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SHAKESPEARE AND THE LIVING DRAMATIST

WOLE SOYINKA

Your statement is an impudently ignorant one to make.... Do you really mean no one should or could write about or speak about a war because one has not stood on the battlefield . . .? Was Shakespeare at Actium or Philippi...?[1]

That tart response from Sean O'Casey to Yeats will be familiar to many. O'Casey is not of course a 'living' dramatist, but I am certain that no one here expects a coroner's interpretation of that expression. O'Casey could have picked no worthier defender of his arguments; the universal puzzle of Shakespeare's evocative power often leads to speculations – in various degrees of whimsy – about his real identity. That is only another way of questing after the unrecorded things he actually did in real life – especially in the area of travel. If Shakespeare was never at Actium or Philippi contemporaneously with the events which he dramatized on these sites, he must have stood on their ruins or visited their living replicas in his wanderings – preferably press-ganged into one of those notorious merchant ships while he was hanging around the theatres, waiting to audition for a small role. Is it any wonder that the Middle Eastern poets and dramatists claim that he must, at the very least, have been a sometime visitor to North Africa and the Arabian peninsula? How else, for instance, could he have encountered the legend of Majnun Layla which he transformed – albeit without acknowledgement – into *Romeo and Juliet*? And so Ali Ahmad Ba-Kathir (who died in 1969), an Indonesian-born poet who became a naturalized Egyptian, restored to his adopted race what belonged to Arab literature in the first place – he translated *Romeo and Juliet* into Arabic free verse.

One interesting poser for Ahmad Ba-Kathir arose from the fact that, in the legend of Majnun's love for Layla, there was no history of family feuds; not only that, Arabic custom prevents a Romeo-style declamation of love even into the empty expanse of the desert – this is bringing dishonour to the girl and ruining the name and reputation of her family. The fate of an Orlando caught in the act of hanging love-sick verses on tamarind trees is better left unimagined – still, such are the impieties to be expected when a gifted Arab like Shakespeare loses his roots among the English infidels!

The difficulties encountered by Arab dramatists as a result of the opposing nature of much of the conventions and mores of Arabic culture, not to mention the actual intervention of language for these poets and dramatists, heighten the phenomenon of the fascination of Shakespeare for Arab-speaking authors, both those who turned naturally to classical (i.e. literary) Arabic and others, like Gibran at the turn of the century, and the contemporary dramatist Tawfik-al-Hakim who have revolutionized the concept of Arabic literature with their adoption and enrichment of colloquial Arabic.

But I should make it quite clear that I am not about to speak on Arabic writers or their adaptations, about whom I have only very superficial knowledge. The phenomenal hold of Shakespeare on modern European and American dramatists and directors is however not merely well-known but accepted as natural.

[1] Quoted in *Sean O'Casey: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Thomas Kilroy (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1975), p. 115.

The ideological interrogatories which a Marxist playwright like Brecht injects into his versions of Shakespeare, such as *Coriolanus*, are normal developments in European literary and dramatic sensibilities – Shakespeare is over-ample fodder for the creative browser. Indeed, the search for a moral anchor among the literary-inclined leads sooner or later to the vast arena of unresolved moral questions in his works and sometimes life. Thus, for Edward Bond, it was not enough that Shakespeare's *Lear* should be reworked through some ideological framework, however vague and ultimately cosseting. Clearly Bond's interest in *Lear* was only a temporary holding device for his real subject, William Shakespeare himself, whom Bond sees – despite some rather 'nice' disclaimers – as a petit-bourgeois Lear: 'Shakespeare's plays show this need for sanity and its political expression, justice. But how did he live? His behaviour as a property-owner made him closer to Goneril than Lear.' The explanation for this bizarre claim is that 'He supported and benefited from the Goneril-society – with its prisons, workhouses, whipping, starvation, mutilation, pulpit-hysteria and all the rest of it.' Like me? And you? Introductions and Prefaces are not of course the most helpful clues to an author's intentions or even thoughts, not even in the case of Bernard Shaw. The basic declarations of intent by Bond are valid enough: 'I wrote *Bingo* because I think the contradictions in Shakespeare's life are similar to the contradictions in us', complemented, for our purpose, by: 'Part of the play is about the relationship between any writer and his society.' That that relationship, in the case of Shakespeare, is closer to Goneril's than Lear's carries for me, I must confess, the air of one of those paradoxes which all writers – especially those with a poetic bent – like to indulge in from time to time. Artfulness is indeed a stock-in-trade of the self-conscious moralist; from Edward Bond we are instructed, in similar vein, that 'Shakespeare created Lear, who is the most radical of all society critics.' Well, Shakespeare's countryman should *know*, I suppose; so on that note I shall return to Shakespeare's distant cousins and demand, like Hamlet: 'What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba?'

Among other statistical and factual details of this fascination is this: between about 1899 and 1950, some sixteen plays of Shakespeare had been translated and/or adapted by Arab poets and dramatists. They include plays as diverse as *Hamlet*, the ever-popular *Julius Caesar*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Pericles*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *King Richard III* and – need I add? – *Antony and Cleopatra*. There will have been others by now because even the government of the United Arab Republic, fed up with the number of embarrassingly inaccurate and inelegant translations, set up a committee to produce a scrupulous and complete translation of Shakespeare's works. So much for statistics, for much of which as well as for other details I am indebted to an essay by Professor Bushrui, formerly of the University of Ibadan, and to Dr Kole Omotoso, of my own University and department.

But the Arab world was not content to adopt or 'reclaim' Shakespeare's works. M. M. Badawi, in an article in *Cairo Studies* (1964) titled 'Shakespeare and the Arab World', states that the matter goes much further. Apparently it was not simply that Shakespeare stumbled on to an Arab shore during his unpublicized peregrinations; he was in fact an Arab. His real name, cleansed of its anglicized corruption, was Shayk al-Subair, which everyone knows of course is as dune-bred an Arabic name as any English poet can hope for.

Well, on our side, that is, in our own black Africa, we know that Julius Nyerere did translate *Julius Caesar* into Kishwahili and I believe there has been one recent adaptation of another of Shakespeare's plays – I think it was *The Taming of the Shrew* – into a little-known language, also in East Africa. But I have yet to hear of any claims that Shakespeare was a suspected progeny of a Zulu or Fulani herdsman or an Ashanti farmer. A young Ghanaian cineast did adapt *Macbeth* for the cinema, setting it in Northern, pastoral Ghana, but I believe the matter was taken no further.

Well, there are the historical causes. The experience of colonized North Africa has been one of a cultural struggle between French and English cultures – beginning with their educational systems – wherein the literature is always centrally placed. Then there is the history of Arabic literature itself on which the Islamic culture placed a number of constraints from which the European culture became not merely a liberating but, in certain aspects, even a revolutionary

force. At the heart of that literary culture – the European that is – stood Shakespeare, with his limitless universal themes, themes which were congenial to the Arabic epic – or narrative – tradition, promoting the romance of lyrical language for its own sake, as a tool of elegant discourse, formalized social relations and pious conduct. Arabic is the conscious vehicle of Islamic piety. The English language, even of King James's Bible, is not tied to any kind of piety; the Shakespearian use of it, however, makes it the very homeland of moral beings – we can see why the Arab poet felt an instant affinity with this language. It should be emphasized that modern, colloquial Arabic is so distinct from the classical that it makes a practitioner of both virtually bilingual – it was this classical form that was considered for a long time the only poetic vehicle fit to bear the colossal weight of Shakespeare, only this language could map the moral contours of the minds of tragic and romantic heroes and heroines, and their judges.

Earlier, in listing the plays which have been transformed by the pen of Arab dramatists, I gave a special kind of note to *Antony and Cleopatra*. Much of course is correctly made of the universality of Shakespeare's plays; here, I find myself more concerned with a somewhat less usual particularity, one with which, I am convinced, the Arabic, and most especially the North African, poet simply could not fail to identify. How could he? O'Casey makes a case for the art of the dramatist by reminding us that the greatest poetic illusionist of all, Shakespeare, did not require physical participation in the battles of Actium or Philippi; to the North African dramatist, especially if he is also a poet, *Antony and Cleopatra* must appear to belie O'Casey. Shakespeare, it seems, must have sailed up the Nile and kicked up sands in the shadow of the pyramids to have etched the conflict of Egypt and Rome on such a realistic canvas, evoking tones, textures, smells, and even tastes which were so alien to the wintry climes of Europe. This is a theme with which I find myself in more than a little sympathy.

Some years ago, I watched a production of *Antony and Cleopatra* at the Aldwych, by the Royal Shakespeare Company – and winced throughout the entire night. We all have our prejudices of course, but some of these prejudices are the result of experience. Perhaps the RSC knew that it had a problem in persuading even an English audience to accept any interpretation of Cleopatra by an English actress – so the actress sent up the whole thing – a sort of 'Look at me, we both know that this Cleopatra is not a character for real'. The production was very much of that order – a sort of variation of the play-within-a-play, only, this time, it was a director's critique-within-a-play – this Cleopatra was 'neither fish nor flesh; a man knew not where to have her'. If there was one female character that Shakespeare knew damned well where to have, it was Cleopatra. Come to think of it, I recall that my mind continually drifted off to a not too dissimilar occasion – this was the erotic, gastronomic orgy so sumptuously designed by the director of the film of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*. But at least that actress was trying her hardest, only I could not help superimposing on her performance the face and body of the actress Anna Magnani, one of the few European actresses of my knowledge who are truly endowed with a natural presence of erotic vulgarity. Shakespeare foresaw the problem, mind you:

> Saucy lictors
> Will catch at us like strumpets, and scald rhymers
> Ballad us out o' tune; the quick comedians
> Extemporally will stage us, and present
> Our Alexandrian revels; Antony
> Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
> Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
> I' th' posture of a whore. (5.2.213–20)

The other side of the balance sheet however is an ironic one. The near-unanimous opinion of the Arabic critics themselves on the translations and adaptations of their 'compatriot' Shayk al-Subair's masterpieces is that they were, in the main, the work of 'scald rhymers' who 'ballad him out of tune'. But I am not qualified to pronounce upon that, knowing no Arabic beyond 'Salaam ailekum', a benediction which we must pronounce on Shakespeare's motions in his grave if what those critics say is true. The special fascination of Arabic literature with Shakespeare however, mends all, at least for those of us who are safe from a direct encounter with the early consequences.

Quite apart from language and colonial history, other theories have been offered, theories closer to the

content of literature. For instance, it is claimed – as one of the reasons for endowing Shakespeare with Arab paternity – that only an Arab could have understood or depicted a Jew so 'convincingly' as in *The Merchant of Venice*. Similarly, the focus is sometimes placed on *Othello* – the Moor's dignity even in folly has been held up as convincing proof that no European could have fleshed out this specific psychology of a jealousy complicated by racial insecurity but a man from beneath the skin – an Arab at the very least. This of course would have to account for the unpredictability of a full-blooded Arab who suddenly turns against his kind in the portrait of Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, reducing the representative of that race to unprecedented depths of savagery and inhuman perversion. No, I find that my judgement inclines to giving most of the credit to *Antony and Cleopatra* for the full conquest of the Arab poet-dramatist, and the reasons lie of course with that universally seductive property of the best dramatic literature – a poetic ease on the ear which, in this case, has been drawn to the service of a specific terrain. Throughout his career, this terrain held great fascination for William Shakespeare. I do not speak here of an inert geographical terrain, but of the opposing and contradictory in human nature. It is not entirely by accident that the physical terrain in *Antony and Cleopatra* was the meeting point of the Orient and the Occident – for Shakespeare, these had come to represent more than the mercantile or adventurers' stomping-ground; they are absorbed into geographical equivalents of the turbulences which the poet observed in human nature, that playground, and warring-ground of 'humours', of performance and intent, will and emotion: Angelo is the unfinished paradigm in *Measure for Measure*. The transfer by Shakespeare, obsessed apothecary, of the unstable mixture called humanity into the Elizabethan (i.e. European) exotic crucible of the Middle East was inescapable – the signs are littered in images throughout his entire corpus, and the Arab world acknowledged itself as the greatest beneficiary even when its dramatists held up the same models through opposing viewpoints.

Ahmad Shaqui, the poet laureate of Egypt who was hailed 'the Prince of Poets' and 'Poet of Princes' by his own peers is often credited with introducing poetry into Arabic drama. Was it just a coincidence that the play in question was *Masra' Kliyupatra* (The Fall or Death of Cleopatra), and that it was inspired unequivocally by Shakespeare's own *Antony and Cleopatra*? It is true that he used material both from Egyptian and Arab-Islamic history but he did set out, according to our sources, to rewrite Shakespeare's own play. Fired by the Egyptian struggle for independence from the British, he recreates Cleopatra as a woman torn between her love of her country and her love for a man. In the end she commits suicide. For Shaqui, Shakespeare's Cleopatra was unacceptably unpatriotic, even a traitress, since she appeared ready to sacrifice her country on the altar of love. The emendations are predictable; they are of the same political and historically conscious order as, for example, the reversal of relationships which takes place when the theme of Caliban and Ariel is handled by anyone from the colonial or slavery experience, most notably in the West Indies. The case of the Arab world is however very different, owing its primary response not simply to politics or history, but to an order of visceral participation in the humane drama of its politics and history.

When one examines the majority of Shakespeare's plays very closely, there really is not much overt respect paid to 'local colour'. If anything, the colour is not infrequently borrowed from elsewhere to establish a climate of relationships, emotions or conflicts: 'Her bed is India; there she lies, a pearl' (*Troilus and Cressida*, 1.1.99). Where we encounter a localized immediacy we are wafted instantly away on a metaphoric bark to nowhere:

> Between our Ilium and where she resides
> Let it be call'd the wild and wand'ring flood;
> Ourself the merchant, and this sailing Pandar
> Our doubtful hope, our convoy, and our bark.
> (1.1.100–3)

Nestor finds Achilles' brains as barren as the banks of Libya while Ulysses considers it kinder fate that he parch in Afric's sun than be withered by the arrogance in Achilles' eye. Beyond two or three boastful and mutual admiration lines from Ulysses to Hector in act 4, scene 5, however, it is remarkable that in a war no less celebrated, no less legendary than Antony's

scrap with Caesar, very little of the terrain of struggle is actually conveyed in Shakespeare's lines. I do not suggest that we miss it; on the contrary. The absent hills, moats, turrets and physical *belonging* all pass unnoticed thanks to the clamour of *machismo*, the conflicts of pride, the debates of honour and schemes of war. The atmosphere is replete, nothing appears missing. In *Coriolanus* we experience the city state as a corporate entity against which one man is ranged, while the Rome of *Julius Caesar* could be anywhere, and the arguments of both, unchanged.

Compare these examples with the other remarkable exception, *Macbeth*:

Duncan.
This castle hath a pleasant seat, the air
Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
Unto our gentle senses.
Banquo. This guest of summer,
The temple-haunting martlet, does approve
By his lov'd mansionry that the heaven's breath
Smells wooingly here; no jutty, frieze,
Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird
Hath made her pendent bed and procreant cradle.
Where they most breed and haunt, I have observ'd,
The air is delicate. (1.6.1–10)

Shakespeare, drawing local colour into the service of fatal irony. The colours of *Antony and Cleopatra* belong however to a different segment of the spectrum and are applied on a more liberal canvas – after all, the whole world is up for grabs. But note that even where we encounter no more than what may be called a roll-call of names, there has been prior fleshing-out, so that the discomfiture of Octavius Caesar at the rallying of former mutual enemies behind Antony is real and problematic. It is historical personages that are summoned centre stage of the tapestry of events, not mere exotic names and shadowy figures from legend:

He hath given his empire
Up to a whore, who now are levying
The kings o' th' earth for war. He hath assembled
Bocchus, the king of Libya; Archelaus
Of Cappadocia; Philadelphos, king
Of Paphlagonia; the Thracian king Adallas;
King Manchus of Arabia; King of Pont;
Herod of Jewry; Mithradates, king
Of Comagene; Polemon and Amyntas,
The kings of Mede and Lycaonia, with a
More larger list of sceptres. (3.6.66–76)

The prior setting for what would otherwise be a mere catalogue of titles is contributive to the emergence of real figures from a mere bas-relief. For this is Caesar caught in a domestic dilemma involving his sister, using the arguments of war to get it into her head that she is neither an Emperor's wife nor an ambassador but, quite ordinarily – a rejected woman. Caesar's passion is both that of a contemned protector of a weak woman, and a contender for empire on a larger-than-historic scale. And these empires become accessible, reduced to a human scale because of what Antony has done with the accumulated panoply of power: 'He hath given his empire / Up to a whore...' The whore? Cleopatra. Her other names – queen, whore, gipsy, Egyptian dish, the serpent of old Nile, ribaldered nag of Egypt, etc., one whose every act, whose every caprice, every clownish or imperious gesture confirms that she deserves every one of these accolades and more. And thus the kingdoms and empires which she draws into her fatal net through Antony partake of this same personal quality and expand our realistic conception and dimension of the drama being waged for possession of the world. Not without cause does Octavius Caesar envision, when the scale of war turns firmly in his favour: 'The time of universal peace is near.'

Shakespeare's enlargements of the ridiculous through sublime prisms are deft and varied; the process happens at bewildering speed, resolving seeming improbabilities through the credible chimeric qualities of the tragic heroine of the piece. Who can quarrel with the steely patriotism of Cleopatra even in defeat? Confronted with the stark choice between death and humiliation:

Rather a ditch in Egypt
Be gentle grave unto me! Rather on Nilus' mud
Lay me stark nak'd, and let the water-flies
Blow me into abhorring! Rather make
My country's high pyramides my gibbet,
And hang me up in chains! (5.2.57–62)

Ahmad Shaqui, poet and patriot, had most of his work already cut out for him; there really is not much left to

do in mending whatever else appears to contradict this poise of nationalist dignity. Even the repulsive imagery has been turned to good account; the worst is evoked, and embraced – if that should be the only choice. How much more those other passages of contrasting physical evocation, those sumptuous, festal passages upon which Shakespeare has poured such haunting sensuousness. Have they not driven later poets and dramatists – notably T. S. Eliot – to an ambiguous relationship with their own literary heritage?

> The silken tackle
> Swell with the touches of those flower-soft hands
> That yarely frame the office. From the barge
> A strange invisible perfume hits the sense
> Of the adjacent wharfs. The city cast
> Her people out upon her; and Antony,
> Enthron'd i' th' market place, did sit alone,
> Whistling to th' air; which, but for vacancy,
> Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too,
> And made a gap in nature. (2.2.213–22)

Does the palate tend to cloy a little? Possibly. But by now Egypt, whom all, including Octavius Caesar, have made us identify with Cleopatra totally, is quickly manoeuvred towards our reassurance that we are still in command of our faculties of judgement, then acquitted absolutely. Admittedly the foreman of the jury is none other than a prejudiced Enobarbus, but we know him also for a blunt-spoken soldier. Most importantly, that habitual juxtaposition of harsh lingual rigour with lines of ineradicable sublimity leaves no room for doubt that an objective assessment has been fairly concluded. In short, the advocate acknowledges faults, but witness how he phrases the extenuating circumstances:

> Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
> Her infinite variety. Other women cloy
> The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry
> Where most she satisfies; for vilest things
> Become themselves in her, that the holy priests
> Bless her when she is riggish. (2.2.239–44)

That Cleopatra should match, in her final hours, the dignified poise of humility with a final thought (and abandonment) of defiance against the jealous gods is, in my view, both dramatically expected and aesthetically satisfying:

> No more but e'en a woman, and commanded
> By such poor passion as the maid that milks
> And does the meanest chares. It were for me
> To throw my sceptre at the injurious gods;
> To tell them that this world did equal theirs
> Till they had stol'n our jewel. (4.15.73–8)

But the awesomeness of the lines that follow can only be fully absorbed by an Egyptian, or one steeped in the esoteric cults of Egypt and allied religions, including Islam. Cleopatra is speaking figuratively here of the house of death, and then again, she is not. She is evoking the deeper mysteries of the cult of Isis and the nether kingdoms of an other-existence, and it spreads an eerie quality over the final tableau – unlike any comparable end in all of Shakespeare.

The following recites like any article of faith in the Resurrection:

> I have believed in Allah, and his angels, and His books, and His messengers, and the Last Day and the decree of its good and evil from Allah-ta'alla, and in the Rising after death.
>
> (*Islamic Book of the Dead*)

But the Arabic script that transcribes this *ayat* from the Hadith is composed like a high-prowed gondola with a crew of ritualized (hierographically speaking) rowers.[2] What Islam in fact opposes in the 'Kafir' cults of Osiris and Isis have merely been transposed from their elaborate structures with all their sacrificial rites to a mystic opacity of liturgical language – in the Islamic exegesis of death, the kinship remains blatant. Their neighbours the pagan Greeks, who borrowed from them much of their cults and religions in any case, would have no difficulty in identifying the Osiris-prowed Hadithic boat of death with Charon's canoe, scything through the River Styx. Islamic injunctions, prayers and invocations on the theme of death more than compensate the exhortations to practical meagreness by their endless liturgy and lyrical wealth of going, and the aftermath of dissolution.

Cleopatra, whom we have watched throned as Isis, imbues the approach of death with a measured

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[2] A marvellously preserved carving of the Egyptian 'Boat of the Dead' in the Pushkin Museum, Moscow, demonstrates most glaringly the relationship of the transcription to the funerary craft.

ritualism that is suffused with the palpable shadowiness of the crypt. Not just her contemporary worshippers at the shrines of Isis and Osiris, but their descendants, born into the counter-claims of Islamic religion, would therefore share more than a mere metaphor of language with Cleopatra's demand: 'Then is it sin / To rush into the secret house of death . . .?' We can hear its echo in the following lines also from the *Islamic Book of the Dead*:

> It is said that every day the
> graves call out five times:
> I am the house of isolation. . . .
> I am the house of darkness. . . .
> I am the house of earth. . . .
> I am the house of the questioning
> of Munkar and Nakir . . .

I know of no parallel echo in the Christian offices of the dead. Arabic 'classical' poetry is however full of it, and of Shakespeare's sonnets, the ones which seem to attract the finest 'classical' poets among the Arabs seem to share this preoccupation with the imagery of death as a place of physical habitation. Sometimes they are outright translations but more often they are original compositions inspired by a specific sonnet of Shakespeare. And we find a consistency in the emphasis given to one part of Shakespeare's variations on the theme of love as against the main theme itself. Comparatively underplayed is the defiant sentiment:

> Not marble nor the gilded monuments
> Of princes shall outlive this pow'rful rhyme;
> But you shall shine more bright in these contents
> Than unswept stone, besmear'd with sluttish time.
> (Sonnet 55)

The humanistic verses of Omar Khayyám are considered worse than irreverent – they are termed heretical and subversive; nor does the graveyard humour of an Andrew Marvell hold much appeal for the True Islamic poet:

> The grave's a fine and private place
> But none, I think, do there embrace.
> ('To His Coy Mistress')

No, it is essentially the grave as a place, an abode in time, that taxes the poetic genius of Shakespeare's adapters, not as a spur to the demands of love, presented as an end which is worse for overtaking its victim loveless, against which is held the imperishable products of the Muse or the talisman of immortality in love's offspring. Elias Abu Shabbakah's 'The Song of Death' is aptly titled, though it derives from Shakespeare's Sonnet 71, 'No longer Mourn for me when I am Dead'. The contrast, despite the opening abnegation, is revealing:

> My will, which I want you to remember, is to forget me when I am dead. And, if memories move you one day and your affection chooses to remind you of me, take the guitar of my inspiration into the dark night and go to my tomb in silence, and tap the guitar once; for it will let you hear a moaning sigh such as mine.

The unearthly moisture of suicide, the aspic's trail of slime on fig-leaves transports us to this totally alien earth, and I mean alien, not from the view of Shakespeare's culture alone. This is yet another world opening inwards from the mundane one into which we have already been inducted by some of the most unnerving imageries in poetic drama: a yoking of approaching bodily corruption with the essence-draining paradox of birth and infancy closes the fatal cycle of the union of opposites that began with the aspic's slime:

> Peace, peace!
> Dost thou not see my baby at my breast
> That sucks the nurse asleep? (5.2.306–8)

In this dark ceremonial, the crown which Cleopatra dons becomes not just a prop for composing herself for death as befits a queen, nor her robe the final cover for a soon-to-be-hollowed vessel, but ritual transformation steps towards the mystic moment of transition:

> Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have
> Immortal longings in me. . . .
> I am fire and air; my other elements
> I give to baser life. So, have you done?
> Come then, and take the last warmth of my lips.
> Farewell, kind Charmian. Iras, long farewell.
> Have I the aspic in my lips? Dost fall?
> If thou and nature can so gently part,
> The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch,
> Which hurts and is desired. (5.2.278–9, 287–94)

Iras has now preceded, and in that calm recital of Cleopatra,

> The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch,
> Which hurts and is desired

is heard the reprise and conclusion of that death aria which we have earlier descried. It commenced in the penultimate act, 'The crown o' th' earth doth melt....' (4.15.63), and winds into the awesome darkness at the Osiric passage:

> Then is it sin
> To rush into the secret house of death
> Ere death dare come to us? (4.15.80–2)

In sustaining its threnody through one more Act, despite the triumphant boots of Caesar and entourage, punctured by the country yokel humour of the aspic-hawking Clown, it becomes clear that our playwright has already inscribed *Finis* on the actual historic conflicts of power and passion. The crown of the earth has melted, and there is nothing left remarkable beneath the visiting moon. But in this setting, is that all? Beyond it? And beneath earth itself? The spectral power of Shakespeare's poetry remains to lead us into the 'other side' of the veil whose precedent reality, which is now seen as merely contingent, gives awesome splendour to the finale of an otherwise butterfly queen. The rest of *Antony and Cleopatra* is our excursion into that world, one which lies more innocently on the Egyptian reality of that time than on the most stoical, self-submissive will in the inherent or explicit theologies of Shakespeare's other drama:

> I am dying, Egypt, dying; only
> I here importune death awhile, until
> Of many thousand kisses the poor last
> I lay upon thy lips. (4.15.18–21)

Contrast this with the death of the genuine Moor whose folly was of a more excusable circumstance than Antony's:

> I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this –
> Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.
> (*Othello*, 5.2.362–3)

One dirge-master is understandably Shayk al-Subair, the other William Shakespeare. Here most noticeably, the cadences of death in Shakespeare's tragic figures are as crucial to his poetry as his celebration of life, even when the celebrants are flawed and their own worst enemy of life. It is difficult to underestimate this property as one which the Egyptian dramatists identified in their own world, for in *Antony and Cleopatra* Shakespeare's sensuous powers climaxed to evoke not merely the humanity of actors of a particular history, but the glimpsed after-world whose liturgy of resolution imbued them with their unearthly calm at the hour of death.

There are other minor but no less critical touches to the realistic evocation of a credible Egypt even within its very mythology. One need only examine the comparative sociologies of Shakespeare's stock characters – the Soothsayer for instance. In *Julius Caesar*, he simply comes off the street like a disembodied voice, and sinks back into urban anonymity once his dramatic role is fulfilled. Cassandra in *Troilus and Cressida* is a hysterical weirdo who, if anything, mars her cause with a melodramatic manner of revelations. Is she a member of the household? We do not really experience her – all these are not pejorative remarks, merely contrastive for a point of view. The Soothsayer in *Antony and Cleopatra* is an individual, a solid, recognizable persona. He follows Antony to Rome as his personal soothsayer and emerges more in the role of a shrewd psychologist than a mere mumbo-jumboist digging in eagles' entrails and seeing portents in the clouds. His analysis of Antony's psyche is as detachedly clinical as Antony's own lecture on the scientific achievements of his adopted home, which he delivers as a cool, observant voyager to a curious stay-at-home:

> Thus do they, sir: they take the flow o' th' Nile
> By certain scales i' th' pyramid; they know
> By th' height, the lowness, or the mean, if dearth
> Or foison follow. The higher Nilus swells
> The more it promises; as it ebbs, the seedsman
> Upon the slime and ooze scatters his grain,
> And shortly comes to harvest. (2.7.17–23)

This mixture of clinical information on human beings and the cultivated soil alike makes the earth of Egypt dominate Rome and take over the half-way house Misenum, making one suspect that Shayk al-Subair cannot wait to get back to his own soil where his