

# The Struggle of Youths in Mamduh Adwan's *Hamlet Wakes Up Late*

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**Abstract** This article reads Syrian playwright Adwan's appropriation of *Hamlet* as a representation of the grappling of Arab youths against authority. Unlike previous articles on *Hamlet Wakes Up Late* (1976), this article considers Laertes as a central figure to this analysis, and hence, it views his fight, and by extension that of Arab youths, as an attempt to defy totalitarian regimes. By relying on the conception of the intellectual, as developed by both Gramsci and Said, we attempt to demonstrate how Laertes, a standout figure in Adwan's rewriting of *Hamlet*, is the one who leads a revolution that gives voice to the youths in the MENA region. Notwithstanding this fact, Laertes remains unable to stand against the regime, which represses these youth-led revolts. This fact is historically proven as this article takes Adwan's narrative as a counter discourse and a resistance to *Shabiha*, a group of thugs working to maintain the regime's apparatus. The play represents the role *Shabiha* play in detaining and torturing dissidents such as Lorenzo; a character that Adwan adds to highlight how brutally totalitarian regimes reply to any attempt to change the status quo.

**Keywords** Adwan; Laertes; Lorenzo; *Shabiha*; youths

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## Introduction

Mamduh Adwan was a distinguished Syrian playwright, critic, poet and writer. He was born in 1941 in Qayrun, near Masyaf, Hama and died in December 2004. As a prolific playwright, Adwan was known, alongside his contemporaries like Mustapha Al Hallaj, Walid Ikhlasso, Ferhan Bulbul, and Saadallah Wannous, for being a political, ideological and nationalistic playwright as he commented regularly on the current status of the Arab nation (Meisun Ali 95). Adwan's *Hamlet Wakes Up Late* (*Hamlet Yastaiqizu Muta'akhiran*) was published in 1976, and performed in the National Theatre in Damascus in 1978. Adwan's play centers on Hamlet's unconsciousness about his surroundings. In Adwan's play, Horatio, the narrator of the story, describes Hamlet's drinking habits that blind him from seeing Claudius's arrangement of deals with Fortinbras, Ophelia's attempt to become a queen by seeking impregnation from him, and Rosencrantz's behavior as an informant to Claudius's regime who captures Lorenzo; a layman and a revolutionary character whom Adwan created to reflect Claudius' manipulative strategies to quell revolutions and maintain power.

Instead of imitating the Bard's text, Adwan captures and recreates a completely different plot, a story that would appeal to local conflicts to which Arab readers could relate. This perspective makes one recall Linda Hutcheon's and Julie Sanders's comments on the implications of interpreting and re-reading literary works. In her attempt to define adaptation, Hutcheon believes that it "comes simply from repetition with variation" (4) which applies to Adwan's recreation as the text diverges from the Bard's *Hamlet*. Instead of centralizing Hamlet's internal conflict, this article attempts to show how the play projects Laertes's interconnectedness with reality in terms of words and action. In *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2006), Julie Sanders uses the term "appropriation" to accentuate the ephebe's, to borrow Harold Bloom's concept in the *Anxiety of Influence*, "decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (26). In this sense, the ephebe, Adwan, redirects Shakespeare's representation of Hamlet's soliloquy to a concrete fight that appeals to a large segment of Arab youths in the MENA region. Through this reading, Adwan not only deviates from the Bard's text, but also recreates an entire canon that prophesizes the youth-led revolutions of the

Arab Spring that started almost four decades after his writing.

The above concepts, despite being independent in their sense, fall within the framework of intertextuality. This postmodern feature has been of major significance to the writings of standout literary thinkers as Kristiva and Eliot who believe that all literary productions are mere recreations of writings already developed in the past. Yet, as much as this element proves the knowledgeable character of the writer, some argue that it mainly disrupts a writer's creativity. However, to Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin (1998), dwelling on an already existing text does not necessarily mean creating a replica, but offers a "reinterpretation" of the current situations the world is encountering (3).

Accentuating the aforementioned notion, Huang and Rivlin (2014) maintain that appropriating an already existing literary text cannot be considered an "unethical" act as it bears "strong overtones of agency" (2). The new text is shaped by political, social, and cultural aura that marks its agency and difference from the source text. Having pointed out the significance of intertextuality in modern time, re-writing Shakespeare has become a tendency that surpassed seeing Shakespeare as a Western canonical figure. Owing to the wide range of adaptations/appropriations of Shakespeare, it seems that the Bard's texts became the property of the entire world and its population. His timeless themes seem to reveal the inner complexities of individuals; he addresses the ambivalent human nature and that is why his texts are still influential.

Arab playwrights have been adapting and appropriating Shakespeare's texts to comment on the current socio-political situations the MENA region is witnessing. For instance, Margaret Litvin (2011) has investigated a new tradition that involves the recreation of Shakespeare's texts that she terms "The Arab Hamlet tradition". In her definition, she maintains that "the Hamlets one meets in Arab countries are different; they are marked by extensive experiences and concerns" (12). Arab playwrights seek Shakespeare's texts to reflect on the status of Arab countries and their youths. The so-called Shakespeare's Hamlet, in England, has become Arab playwrights' Hamlets to keep recreating different agencies and a new tradition that dwells on Shakespeare's text but recreates its socio-political aura to raise awareness.

A significant scholarship has been written on Adwan's play. In her introductory note on the English translation of the play, Litvin (2015) comments that the play discusses both foreign and internal affairs (*Four Arab* 65). She insists that Adwan's play "satirizes two betrayals, domestic and national" (65). Socially, "the silent ghost," for Litvin, does not only represent the nationalistic ideals of the deceased Egyptian president that "haunts Hamlet" but also "Ba'thist Syria's own socialist

ideals” (Ibid). Litvin maintains that the play is open to multiple interpretations (5). She insists that the text is a “social satire” that mirrors 1970s Syria:

Hamlet’s madness is plausibly troped as a resigned intellectual’s alcoholism; the added characters Lorenzo and the actor highlight the problem of class division in an ostensibly socialist society, Ophelia’s pseudo-liberated sex life brings no happiness but turns her into a disposable tool of the men around her. (65)

As Litvin succinctly puts it, 1970s Syrian society roamed in a gothic atmosphere as the regime came into power. Cleveland (2004) argues that “as the regime sought to implement the original Ba’[a]th principle of social transformation, it also imposed political rigidity, cultural uniformity, and intellectual obedience [...] Syria was to be controlled by the state, not fuelled by the creative energy of individuals” (404). At the national level, Baa’th Syria imposed many restrictions that limited freedom of speech. This echoes Bessami and Abu Amrieh’s comment on Arab playwrights who adapted and appropriated Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in the sense that they “comment on the contemporaneous issues in the Arab world” (1791).

In “Hamlet in Arabic,” Al-Shetawi (1999) writes that Adwan’s play projects the playwright’s darkest thoughts about the “political repression and corruption in his native Syria, and probably the Arab world at large” (50). He elaborates that the text is a direct critique to Arab intellectuals who failed to act “positively” towards the Arab region’s conflict with Israel especially after the loss of the 1967 war (50). In this sense, Hamlet’s alcoholism, Al-Shetawi maintains, echoes the intellectual slumber in the Arab world as “he embodies the image of the educated Arab in the sense that he is always taken by surprise” (51). Al-Shetawi’s focus on the portrayal of these particular secondary characters draws our attention to one of the significant changes in recontextualizing Shakespeare in the Arab world. Similarly, in “Hamlet as an Arab Intellectual: A Marxist Reading of Mamduh Adwan’s Play *Hamlet Wakes Up Late*,” Bedjaoui and Abu Amrieh (2022) argue that Adwan’s play “criticize[s] the Syrian policy of the post-1970s under the rule of President Hafez Al-Assad” (90). As a Marxist scholar, Bedjaoui and Abu Amrieh claim, that Adwan uses Shakespeare “to critically respond to the modern Arab politics” (90). Bedjaoui and Abu Amrieh conclude that “in delineating Hamlet as an Arab intellectual, he criticizes through him the hypocrisy not only of the Syrian regime, but of the Arab world in general” (90). Unlike Al-Shetawi’s , and Bedjaoui and Abu Amrieh’s readings, this article focuses on Adwan's representation of Laertes. By changing

Laertes's and Ophelia's characters drastically, Adwan points out how the 1970s in Syria were indeed "an interesting time" (71). For Bessami and Abu Amrieh "the representation of the political, social and cultural malaise of the region began from 1970s as the death of the late Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970) shattered all hopes of establishing an Arab "unity" (174).

In *Hamlet's Arab Journey*, Litvin (2011) writes that Adwan went in the same direction as Sadiq Jalal al-Azm who encouraged "his Arab leaders not to oversleep and let 'the Fortinbrases of his world...win the day and have the final say'" (27). Litvin affirms that Adwan's Hamlet's reproduction of Shahrayar is "self-expressi[ve]" of his "moody" thoughts and realizations (186). She adds that Adwan's readers were able to grasp that Hamlet's mouse trap is no "resistance" as she quotes Ghassan Ghunaym's interpretation of the Arabic Hamlet as "'an exhausted intellectual'... distinguishable from an outright 'opportunist' only by the guilt he suffers" (191).

In her analysis of the Arabic adaptations of *Hamlet* on the screen, Khoury (2010) writes in her article that Mamduh Adwan's play "awakened" the Arabic Hamlet Tradition (157). Similarly, Alghaberi (2018) writes that Adwan is a leading figure in the making of the "Arab Hamlet Tradition and Canon" (11). He argues that the tradition's concerns with socio-political criticism urges producers to think outside the box in reconstructing different "Hamlets" (10). In another article, Litvin (2014) illustrates that Adwan's theatrical piece:

alludes to contemporary politics: Elsinore (read the Arab World) is recovering from a bitter defeat by Fortinbras (Israel/the West), who still occupies a piece of its land (The Golan Heights/Palestine), the new king (Sadat) is treacherously planning to make peace with Fortinbras. (*Arab Near* 325)

Indeed, Litvin's reading of Adwan's text is purely political that comments in general on the Palestinian dilemma. She writes, furthermore, that the playwright's Hamlet "is helpless but far from blameless" as he appoints himself as "Christ, quoting the Gospel of Mathew to express his opposition to Claudius's proposed peace making with Fortinbras" (*Arab Near* 325)

Indeed, Adwan was a leading dramatist who commented regularly on the Palestinian question. He was an effective contributor to the Palestinian National theatre (1970) which helped in "politicizing" its audiences after the Six-Day-War through which theatrical pieces were seen as a form of "resistance" to Israeli occupation (Robin 192). The theatre historian Edward Ziter (2015) contends that

the writings of Adwan, Wannus and Maghut explore post Six-Day War effects (61). He argues that Adwan's play was written after "Sadat's historic speech to the Israeli Knesset in 1977" which was a "shock" to the Arab region and its "attack on 'the martyrs of the Arab World'" which was interpreted as a "normalization" of the death of the martyrs (Ziter 24). Ziter believes that similar to Hamlet's father's ghost, "the dead demand vengeance, but the greatest betrayal is political appeasement, not sexual transgression" (Ziter 25). He insists that the incorporation of the "angry ghost of a father" is very often incorporated in the Syrian theatre as a connotation of "martyrdom" (Ziter 25).

'Ismat (2019) writes in his article that Adwan was "nicknamed 'Zorba' for his wild and vivid personality" (123). 'Ismat affirms that the playwright "opposed the Alawites religious thinking and was inclined towards leftist ideology" (Ibid.). For Cooke (2007), Adwan views the prison narrative as a mirror to the Syrian everyday life (*Dissident Syria* 4). She maintains that Adwan was attacked for his ties with the Syrian regime due to being a part of the Arab Writers Union (*Dissident* 153). She quotes Adwan when he said that the status of intellectuals is "agonizing [...] who need to choose between daily security and revolting [...] Intellectuals had to negotiate between twin evils: state control and attempts at cooptation on the one hand and perception of appropriation on the other hand" (Cooke, 76-77). In *Dancing in Damascus*, Cooke (2017) illustrates that Adwan urges "readers and theatre audiences to think the unthinkable: coercion is not normal, stolen dignity must be redeemed, liberty seized" (23). Cooke quotes Adwan as saying:

We believed that a poem could overthrow a dictator. We were enchanted with the thought that art is a weapon. Of course, it is. But no poem, no piece of music can overthrow a dictator. It can, however, resist the normalization of oppression. It can focus on human beings and their deep humanity, reminding them constantly that they are human. (quoted in Cooke, 120)

Indeed, this quote in particular reminds us as readers of the importance of artistic production in fostering awareness of the sociopolitical situation as well as humanizing individual experiences. As stated by Adwan, writing a poem does not change an entire political system/regime, but it contributes in one way or another to the process of making change in society.

By contrast to the already conducted scholarship on Adwan's play, this article attempts to fill in a gap widely disregarded in academia. While the mainstream focused on analyzing the text as a commentary on the Arab-Israeli conflict, as stated

in the above-mentioned critical pieces, this article reads the play as a reflection of the domestic affairs of Adwan's Syria. It investigates the way *Hamlet Wakes Up Late* comments on the emergence of *Shabiha* and how the group oppresses youths to maintain the country's status quo. This article probes into how Adwan depicts the struggle of youths under the Syrian repressive regime. While the latter attempts to preserve its authority on Syrian lands, youths find themselves suffocated and frustrated to organize revolutions to voice out their concerns. Reading Adwan's play from this lens would help us as readers better understand the nature of the repressive regime and most importantly the tactics and strategies employed to silence an entire generation namely containment and coercion. This socio-political reading attributed to Adwan's play is inspired by the emergence of the Syrian uprising in 2011. In this sense, Adwan's text can be read as a revolutionary play that prophesizes the revolution of Syrian youths against authoritarian regimes.

### **Mercenaries in Shakespeare's *Hamlet***

Informants, thugs and mercenaries as characters, are present in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which further explains why Shakespeare's text is helpful in highlighting Syria's malaise. Claudius, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, refers to the "Switzers" to protect him (Kliman and Lake, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, 117). He says:

KING: Where are my Switzers? Let them guard the door.

*Enter a Messenger*

MESSENGER: What is the matter?

Save yourself, my lord (Ibid).

In the explanatory note, Bernice W. Kliman and James H. Lake (2008) write that the "Switzer" is a name that refers to the Swiss "bodyguards" who used to protect "foreign princes" (Ibid). Arguably, Adwan selected Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to draw an analogy between the Switzers and the *Shabiha* as two repressive apparatuses that protect the regime in power.

John Casparis (1982) highlights in his article that "by the end of the fifteenth century, the Swiss had mastered the new tactics and developed a reputation as invincible, fearless and ruthless soldiers" (597). He argues, furthermore, that "the mercenary" worked "for a specific wage... under a centralized, bureaucratic, hierarchal authority" (605). Seen from this angle, Claudius's use of the Switzers was to for the purpose of being protected from the revolution coming from the

people. Similarly, the *Shabiha* ring is considered the “bodyguard” of Claudius’s regime, having both Polonius and Rosencrantz as protectors of the regime. Here, the analogy drawn between both texts help us have a better understanding of Adwan’s rewriting of *Hamlet* as a palimpsest of Syrian youths’ struggles owing to the fact that the Bard’s play offers an inspiring environment to reflect on Adwan’s native Syria.

Furthermore, Shakespeare’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as informants in *Hamlet* who vouch their services to Claudius when they say: “we both obey/ And here give up ourselves in the full bent/ To lay our service freely at your feet, To be commanded” (Mowat and Werstine, *Hamlet*, 45). Similarly, in Adwan’s appropriation, both characters insist on the fact that they are “carrying out the king’s orders” (127). This entails the presence of the *Shabiha* phenomenon that works for the king and follows his orders. Both Claudius and Polonius are considered part of the authority; therefore, they order acts of violence toward the population but not doing them themselves.

### ***Shabiha*: An Etymology**

In *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*, Yassin Al-Haj Saleh (2017) traces the emergence of a group of “thugs” who called themselves *Shabiha*. He argues that the very origin of this phenomenon is oblique as it can have multiple sources: “*ashabaah* (ghost), since they are outlaws who work in the dark or *Shabah* that relates to the Mercedes Benz that senior *Shabiha* preferred? Or idea of *Shabh*, the extending and expanding of privileges and powers” (46). The group “surfaced in the second half of the 1970s, after Syria’s intervention in Lebanon in 1976 and the rise of the economic smuggling from Lebanon which is open economically into the Syrian isolated economics” (46). Indeed, the central source of their financial income was “smuggling [...] electronics, tobacco, drugs, alcohol, antiquities...etc” (47).

Al-Haj Saleh argues that due to the close ties shared between both *Shabiha* and the government, they were never stopped by the latter, only if one of their interests were put at stake (52). He writes that the *Shabiha* group was incorporated within the state as a part of “security then discharged them in a form of generalized, organized, and legitimized violence against society” (53). The *Shabiha*’s uncontrolled behavior bestowed signs of hostility, aggression and humiliation, and attempted to show the civilians the hierarchal system to let them understand their position as ruled subjects (54). For al-Haj Saleh, the *Shabiha* are “outlaws, having relation with *Mukhabarat* and police officers and gaining money from illegal practices” (55). Al-Haj Saleh

adds that by the 1980s, the president was to be seen as “the leading father” figure while the governed took the role of “children” (56). During this time, the group became so powerful, “untouchable, operating freely and with impunity in the coastal city of Latakia” (47).

### **Syrian Youths and *Shabiha* in Adwan’s Appropriation**

Adwan’s play comments on Syria’s socio-political life in the 1970s. He comments on the rise of *Shabiha* as a primary state apparatus that manipulates and silences the revolt of youths. Adwan starts his play by incorporating Shakespeare’s ending scene as a beginning in his; Laertes fencing Hamlet with a poisoned sword, having Claudius and Rosencrantz watching the fight. As it is written in the Bard’s original tragedy, Hamlet asks Horatio to be “fair” in retelling his version of the story. The stage is described as “dark” to reflect the gloomy atmosphere of injustice prevailing in Denmark after Hamlet’s death. Horatio comments, moreover, on Hamlet’s inability to grasp his surroundings by saying: “Life was not cruel to him, but he did not know that he lived in a difficult and interesting time” (*Four Arab* 71). Horatio’s comment entails the danger of being unconscious of the current surroundings of the individual. Hamlet’s downfall is a result of his blindness to the sociopolitical situation, and thus Horatio, or Adwan, predicts the future of Arab youths, represented by the unconscious Hamlet, in case they fail to act against authority that continuously and maliciously manipulates them. In other words, this section highlights youths’ difficult journey of self-assertion in Syria, and thus, the MENA region and their ongoing manipulation by the old regime and its apparatuses.

Horatio, furthermore, comments on the “interesting time” as a “time of great responsibilities and self-discipline and daily anxiety for oneself and for others and for the nation” (*Four Arab* 72). We believe that the responsibility Adwan is referring to is linked to the responsibility of Syria towards Syrians in providing a good life that guarantees an acceptable level of dignity, as well as its responsibility towards Palestine which the Arabs lost after the Six-Day War. Adwan’s recontextualization of *Hamlet* in the Arabic context reminds us of Harold Bloom’s theory of the *Anxiety of Influence* whereby he asserts that influence by Shakespeare had a similar sense to “inspiration” (xvi). He further maintains that “strong poems are always omens of resurrection. The dead may or may not return, but their voice comes alive, paradoxically never by mere imitation, but in an agonistic misprision performed upon forerunners by only the most gifted of their successors” (xxvi). Applying this to Adwan, his re-writing of Shakespeare’s tragedy was not merely a mimesis of Shakespeare’s theatrical piece, but rather a new production that is “inspired” by a

canonical piece of writing, and as stated by Bloom, this “inspiration” is triggered in only those equipped enough to “resurrect” new interpretations to an already existing text in the literary canon.

As stated above, this section attempts to highlight Adwan’s play as a projection of Syrian youths’ struggle for self-assertion while being silenced and manipulated by the old regime’s apparatuses such as *Shabiha*. In the first scene of his play, Adwan uses the motif of drinking to reflect the status quo of the country. Even if most characters are sober, they are drunk. This might be interpreted as Adwan’s comment on socio-political life in 1970s Syria as its population suffered under the regime’s *Shabiha*. Laertes’s first appearance in the play shows that he is no ordinary character as his first statement entails a critique of people’s “ignorance” when he enters a debate with Lorenzo and Guildenstern about the late king’s corpse. This again can allegorically refer to Adwan’s socio-cultural critique of Syria’s government whereby the level of “illiteracy” in the country reached around 60% of the country’s inhabitants (Cleveland 403). Adwan; therefore, uses the techniques of “redrafting” and “recrafting” (Sanders 46) to draw an analogy between his Syria and Shakespeare’s Denmark. Perhaps, one can say that *Hamlet Wakes Up Late* has its own “aura” that makes it very hard to detect that one is reading an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. It seems that readers detect the Bard’s text only through the names of characters but what is attributed to them does not resonate with Shakespeare’s text.

Laertes’s reasonable thoughts and logical arguments prove that he cannot tolerate discussions that are not based on reason. As proof, he is never able to finish the discussion with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as they relate the nation’s bad situation to people’s deviation from religion. In this way, Laertes’s character connotes the Saidian concept of the secular intellectual. For Edward Said (1994) the “public” job of the intellectual is to be an “outsider, ‘an amateur’ and disturber of status quo” (*Representations* x). To begin with, Adwan’s Laertes is an educated man who studied abroad and is closely related to his native culture as he wrote a thesis on “folk singing” that relates mostly to the masses. This accentuates the way he is close to the public, thus having a broader view that allows him to raise people’s consciousness. According to Gramsci, the essence of intellectualism should not be judged from “eloquence” as an undistinguished criterion rather a true intellectual, which he labels as “organic”, should be able to actively engage in real life “as a constructor, organizer, ‘permanent persuader’, and not just a simple orator” (10). This definition fits our understanding of Adwan’s representation of Laertes as an organic intellectual whose quest is to raise people’s consciousness and awareness

about their surroundings.

Moreover, Laertes is a secular organic intellectual in the way he bestows the intellectual's "universal" approach. For Said, an intellectual aims at deconstructing ideas "limiting to human thought and communication" (xi) and thus "universality means taking a risk in order to go beyond the easy certainties provided [to] us by our background, language, nationality, which so often shield us from the reality of others" (xiv). Laertes's comment on religion, including his mockery of the appearance of the Virgin Mary, makes him a secular intellectual *par excellence*. Despite being attacked by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for forgetting his religion after studying abroad, Laertes feels that his behavior is rather logical as a secular intellectual favors substance over superficiality, and thus, reason over emotion. As a secular intellectual, he analyses the situation reasonably as an "amateur" who studied outside his country, and thus, he can offer an alternative version of perceiving the country's status quo. He has no affiliation to his homeland's religion or background; therefore, he can offer a socio-cultural critique in a neutral objective way. For Levin (2002), Shakespeare's Laertes represents Hamlet's "Foil". Indeed, even though both are triggered by revenge, Hamlet's closeness to his father is juxtaposed with Laertes's "cold, formal and annoyed [...] sardonic" (222) relationship with Polonius.

Lorenzo regards Laertes as the country's savior from Claudius and Polonius's corruption. When they enter the stage, accompanied by both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Lorenzo tries his best to talk to Laertes about his father's embezzlement. He blames both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for their unnecessary comments that drove Laertes off-stage. He says: "You guys wasted our chance, I had wanted to bring the conversation around to his father" (*Four Arab* 75). Lorenzo draws a line of separation between Laertes and Polonius and tells his friends that the former differs from his father in terms of beliefs and morals. Indeed, Lorenzo has blind faith in Laertes' justice. He says: "Laertes is better than his father. I was wondering what he would do if he found out. But you guys ruined everything" (76).

Laertes's father, Polonius, is a corrupt politician who "embezzled" the money that was donated to help war victims. This fact is shown through Lorenzo whose dissident voice is brutally silenced by the regime's repressive apparatuses. Lorenzo is the incarnation of the voice of wisdom and justice. As a character, he wants to reveal Polonius's corruption to his son Laertes. He tells both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that Polonius "took more than three million [and] stole from the people" (75). Rosencrantz takes Polonius's side by telling Lorenzo let "him steal" as everybody in the country is "stealing" (*Four Arab* 76). Later on in the play,

Lorenzo's hatred towards Polonius is intensified as he "spits after him violently [and says that he] can't stand the sight of that man" (78). Laertes is not aware of his father's wrongdoings in the kingdom. Relating this to Al-Shetawi's and Litvin's arguments, it appears that Hamlet is not the only intellectual in the play waking up late to his surroundings; apparently, Laertes is also unconscious of his father's corruption and involvement in filthy political deals.

Laertes's portrayal is also reminiscent of Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami's illustration of Syrian elites who were torn during the revolution, which further accentuates the relevance of reading Adwan's text as prophetic of the Arab Spring revolutions. Yassin-Kassab contends:

As Syrians rose up against the regime, the old oppositional elites inside the country and in exile succumbed to catch up. Of the three main projects which resulted, one depended on the empty hope that the regime would negotiate itself out of existence, and two threw themselves to the mercy of foreign states. None were able to establish deep roots in the revolution on the ground, neither among activists not the armed resistance (183).

This feeling of being lost among Syrian elites has accentuated the masses' loss of revolution. Not only has the authoritarian regime taken the upper hand in terms of revolutions due to its heavy reliance on different apparatuses, but also Syrians have suffered a double-oppression having been betrayed by their elites. Similarly, Lorenzo and the actor in Adwan's play seem to have been betrayed by Laertes, their only hope to expose the corrupt regime and its *Shabiha*. In here, as it will be detailed below, the regime has used two main tactics to manipulate and quell the masses from revolutions and this includes coercion and containment.

When Polonius asks about the whereabouts of Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern start looking for Laertes in their pockets. When Polonius tells them to stop acting like children, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern say: "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (*Four Arab* 77). This, we believe, entails Adwan's prophecy about Syria's *Shabiha* who started telling people to consider the president as "the leading father" to whom citizens would take "the role of children" (Al-Haj Saleh 56). The latter are to be controlled and governed by the parental figure as they are unable to decide their lives themselves. The kingdom of heaven, we reckon, connotes Syria's authority, meaning that devotion to the leader and behaving like children would allow citizens to live peacefully under Claudius's absolute reign. Practicing the required

behavior would lead Lorenzo and the other characters to “enter the kingdom of heaven,” meaning good life. Moreover, it shows how Adwan exposes the regime’s infantilization of its people and youths.

Lorenzo believes that each time he sees Polonius he “feels that he’s filled his belly with the blood of the martyrs” (*Four Arab* 78). Rosencrantz tells Horatio and Lorenzo that working with Hamlet would guarantee them immunity from Polonius which again reminds us of the *Shabiha* who are “devoted to their leaders” (Al Haj Saleh 47), and thus, they gain absolute protection by authority. Polonius, in this case, bestows many signs that show he is a *shabih* in every sense of the word. According to Al-Haj Saleh, members of *Shabiha* share “powerful ties of loyalty” towards authority (55) which is itself a significant feature in Polonius who protects the regime with all his power. Moreover, Al-Haj Saleh argues that if the existence of the regime was threatened, “the masks would drop and *Shabiha* would practice unlimited violence, random and discriminatory” (56). This is reflected in Lorenzo’s case: he is tortured after his comments on the regime under Polonius’s orders as will be explained in the following paragraphs. Al-Haj Salah writes, furthermore, that Baa’thist members were rich and this entails Polonius’s richness that he took from the citizens’ money as well as the authority.

Polonius is indeed Claudius’s sidekick. He works hard to protect Claudius’s position as a king. He hires a group of citizens to support Claudius’s regime by giving them specific flags; he also teaches them to “chant the approved cheers” (112) and gives them orders to arrest and torture those who oppose the regime, particularly Lorenzo whom we know of his death later in the play. Indeed, Lorenzo’s rebellion is accentuated after he discovers his friend’s betrayal when he says that his act of treason is “just a natural result of the general corruption” (105). He carries on by saying that all the series of kidnappings and executions are done to “those who show their discontent” (105). He points to Hamlet’s ignorance and incites him to defy authority by saying “You have to stop what’s happening, you have to halt the current situation that’s corrupting the people, [and] end the waste of the nation’s resources” (106).

In Act II, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern torture Lorenzo whose “face is covered with blood” being accused of national treason after being condemned of “inciting the people to curse Fortinbras” (*Four Arab* 126). This, as stated above, signifies the strategy of containment in which Lorenzo’s rebellion was contained by torture. Here, containment would guarantee control over the masses as any voice that expresses revolution is silenced before it reaches the wider masses. This again confirms Adwan’s critique of *Shabiha* whose main job is to capture the regime’s

opposition and torture them (Al-Haj Saleh 60). When Horatio remonstrates that this is not a treatment fit to a “friend,” Rosencrantz confirms that he is fulfilling the king’s “dirty orders” (127). As stated above, *Shabiha* performed unconditional violence, and this shows Adwan’s critique of the country’s repressive apparatus. Rosencrantz knows that he has immunity since he serves the king, and thus, he allows himself to follow the orders to the extreme. He even tells Hamlet that he does not have authority as a crown prince over him as an informant, i. e. as a *Shabih*. Horatio narrates “and so Rosencrantz turns into an executioner of his old friends. Friends who were useful to him in difficult times, he became a weapon against them in the hands of the new time” (*Four Arab* 148). Rosencrantz symbolizes the authority’s repressive apparatus. Because people in authority cannot themselves execute people, they hire thugs and informants to do the job for them.

This depiction by Adwan in his play is reminiscent of Al-Haj Saleh’s condemnation of the unlimited force practiced by *Shabiha* in the Arab Spring. He comments on their savagery which is “propelled by a combination of violence, kinship and despotism” (52) and explains how it served the regime’s purpose in quelling revolutions. After being tied to the country’s organism, Al-Haj Saleh continues, “[*Shabiha*] paralyzed society, making resistance impossible outside the context of a full-blown revolution” (53). To bring insight into this suffocating environment, Al-Haj Saleh quotes lines from Mamdouh Adwan’s book *Hayawanat al-insan (The Animalization of Man)* in which the playwright explicitly refers to the vicious and inseparable ties between *Shabiha* and its regime. Adwan writes: “despite the fact that it was the *shabih* who had broken the traffic laws, he still got off his bike and started cursing at the driver [...] he kicked [the driver] in the face, the *shabih* answered, ‘Don’t you know that this whole country belongs to us?!’” (Quoted in Al-Haj Saleh 53). This use of “us” by the *shabih*, the critic argues, not only bestows signs of power, but shows how all violent actions are legitimized by the authoritarian regime (53-4). This intimidation surpassed physical boundaries to reach psychological and linguistic humiliation of populace (54).

Moreover, the authority seems to be quite scared of Laertes’s spirit of activism. Adwan’s characterization of Laertes as the representative of the “rabble” echoes Shakespeare’s portrayal of the same character in *Hamlet*. The Bard writes:

Than young Laertes, in a riotous head,  
O’ever bears your officers. The rabble call him “lord,”  
And, as the world were now but to begin,  
Antiquity forgot, custom not known,

The ratifiers and props of every word,  
 (they) cry “Choose we, Laertes shall be king!” (Mowat and Werstine 107).

As a young intellectual, Laertes seems to have planted the seeds of revolution in the masses. He was put in prison for “he entered the country by stealth and went to rally them and spread fabricated news about [the king,] inciting the people to rebel” (*Four Arab* 144). The informants affirm to Claudius that Laertes is popular among the “rabble” thus a possible leader of the revolution. People, in this sense, consider him as their representative instead of Hamlet. After being detained, the informants tell Claudius to offer Laertes a symbolic position in the palace without having any official “power” to reduce the masses’ rebellion since the presence of a representative within authority would make the population feel that their hopes and aspirations are “realized” (144).

Similar to Shakespeare’s text, Laertes, who realizes the death of his father, seeks revenge. He is blinded by the spirit of vengeance, and manipulated by Claudius who tells him that the informants carried orders he did not make. In Adwan’s re-writing, Laertes approves his sister’s marriage to Guildenstern to conceal her pregnancy, and agrees to have a position in authority as a medium between authority and the “rabble.” He is tricked into believing that Claudius wishes him good fortune. As in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Claudius arranges a duel between Hamlet and Laertes the outcome of which is the death of both. Adwan, thus, warns Syrian youths not to fall into the regime’s manipulation and to be cautious. Revolution is mandatory to attain political, social and cultural stability. At this stage, Adwan reveals another strategy of manipulation by the regime namely coercion in which Laertes is subjected towards agreeing on becoming part of the regime rather than defending his own people. Even if the essential plan to which he agrees links him to the populace, Claudius could have never allowed any rebellion or contact with the masses. The position he offered Laertes was a title without effective authority or power as he was doomed to die with Hamlet.

Adwan’s belief in the power of youths is omnipresent in the text. Claudius is aware that “young people are the blessing of life. They always set examples we should learn from. We should speed toward our goals with the speed of youth” (86). This statement can be read in two different ways. On the one hand, one may argue that Claudius is sarcastic since he is not interested in encouraging the youths to participate in the political life because they pose a threat to his rule. On the other hand, Adwan uses Claudius to project the importance of youths in fostering awareness and change in society as they can be a “blessing” to the entire community

when knowing how to react to oppression.

That is why we reckon that Claudius's use of Fortinbras as a pretext reflects again his manipulation of the masses and justifies the presence of Syrian *Shabiha*. For Al-Haj Saleh, "the Baa'thist used 'ideological tashbih:' accusing treason, a collective atmosphere of paranoia, putting population in guard of the conspiracies allegedly planned against them" (Ibid, 58). In this sense, it appears that Adwan's choice of *Hamlet* emanates from the fact that more than one feature of the play applies to Baa'th Syria that roamed in corruption and secularism. For instance, the play comments on how *Shabiha*, while claiming to be protecting people from external dangers and threat, are heavily involved in "smuggling." In the play, the actor says: "in the poor quarters they say that everyone from the palace only cares about arranging deals and smuggling money abroad" and that "no one cares anymore about the land Fortinbras has occupied" (*Four Arab* 97). Here, Adwan's reference to *Shabiha* is rather clear. Members of *Shabiha* used to practice "smuggling" from Lebanon. "Abroad" here, may refer to the easy access members of the *Shabiha* have to strengthen their existence in Syria through Lebanon. Moreover, the actor accentuates the carelessness by which the Palestinian question is being dealt with as no action has been made against the territory "Fortinbras occupied."

Adwan's incorporation of Syria's *Shabiha* is detailed when he mentions the "informants" to Claudius who "bring him all the news" (100). Al-Haj Saleh (2017) writes that the government used *Mukhabarat* who put citizens under "surveillance" to lower down all risks of revolution (49). This is evident in Claudius's use of Hamlet's friend, Rosencrantz, as an informant to control Hamlet's actions, mainly the play production. Using informants at this stage would help the authority maintain its power and preserve the status quo. Polonius hires Rosencrantz or as Adwan writes, Polonius has "been using him [Rosencrantz] for a while" to reveal a piece of information of great "value" (*Four Arab* 101). Rosencrantz informs both Claudius and Polonius of the changes in the play as well as the good relationship between Horatio and the actor.

Indeed, Polonius shows the threat that the actor poses as he questions this close tie when he asks "what could a youth who lives in the palace like Horatio have in common with a poor man like this actor" (102). This sentence entails two main facts. On the one hand, it refers to the fact that the people of the palace and those outside the palace live two completely different lives. It is, as if Adwan is making a distinction between the people living in the "kingdom of heaven" or inside the regime's palace including informants and members of the authority, and another

world or what we shall allow ourselves to call the “kingdom of hell” outside the palace in which people are poor, do not have preferences (*Four Arab* 95) and are barely recalling their humanity and dignity that they were deprived of by authority. On the other hand, it seems that Horatio’s interest in the actor stems from the very fact that he is the narrator in the story, and thus, the version he plans to tell does not only do justice to Hamlet but also does justice to the people living outside the castle.

At this stage, Adwan is calling on youths to look beyond the confines of the palace, or the Baath principles, disregard *Shabiha*, and use their powers of change to look at the truth that exists outside the realms of authority. His call for youths is indeed the solution he thinks possible for a revolution in Syria to make important decisions on both national and international spheres. This is evident when the actor tells Hamlet to stop turning around Rosencrantz’s “betrayal” and focus on the planned “reconciliation with the enemy” (Ibid, 105).

### **Conclusion**

In *Hamlet Wakes Up Late*, Mamduh Adwan re-writes Shakespeare’s play to comment on the sociopolitical conditions in Syria, and by extension the Arab World, in the 1970s. Numerous researchers have focused on the character of Hamlet, who, according to most, represents the Arab intellectual who is unaware of the conspiracies that surround him. This article, however, has focused on Adwan’s representation of other characters to comment on the strategies that the old guards employ to maintain their control over youths and manipulate them. This is explored through a detailed analysis of both Laertes and Lorenzo. In this article, we have argued that Laertes is an intellectual whose closeness to the masses has qualified him to speak on their behalf and defend their rights at one point. However, manipulated by Claudius, Laertes is distanced from the people whom he represents, and therefore, he becomes a pawn in Claudius’s grand plan of silencing people and crushing their revolts. While Claudius manages to contain Laertes’s anger by offering him a position in his government, Lorenzo, a character that Adwan invents, is detained and tortured by Claudius’s informants and thugs. In this way, Adwan exposes how the totalitarian regime employs filthy ways to quell revolutions namely containment and coercion.

In fact, the intricate system of surveillance, detention and torture that Adwan’s play depicts is a reflection of the repressive system that the government invented in the 1970s to protect the regime and silence dissident voices. At the heart of this coercive apparatus is *Shabiha*, a group of thugs and informants who swear allegiance to the regime. Nurtured under the country’s regime, *Shabiha* have

traditionally played crucial roles in averting protests against the regime. During the 2011 Syrian Revolution, *Shabiha* have played even a more visible role in torturing and killing civilians. Hence, while Adwan's play draws on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, it clearly depicts Claudius's cruel techniques and tactics to keep the youths silent. While the theme of rebellion is already present in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Adwan appropriates it in the Syrian context to demonstrate how Syrian youths, and by analogy Arab youths, are manipulated by the regime through the use of the *Shabiha* represented by both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who have no qualms about torturing and murdering young rebels and dissidents like to Lorenzo.

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