran) (Ganjeh 159).

about Nothing directed by Reza Azarakhshi were performed between 1903 and 1921. However, the growing admiration for Western theatre faced resistance from the fundamentalist religious leaders. Ganjeh argues that:

> theatre did not develop as expected, as Naser al-Din Shah and Amir Kabir were soon confronted with opposition from mullahs and religious teachers, who had regularly attended the Dar al-Funun performances. At first, there were rumours about the content of the plays, with the clergy worried about morality and the consequences of such gatherings. These pressures led to the rule that entering theatre performances were restricted to the royal family and its guests. Later, objections were raised to devoting such a space to such nonsensical Western rituals while faithful Muslim students were not given any proper place for their daily prayers. According to available records, the theatre hall subsequently served as a prayer hall for the students. Nevertheless, every now and then, a few theatre performances were held there until 1891, when it was closed to theatre activities - probably because the shah considered it as a real threat. Ultimately, the space was transformed into a lecture hall (97).

Evidently Nasir a1-Din Shah himself was also in fact "only in favour of [theatre and] educational reform to the extent that it would not jeopardize his dictatorial rule. In other words, his love of [public literacy,] theatre and art was not deep, nor was it for the interests of society and the people" (Emami 124).

But theatre and the dramatic arts had already begun to catalyze social and political reform. The Mullahs and religious teachers' opposition could not change facts on the ground, as "traveling abroad made Iranian intellectuals aware of the significant role of theater in the process of social changes" (Malekpour 27). The first intellectual who highlighted the significance of theatre for educating the public was Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh (1812-1878).[8] Akhundzadeh, as Farrokh Gaffary states, is "the first Asian to have shown the importance of European-style theater, [who] has been called the Moliere and the Gogol of the East" (375; Navabpur 88). In a letter to Mirza Aqa Tabrizi, Akhundzadeh emphasizes the importance of Western-style theatre and playwrights: "… Moliere and Shakespeare deserve a bow" (Akhundzadeh 7). Akhundzadeh complains that Mullahs and religious teachers have "forbidden the theatre—this 'beautiful gift'" (Gaffary, 375). He appreciated that the theatre was essential in reforming and modernizing society: "One should build foreign style theatres in Iran instead of Taziya Halls" (qtd. in Ganjeh 11). Hence Akhundzadeh, as an Iranian elite, philosopher and the founder of modern literary criticism, played a significant role not only in introducing theatre to Iranian society, but also influenced the development of Persian drama.

[8] Also known as "Mirza Fatali Akhundov" and "Mirza Fatali Akhundzade."

Akhundzadeh also had a lasting impact with regard to Shakespeare's introduction to Iranians (Ganjeh 11). Living in Tbilisi, he met the members of "Decembrist Revolt" such as Lermontov, Pushkin, Griboyedov, Marlinsky, Alexander Odoevsky, and had a chance to delve deeply into European literature and philosophy. He mainly focused on French authors such as Molière, Voltaire, Russo, Mirabeau, Montesquieu, Renan, Eugène Sue and Dumas. However, along with the Russian writers such as Pushkin, Gogol, Lermontov, and Tolstoy, he also went through the works of Shakespeare (Balay and Cuypers 20). Akhundzadeh accentuates that: "In England a few centuries ago appears a poet called Shakespeare who depicts the sufferings of England's kings in an effective way that even the most callous one (a cold-hearted person) upon hearing could not stop oneself weeping" (Amini).

The popularity Shakespeare enjoyed at this point in time not only affected the development of translation approaches, but also encouraged young authors to adapt the same dramatic structures as in Shakespeare's plays. Supported by Akhundzadeh, Mirza Aqa Tabrizi was the first to write plays in Persian. One of Mirza Aqa's pieces called *The Story of Shah-Quli Mirza's Journey to Karbala* (Ḥekayat-e Karbala Raftan-e Shah-Quli Mirza …) has a plot similar to that of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:

> In the play masses or the lower classes come onto the stage. Mirza Aqa prepares the play for a theatre-in-theatre. Iraj Mirza, a character of the play, arranges a "performance" to get rid of his acquisitive uncle-Shah-Quli Mirza. In the play, the uncle misbehaves in his treatment of the peasantry. This leads to their (the audience's) revolt and the interesting point is that the uproar of the revolt even drowns the performers of the play-within-play, thereby ending the play in the commotion of the riots (Sepehran 210).

Mirza Aqa Tabrizi clearly uses the outline of *Hamlet* in a theatrical form as an effective tool to fulfill his duty as an artist to demonstrate the tragic situation of the people, and to criticize the totalitarian system of the country. The technique of theatre-in-theatre provides a possibility for Mirza Aqa, like Hamlet, to speak his mind confidently.

Interest in drama more generally and Shakespeare in particular coincided with the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1907), which led to the establishment of a parliamentary system in Iran. The intellectuals of the Constitutional period developed new attitudes and tastes toward dramatic forms and theatre in Iran as it was gradually introduced to the common people. Iraj Emami notes that:

> In 1905, a group of well-known Iranian intellectuals gathered for the first time with the aim of spreading the Dramatic Arts, and founded a club called The

> Culture Club.[9] Their objective was to free Dramatic Art from the exclusive circles of the aristocratic elite and take it among the people. Most of the productions by this group were characterized by political views and criticisms, and were performed in the main parks of Tehran such as Atabak Park, Amin-al Dawla Park, etc. The founders of this Zill-al-Sultan group were Muhammad Ali Furughi, Ali Akbar Davar, and Seyyed Ali Nasr, also known as the founders of Iranian contemporary theatre (137).

They began to encourage the production of modern theatre because among revolutionary forces "it was strongly believed that theatre was one of the vehicles to diffuse the constitutional ideas among the population at large" (Floor 222). Clearly, theatre was perceived as contributory to democratic education. In the constitutional era, theatre was considered an essential tool for enlightening the people and developing the country, and it was used by the activists to promote their political objectives (Kazemimojaveri; Emami 138).

The Constitutional era also marks Iranian intellectuals developing interest in Shakespeare's plays and poetry. The attention that had previously been given to Moliere and his works completely changed in favor of Shakespeare.[10] Several literary publications emerged focusing on Western cultural works, such as *Majalle Adabi Raad*, and *Bahar* and began publishing critical essays on Shakespeare. In 1909, the parliamentary member and founder of *Bahar* magazine, Yusuf Etesami, published an essay that included a brief history of drama, a biography of Shakespeare, and Persian translations of excerpts from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Macbeth* translated from Arabic and French (*Bahar* 221). Through these publications, Shakespeare's popularity grew to the point that the newspaper *Raad* even published the news of Shakespeare's birthday being celebrated in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. Shakespeare's emerging importance during the Constitutional Revolution allows Ganjeh to label the Constitutional period the 'Shakespeare period' (5).

Like Hamlet, Iranian constitutional intellectuals strongly believed in the enlightening power of theatre. Modern theatre was imported as a cultural commodity to function as a tool of refinement, the dissemination of ethics, and the imposition of modern social moralities, modernization, and democracy. Iranian intellectuals' faith in theatre as a vehicle for promoting democracy gave a decisive political and social role to Western theatre—and especially Shakespeare (Ganjeh 7-8). Persuaded by Western history, Iranian constitutional revolutionists believed that human progress was easily attainable if:

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[9] Rashid Yasami. *Adabiyyat-i Mu'asir-i Iran*. 1st ed., Tehran, 1316/1937, P. 27.

[10] See Mehdi Nassiri's paper on, 'Neghahi be Jaryan e Tarjomeh Adabiyat Nomayeshi dar Iran' (A Survey on Translation Movement in Dramatic Literature in Iran). Iranian Association of Theatre Studies: https://iatc.theater.ir/fa/75948/. Accessed 9 April 2023.

> they broke the three chains of (1) royal despotism, (2) clerical dogmatism, and (3) foreign imperialism. The intelligentsia thus considered constitutionally based government, secularism, and nationalism to be the three vital means for establishing a modern, strong, and developed state of Iran. The first, they argued, would destroy the reactionary power of the monarchy. The second would eliminate the conservative influence of the clergy, and the third would eradicate the exploitative tentacles of the imperialists (Abrahamian 62; Ganjeh 103-4).

Shakespeare Helps the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979)

Having already staged a coup d'état in 1921, Reza Khan proclaimed himself as the Shah of Persia in 1925. As the first king of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979), he took progressive steps towards modernizing the Iranian nation through promoting and establishing a modern educational system. Reza Shah and later his son Mohammad Reza were in favor of social, economic, military, and cultural transformation in Iran. To this purpose, "young people were sent to western countries to learn modern science, technology, and culture so as to help westernize the country on their return. Modern college and university education were also developed under the Pahlavis" (Borjian, *English in Post-Revolutionary Iran: From Indigenization to Internationalization* 2013; Riazi 2005). Reza Shah also began financing the arts as part of his attempt to modernize Iran's cultural sphere.

On the theatrical front, in 1933 Reza Shah established the 'National State Theatre Company' and invited Vahram Papazian[11], a talented Armenian actor who was famous for his Shakespearean roles, to teach modern theatre to Iranian theatre artists and to cast a number of plays such as *Othello* and *Hamlet*. The Iranian theatre became particularly vibrant during Papazian's stay in Iran. Intellectuals and reformists attached great expectations to a *Hamlet* performance as a vehicle for fostering progress of modern theatre and facilitating modernisation (Ganjeh 4). The new political parties in Tehran were prepared to use theatre as a tool for propaganda and as a practical means of disseminating their ideas and slogans, and the educated class of the country was to promote theatre to be a source of enlightenment, a podium for expressing modern and reformist ideas (Mohandespour).

Alas the combination of politics and theatre in the early days of the Pahlavi dynasty ultimately resulted in the exercise of strong censorship by

[11] Reza Shah chose the most acclaimed actor in the neighboring country. It was in the same year that the Moscow press called Papazian one of the best modern tragedians and a French critic remarked that he had seen Parisian audiences moved to tears, declaring that Papazian was the best Othello he had seen (Ganjeh 129).

Reza Shah's government (Floor). Although among the plays produced by Papazian, *Hamlet* received the greatest attention (Ganjeh 130) by the audiences, his *Hamlet* would be the only performance of the play for decades, because *Hamlet*'s story proved "too inflammatory" for Reza Shah:

> The Pahlavi regime hoped audiences would relate *Hamlet* to the corrupt Qajar regime and engender more support for their government. But Reza Shah was displeased following the performance. He subsequently banned any play featuring murdered kings, mad princes, unfaithful queens, and usurped thrones from the National Theatre. Other than this single performance by Papazian, *Hamlet* would not grace another Iranian stage while a Pahlavi sat on the throne (Tafreshi).

Despite the fact that the ascension of the Pahlavi dynasty brought even larger support for Shakespeare's works and the production of European plays in general, it also brought new trends in censorship. Because of theatre's robust political aspect and consequently increasing censorship, Willem Floor underlines, playwrights became progressively introverted and turned to experimentation with technique.

Nevertheless, while some writers sought their inspiration in the avant-garde movement, others preferred to draw on the Iranian dramatic tradition and popular stories: "the mix of modern and traditional, symbolism and realism, foreign influence and social ills remained the main menu that the theatergoer was offered until the end of the Pahlavi regime" (Floor 291). To tackle the censorship problem, even some of the translators and intellectuals of the time decided to relate Shakespeare plays in prose. These simplified versions of Shakespeare's works were warmly welcomed in Iranian society and attracted the attention of various age groups. Mohammadkhan Bahador translated simplified versions of Shakespeare's *Julies Caesar* (1926), *Coriolanus* (1935) and *Tempest* (1936); Soltan Hamid Amir Soleymani published the book, *Shakespeare's Masterpieces* (1928); and Ali Asgar Hekmat compiled a book under the title of *Five Stories by Shakespeare* (1941-42).

Reza Shah's reign also witnessed the opening of the first modern university in 1934. The Faculty of Letters and Humanities at the University of Tehran was one of the earliest of its six faculties, in which the Department of English Literature was one of the major components, offering courses on Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. Based on the *Guide Books* that the university published annually since 1939, Shakespeare was part of university's curriculums in the School of Humanities, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literature, Department of English Language and Literature. In the "Syllabus published for the Academic Year 1939-1940" for the freshmen in the Faculty of Arts as part of their course, English Verse, (based on the course book, *Oxford Book of English Verse*), students studied three sonnets of Shakespeare: Sonnet 29: When, in

disgrace with fortune and men's eyes; Sonnet 116: Let me not to the marriage of true minds; and an excerpt from *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene I: The quality of mercy is not strained.

As the university developed, it began to offer BA, MA and Ph.D. degrees in English language and literature. For the BA and MA students they designed the general courses including Shakespeare as part of their curriculum such as 'Introduction to Literature I-II'; 'Drama I-II', 'Survey of English Literature I-II-III'; "Studying the Works of the World's Well-known Playwrights." However, for the Ph.D. candidates they planned a specific course on Shakespeare called: "Shakespeare: Plays and Methods of Representation." According to the course syllabus, Ph.D. candidates are to study Shakespeare's plays and his playwriting methods, discuss Shakespeare's crucial place in Renaissance Studies, examine the phenomenon of "Shakespeare Industries" and the relevant topics such as the film and theatrical productions of his plays, and debate, in detail, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*.

Following the abdication of Reza Shah in 1941, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi came to power and ruled until the 1979 revolution. His reign is considered "the peak of theatrical activities in the western form in Iran" (Bozorgmehr 334). The reign of Mohammad Reza Shah continued the trend towards modernization and Westernization coupled with a seemingly paradoxical desire to revive of the country's heritage as well as develop a sense of national identity (Gaffary 378). He paid particular attention to theatre as a Western product and "helped considerably make it popular by building more theatre halls, to the point that more than 500 foreign plays were translated and performed in this period" (Jalili Kohne Shahri and Pishgar 91). In this period Alaudin Pazargady published his translations of Shakespeare's plays in two volumes which included all Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies. On stage, however, Shakespearean performances were limited because, as before, "the Pahlavi regime was opposed to the performance of those plays in which kings were murdered" (Malekpour 62). Hence in this period, only two or three of Shakespeare's plays were permitted to be performed on the stage. The SAVAK (Iran's secret police) was particularly concerned about the political readings of Shakespeare's plays and on one occasion refused to issue a license for the film version of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*: "the film, SAVAK suggested, taught the dangerous lesson of regicide" (Milani, *Eminent Persians: The Men and Women Who Made Modern Iran* Vol. 1, 2016; Ganjeh 229-30).

In Mohammad Reza's time the first cultura1 and arts organization that operated on a wide scale was the Department of Fine Arts, which was established in 1950 and functioned autonomously. In 1957, this department established the Department of Dramatic Arts (Emami 143). In the 1960's the

Department of Fine Arts decided to invest part of its increased budget in drama. Several drama schools were founded and foreign teachers were invited to improve the artistic skills and dramatic knowledge of theatre students. Patrick Quinby of Bowdoin College in Maine was invited two times to teach drama at the University of Tehran. Classic European plays, including Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* were translated and staged by a group of students (Ganjeh 26). In 1964, the Faculty of Dramatic Arts was opened by the Ministry of Culture and Arts, which became the first institution of higher education in Iran to offer a diploma equivalent to a Bachelor's degree. In 1965, the University of Tehran created the Faculty of Theatre, in the Faculty of Fine Arts, which finally incorporated theatrical pedagogy within already existing Iranian universities (Emami 143, 147).

To promote the traditional and modern theatre in Iran, Shiraz Arts Festival was founded in 1967 and continued annually till 1977. Queen Farah Pahlavi in an unprecedented step invited several talented foreign artists together with well-known theatre companies to stage extremely experimental productions in the Arts Festival in Shiraz. Ganjeh accounts that:

> Shakespeare officially came back to Iran, again with foreign theatre groups. In 1971, for the first time after 39 years, an interpretation of *Hamlet* was staged at the fifth annual Shiraz Festival of Arts under the name of *Becket, Hamlet, King Lear*. The director was Mustafa Dali, a French-Algerian, who was also teaching theatre at Tehran University's faculty of dramatic art. […] Two years later, Slobodanka Alexic's *Hamlet in the Cellar*, a successful performance by Atelier 212 from Yugoslavia, performed in 1973 at the Shiraz Arts Festival. There are records of other Shakespeare plays performances, such as Andrei Serban's *La Ma Ma* production of Shakespeare's comedy, *As You Like It* in 1977 (207, 230).

Shakespeare Sidesteps Censorship in Post-Revolutionary Iran

The Westernization of the Shahs ended abruptly in 1979 when the so-called Islamic Revolution led to the fall of the last Pahlavi Shah and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. From the beginning, the religious revolutionaries were opposed to the presence of the western elements in society, which resulted in eradicating British and American educational operations established under the Pahlavis' era and ushered in a decade-long suspension in the field of arts and theatre.[12] A year later the situation worsened with the beginning of the Iran-Iraq

[12] It took the British a good two decades to reestablish themselves within the educational domain of Iran by reopening the British Council in 2001, only to be closed again in 2009. The Americans have not been permitted to return to the country ever since (Borjian, *English in Post-Revolutionary Iran: From Indigenization to Internationalization* 59).

war (1980-1988) and hopes of establishing a democratic government dwindled. The war provided "a solid legitimation [for] the Islamic state and empowered it to purify the cultural scene from what the ruling clergy called 'imperialist culture'" (Ganjeh 28).

The 1979 Political Revolution thus prompted the 1980 Cultural Revolution during which all universities in the country were forced to close for three years. On April 18, 1980, after Friday prayers, Ruhollah Khomeini (1902-1989), founder of the Islamic Republic, gave a speech harshly attacking the universities: "We are not afraid of economic sanctions or military intervention. What we are afraid of is Western universities and the training of our youth in the interests of West or East" (qtd. in Ganjeh 236). The government violently took over the campuses and submitted the professors and employees of the universities and institutions to ideological investigation. Believing that Islamic values and identity were marginalized throughout the modernization era in Iran, the Islamic and revolution's values and principals also were applied to the course syllabuses as an act of rebellion against the secularization and Westernization which were encouraged during the Pahlavi era.[13]

During and after the Revolution, English was viewed as the language of the enemy. However, as time passed and the necessity of the interaction with the international world became apparent, this anti-English view gradually shifted towards regarding English appropriate and useful. English as the instrument of modernization and westernization for the Pahlavis', changed into a practical tool for introducing Islamic values and policies in the international sphere for the Islamic clergymen who were in power. Later even "English, the language of a globalized economy, gained a high utility status in numerous domains such as media and social networks, tourism, education, technology, and trade" (Riazi, 2005). Despite severe resistance at the beginning, "English education in today's Iran is marked by two diverging and seemingly incompatible models: the indigenized or culturally—and ideologically—adapted English vs. the international or Anglo-Americanised English" (Borjian, *Bridge or Wall? The English Language in Iran* 202).

Following the 1979 Revolution, the fate of the modern theatre tradition became uncertain as well. After the Islamic Revolution "all these festivals were abandoned and both the Faculty of Theatre and the School of Dramatic Art were closed for a few years" (Emami 16). Floor accentuates that theatre in Iran during the Islamic Republic was "socially, religiously, and, above all, politically suspect" (297). Theatrical activity dramatically decreased during the devastating Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s, and aside from the occasional production, this

[13] Strain and New York State English Council (1971) writes that more than 90% of the Iranian school students elected English as a foreign language. All these factors led to a situation of modernization becoming amalgamated with the Iranian culture.

burgeoning Iranian theatrical scene did not resurface until the 1990s.[14] The members of the Cultural Revolution which after the 1979 revolution were to purge the western elements from the universities and Islamize them in Iran, divided theatre and cinema into two categories: "valued art" and its contrary "anti-valued art." Fortunately, Shakespeare's plays were labelled "valued." In two public meetings (July 30 and January 19, 1993), even Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, expressed his point of view on Shakespeare (reflected on his twitter account):

> I have read most of works by Shakespeare and enjoyed them. Plays by Shakespeare are historical stories that he has formed beautifully and they see most of his works in accordance with 'values'. Shakespeare plays, such as *The Merchant of Venice* or *Othello* are all in accordance with values, but Western values (qtd. in Ganjeh 265)

Theatre under the Islamic Republic of Iran is governed by the Dramatic Arts Center and its umbrella organization, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Vizarate Farhang va Irshade Islami). The government-controlled agency has been criticized for its censorship of artists and ideas that are believed to be "Anti-Islamic" or in opposition to the political loyalties of the Iranian government (Karimi Hakak). As a consequence of the emergence of the Islamic Republic, revolutionary playwrights dominated the stage (Ganjeh 28).

One of the main obstacles to Shakespeare study and performance after the revolution was the on-going censorship. Both playwrights and actors, to push back the boundaries of censorship, have been very inventive, selecting "plays that indirectly provide a sometimes critical if not satirical view of conditions in contemporary Iran" (Floor 300). Therefore, Shakespeare's works have been subject to numerous adaptations in an Iranian cultural context due to their themes and literary merits. Even historically considered, since Shakespeare first permeated Persian culture, to avoid censorship, translators and dramatists used symbolism, altered the language, adapted the content to make it more relatable to an Iranian audience, and created alternative endings to Shakespeare's plays. As translators explored various ways to render Shakespeare for the Persian-speaking audience, "they engaged in a process of cultural adaptation to meet the needs of their audience and their time" (Tafreshi). Adapting Shakespeare's works such as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Richard III* as the appropriate metaphor for the current political situation in Iran, Iranian artists gave voice to the unvoiced repressed people and masses. The plays of Shakespeare became an effective

[14] Lazgee, Seyed Habiballah (February 1994). *Post-revolutionary Iranian Theatre: Three Representative Plays in Translation with Critical Commentary* (PDF). University of Leeds, School of English (Workshop Theatre). Retrieved 12 July 2014.

medium of expression in the educated culture—a voice of the reformists, protesters, marginalized groups, and the opposition groups within and without Iran.

The popularity of Shakespeare's plays mostly lies in their plots as the appropriate metaphors for the changing political situations in Iran, and their fluid nature that enable them to conform to diverse circumstances to comment on current events. Consequently, Shakespearean adaptations play a crucial role in enriching Persian literary culture and becoming the voice of the intellectuals and elites in different political phases in Iran. The first well known adaptation of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* is *Zohreh and Manouchehr* (1925-26) by Iraj Mirza. Iraj Mirza aptly adapts Shakespeare's poem into Iranian cultural context that "an Iranian reader reading the story never feels himself in a strange world or life" (Mahmoodi Bakhtiari). Akbar Radi's *Hamlet with Season Salad* (1988), Mostafa Rahimi's *Hamlet* (1992), Atila Pesyani's *Qajari Coffee* (2008), *Doubt* (2009) by Varuzh Karim Masihi, Ebrahim Poshtkuhi's *Hey! Macbeth, Only the First Dog Knows Why It Is Barking!* (2010), Hossein Jamali's *Hamlet: The Retribution Affair* (2015), a narration in "naqqali," a classic Persian genre, Hamid-Reza Naeemi's *Richard* (2018) are the other examples of contemporary adaptations of Shakespeare's plays which try to demonstrate the Iranian people's discontent with the censorship, corruption, hypocrisy, and above all the exercise of absolute power and despotism from a small group in power in Iran.

However, Shakespeare's first post-revolutionary voice was first heard through an adaptation of *Othello* in 1985. *Othello in Wonderland*, adapted by Gholam-Hossein Saedi, depicts the Damavand Troupe preparing to perform Shakespeare's *Othello* in the newly founded nominal Islamic Republic of Iran. The play opens with the actors waiting for the director to return from his visit to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, to get the required "Letter of Permission" to act out the play for the public. The director shows up triumphant, but declaring that there are some conditions, such as "Islamic veiling" for the actresses and a final monitoring and revision of the performance by the authorities in charge. Soon enough the Minister of Islamic Guidance, with two companions, a female representative, Zeynab Sister, and a Revolutionary Guard, arrives in and begins literally rewriting the *Othello*'s text to Islamize the setting, and to convert Othello and the other characters into Islamic revolutionaries. *Othello in Wonderland* bravely ridicules the implication of harsh censorship by the Islamic government and condemns its attempts to take art as hostage and confiscate its voice and power.

During the last two centuries, Shakespeare has acted as a great educator as well as a Trojan horse for sidestepping censorship and attacking the authoritarianism, dictatorship and totalitarianism through the different socio-political phases in Iran. Reading Shakespeare's works in Persian or seeing them on the Iranian stage, one is struck by how little the characters and places resemble sixteenth century England and more portray contemporary Iran and its

people. Shakespeare's translated plays and their Persianized adaptations have attracted wide attention in modern Iran and enjoyed popularity among different generations, classes and various age ranges. In the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, it can finally be concluded that Shakespeare is the most important and most frequently taught Western figure in Iranian culture and literature.

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