

“I belong only here in Baghdad”: transcultural adaptation and the Shakespearean canon in Monadhil Daoud Albayati’s *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* (2012)

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Abstract: *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad*, written by Monadhil Daoud Albayati, was commissioned by the World Shakespeare Festival in 2012. The festival aimed at commemorating the influence of Shakespeare across the globe and celebrating international adaptations and co-productions of his plays. The setting of the World Shakespeare Festival naturally encouraged cross-cultural adaptations, i.e. transpositions into cultural, political or religious contexts different from those of the hypotext. Daoud Albayati’s adaptation decentres *Romeo and Juliet* and sets the play in Iraq, in the context of the invasion of the country by the forces of the Coalition. Based on Linda Hutcheon’s concept of “transculturation”, this article will analyse the incorporation of cultural Iraqi elements into the plot: although the play was a commission, Daoud Al-Bayati wanted to address his people first and foremost, even if it meant that *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* was sometimes obscure to a Western audience. This article will also address the paradox of using the Shakespearean canon, which to this day occupies an ambivalent position in the cultural landscapes of former British colonies and mandates, to draw the attention of a European audience to the tragic fate of Iraq after its invasion by British and American forces.

Résumé : *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad*, écrit par Monadhil Daoud Albayati, est une pièce de commande pour le World Shakespeare Festival qui a eu lieu en 2012. Ce festival ambitionnait de commémorer l’influence de Shakespeare à travers le monde et de célébrer les adaptations et coproductions internationales de ses pièces. Le cadre du World Shakespeare Festival a naturellement encouragé les adaptations interculturelles, c’est-à-dire les transpositions dans des contextes culturels, politiques ou religieux différents de ceux de l’hypotexte. L’adaptation de Daoud Albayati décentre *Romeo and Juliet* et situe la pièce en Irak, dans le contexte de l’invasion du pays par les forces

de la Coalition. En s'appuyant sur le concept de « transculturation » de Linda Hutcheon, cet article analysera l'incorporation d'éléments culturels irakiens dans l'intrigue : bien que la pièce soit une commande, Daoud Albayati a voulu s'adresser avant tout à son peuple, même si cela signifie que *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* demeure parfois obscur pour un public occidental. Cet article abordera également le paradoxe de l'utilisation du canon shakespearien, qui occupe aujourd'hui encore une position ambivalente dans les paysages culturels des anciennes colonies et mandats britanniques, afin d'attirer l'attention d'un public européen sur le destin tragique de l'Irak après son invasion par les forces britanniques et américaines.

Keywords: Iraq war; Shakespeare; transcultural adaptation; literary canon; World Shakespeare Festival; rewritings

Mots-clés : Guerre en Irak ; Shakespeare ; adaptation transculturelle ; canon littéraire ; World Shakespeare Festival ; réécritures

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, new translations and iterations of Greek tragedies began to flourish on British stages, inviting audiences to draw parallels between the wars and conflicts depicted in classical plays and the unfolding war on terror. Between May 2004 and January 2005, no fewer than five adaptations of Greek plays were staged in England: *Cruel and Tender* by Martin Crimp, a rewriting of Sophocles' *The Women of Trachis*, was performed at the Young Vic; Euripides' *Ion* was adapted by David Hunt at the Mercury Theatre in Colchester, and *Iphigenia at Aulis*, based on Euripides' tragedy, was directed by Katie Mitchell at the National Theatre. In addition, two productions of *Hecuba*, the first by Jonathan Kent at the Donmar Warehouse and the second by the Royal Shakespeare Company, were staged.

The return of these tragedies to the forefront of theatrical creation prompted Michael Billington to wonder: "Where does our theatre

instinctively turn in times of crisis? Not to Shakespeare or Shaw but to the Greeks.” However, although tragedy can indeed be considered a “theatre of crisis” (Decreus qtd. in Banu 23), the Shakespearean canon remained, at the turn of the new millennium, a prolific matrix through which the subject of the war on terror, and more specifically the war in Iraq, was broached. For instance, *Henry V* was rewritten and set in the Iraqi desert in Nicholas Hytner’s 2003 production at the National Theatre; *Much Ado About Nothing* was used as the hypotext for Roy Williams’s *Days of Significance* (2008), which tells the stories of young British soldiers about to be deployed in Iraq; and *Macbeth* was reimagined through the Scottish lens in David Greig’s *Dunsinane* (2010), inviting a parallel between colonial conflicts in Scotland and Iraq.¹

This very brief overview of the British theatrical responses to the war in Iraq indicates that while original plays were written about the conflict,² playwrights also tended to turn to the Greek and Shakespearean canon.³ The transformation that hypotexts undergo in order to be adapted to the contemporary world, and more particularly to the context of the war in Iraq, paradoxically seem to underline a desire for stability: in times of political upheaval, meta-narratives, in Lyotard’s sense of the term, seem to be a source of immutability, a frame of reference through which the war in Iraq can be interpreted, processed and understood. However, as Linda Hutcheon points out, “adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication” (vxi): the necessary changes made to a play in order to adapt it to contemporary events shed light on our present, but also allow us to reassess the ways in which a literary canon is constructed and can become a space of friction.

This paper will consider the Western literary canon, and more specifically the Shakespearean canon, as a space of conflict through the adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* by Monadhil Daoud Albayati.⁴ Daoud Albayati rewrites *Romeo and Juliet* in the context of the sectarian conflicts that ravaged Iraq after the country was invaded by the forces of the Coalition in 2003. Using Linda Hutcheon’s con-

cept of transcultural adaptation, I will analyse the ambivalent role of the Shakespearean hypotext: can the play, deliberately rooted in Iraqi culture, draw the attention of a European audience to the tragic fate of Iraq, without losing its cultural specificity by operating through a Shakespearean matrix? The political potential of this rewriting will first be studied through the specificities of the transcultural adaptation and the changes made to adapt the play to the Iraqi political and cultural context. The reception of the play, both in Iraq and in the UK will then be analysed in order to pinpoint the political influence of the Shakespearean canon. Finally, the historical presence of the Shakespearean canon in Iraq will beg the question of adaptation as (re)appropriation.

***Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* as transcultural adaptation**

As part of the Olympic Games organised in London in 2012, a festival celebrating the influence of Shakespeare across the globe was held from April to September 2012. The World Shakespeare Festival, which mainly took place in Stratford-upon-Avon and the capital, aimed at celebrating Shakespeare's work by inviting playwrights from all over the world to adapt the Bard's plays: "[The World Shakespeare Festival is] a challenge set by the Royal Shakespeare Company to theatre groups around the world to create contemporary versions of the classics to mark the London Olympics" (Spencer). The festival strove to open up a new space in which marginalised, and even oppressed, voices could express themselves, turning Shakespeare into a cultural catalyst: "Shakespeare becomes a vehicle of empowerment, an agent to foster the multicultural good" (Huang and Rivlin 1). The scope of the festival was clearly intended to be both meliorative and gratifying for the countries and cultures thus represented through the adaptations and rewritings.

Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad was commissioned as part of the World Shakespeare Festival. First performed at the National Theatre in Baghdad, the play was then staged in Stratford-upon-Avon. It updates *Romeo and Juliet* in the context of religious tensions in Iraq after

the invasion of the country by the Coalition forces: the geographical precision “in Baghdad”, attached to the title of the play, underlines the decentring of one of Shakespeare’s most famous plays. The setting of the World Shakespeare Festival naturally lends itself to transcultural adaptations, i.e., transpositions into cultural, political or religious contexts different from those in which the hypotext takes place. Linda Hutcheon sees transcultural adaptation as a dialogue between works and the context in which they were produced:

Contemporary events or dominant images condition our perception as well as interpretation, as they do those of the adapter. There is a kind of dialogue between the society in which the works, both the adapted text and adaptation, are produced and that in which they are received, and both are in dialogue with the works themselves. Economic and legal considerations play a part in these contexts, as do evolving technologies [...]. So too do things like religion. (149)

The transposition of *Romeo and Juliet* to Iraq requires a transcultural encounter, the result of which is a hybrid play that borrows from several cultural, political and religious contexts. The playwright displays agency by selecting passages or features from the hypotext: what is retained, along with what is discarded from the original play, becomes highly significant. This process of transposition was theorised by Linda Hutcheon as “transculturation” (xvi). Hutcheon uses the metaphor of the adapter to describe this transformation: “Power comes in different forms, in addition to AC/DC and 120v/220v, of course, and it can be adapted for use in different contexts (different countries); the adapter plug and the converter allow the transformation of power to a usable form for a particular place or context” (150). By ensuring that the hypotext is intelligible to the audience in terms of its history and its political, cultural, social and religious context, the playwright plays the role of adapter. Daoud Albayati chose *Romeo and Juliet* not only because it is a world-famous literary reference, but also because the play lends itself to comparison with the tragedy being experienced in Iraq:

I found Shakespeare’s text to be relevant to my Iraqi audience, which has been suffering from sectarian violence since the American invasion. It was

a big adventure to struggle with a classical text, which is implanted in the memory of both the Iraqi and world reader. The process of writing took more than a year and a half. The adaptation should grow out of the Iraqi spirit entangled as it is with deep internal problems. Since I believe that theatre should be for the people, I had to adapt the Iraqi and local collective memory to the tradition of Shakespearean tragedy. (71)

Daoud Albayati's aim was to use Shakespeare as the matrix for a theatre steeped in Iraqi culture, which would speak first and foremost of the problems facing the country.

The sober aesthetic of *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad*, as well as its bare stage, allow the audience to focus on the text and the changes made to Shakespeare's play. The essence of the plot remains untouched: the Capulets and the Montagues are at war (here, they are fighting over the ownership of a boat) and Romeo and Juliet, who have not seen each other for nine years, are condemned to a doomed love affair. The characters' first names are retained from Shakespeare's play, and *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* regularly makes intertextual references: for instance, when Romeo asks the Nurse to tell Juliet where they can meet, the place agreed upon is called "Sheikh Zubare", a paronym for "Shakespeare" (Amjad and Makki 26).

The introductory stage direction plunges the audience into the atmosphere of a civil war, which will only grow more violent throughout the sixteen scenes of the play: "*The sound of gunfire and explosions. The scene conveys the atmosphere of a civil war. Young people run in all directions, carrying weapons*" (75).⁵ A history teacher replaces the chorus: the choice of this allegorical character reinforces the play's desire to present the history of Iraq through the Shakespearean matrix. The professor opens the play with a desperate observation:

HISTORY PROFESSOR. A long time would pass before we could comprehend the magnitude of what had happened. Alas, our homeland has become an arid wasteland, unable to support our ambition. (*To the characters onstage.*) Why are you smiling at the darkness? Turn away, I don't belong to you.

As the HISTORY PROFESSOR. addresses the audience, the other characters gradually exit.

HISTORY PROFESSOR. I want to inhale the fragrance of palm trees, not the stench of war. I crave the lovers' night, the night of those deeply in love. I am the water of life. I am the legal heir to this country. Bear witness. I belong only here in Baghdad, and only to Romeo and Juliet. (75)

While the prologue to *Romeo and Juliet* evokes a quarrel between two families and the fates of two individuals, Daoud Albayati chooses to make the History Professor the personification of the Iraqi nation through the use of the first-person pronoun. The parallelism between the last two sentences of the Professor's rejoinders ("Turn away, I don't belong to you" and "I belong only here, and only to Romeo and Juliet") categorically rejects conflict and struggle as the essence of Iraqi identity: by banishing the characters from the stage, the Professor puts the love and unity embodied by the lovers, albeit cursed, back at the centre of the play.

As a transcultural adaptation, *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* incorporates Iraqi culture and traditions, and Iraqi folklore replaces Shakespearean tales. For instance, the infamous Queen Mab speech delivered by Mercutio in Act 1, scene 4 of the original play is swapped for the account of a dream Mercutio has had about a beetle and a rat. Both speeches draw upon folk tales: Shakespeare referenced the Queen fairy, a figure deeply rooted in English folklore, while Daoud Albayati uses "[...] a version of a traditional story from Mosul about *kham-fasana*, a beetle" (qtd. in Al-Azraki and Al-Shamma 106). Mercutio's dream centres on a female beetle who turns down a marriage proposal from a radish peddler, then from a lettuce peddler, as both men admit they will hit her. A rat then comes along, and promises to ever only caress her: the beetle agrees to marry him. The couple are happy but destitute, and they go hungry. One day, the rat happens upon a jar of date syrup: trying to get some nectar for his beloved, he falls into the jar and drowns. The female beetle, overcome with grief, flies off on a carpet to ask Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, then Scheherazade, to help the poor, who suffer from the never-ending wars that are wreaking havoc on their country. The story ends with this prediction, delivered by the

beetle who tries to comfort her fellow women: “Be patient. Romeo is coming with a jar of date syrup” (83).⁶ This transcultural adaptation of the Queen Mab speech not only draws on Iraqi folklore, but also helps adapt the play to a specific contemporary context: “Sometimes adapters purge an earlier text of elements that their particular cultures in time or place might find difficult or controversial [...]” (Hutcheon 147). The transcultural shift from Queen Mab to the beetle illustrates the problems associated with adapting plays to different historical, religious and political contexts: the sexual undertones of Queen Mab, deemed inappropriate in Iraq, are replaced with a tale about the living conditions of the Iraqi people and presents Romeo as Juliet’s saviour.⁷

The transposition of Shakespeare’s play in the context of Iraq is also highlighted by the specificities of invasion by the Coalition forces and the inter-religious tensions it later provoked. The religious conflict is embodied by the fathers of the two protagonists: Juliet’s father wears a keffiyeh with a red and white chequered pattern similar to that worn by Sunnis. Montague, Romeo’s father, on the other hand, wears the black and white keffiyeh traditionally associated with Shiites (Arango). References to jihad and Al-Qaeda appear regularly, particularly in the person of Paris, who in this rewriting is a Mujahid advocating for violent action rather than traditional religious practices. The play also evokes the problems associated with the invasion of the country in 2003. Scene 7, for example, shows an anonymous and silent American General giving blood to Romeo’s father: “*Romeo’s father drags an IV stand with a transfusion bag. An American General stands beside him, giving him blood*” (85). Despite his silence, the presence of this high-ranking officer is a reminder that the Coalition forces have helped to stir up religious quarrels in Iraq. The play also refers to specific events, such as the massacre perpetrated by employees of the American private security company Blackwater. To Mercutio, who makes fun of her looks, the Nurse replies in Scene 10 that she will one day become famous in England and the United States:

Anyone who wants to go to London, he must be an extremist because the British love extremists and one could become famous after that. And then the American ambassador will send for you and I’ll become an important

person and they will give me fat contracts with many security guards—Blackwater security guards. Then they'll break the heads of anyone who tries to laugh at me. (90)

Hired by the US government to provide, among other things, security for Paul Bremer, Iraq's civilian administrator during the country's reconstruction, Blackwater was found guilty of murdering seventeen Iraqis in Nisour Square in September 2007 while its employees were escorting an American convoy.⁸ The Nurse denounces British prejudice against Iraqis and the permissiveness of the United States in the country's reconstruction market: lucrative contracts are awarded to the highest bidders.

Converting *Romeo and Juliet* to contemporary Iraq therefore serves Daoud Albayati's intention of writing a play specifically for an Iraqi audience. However, the dialogue theorised by Hutcheon in transcultural adaptations seems to give way to tension, in that not all references to specific events, traditional tales or other cultural and religious markers may be intelligible to a foreign audience.

Adapting for Iraqi and British audiences

The play was performed in Stratford-upon-Avon, and later in London, in Arabic with English surtitles, before being translated into English and included in the anthology *Contemporary Plays from Iraq* (2017), edited by Amir Al-Azraki and James Al-Shamma. Bennett and Carson felt that this surtitling made it difficult to understand the play: "The audience was sparse and seemingly predominantly Western and unable to understand the Arabic language. The rapid-fire surtitles made following both the action and words hard-going" (qtd. in Edmondson et al. 184). It seems relevant, however, that the play was performed in its original language, since the process of transculturation is intended to adapt it to a context unfamiliar to British audiences; translation into English would also have deprived the Iraqi actors of the opportunity to perform in the United Kingdom. As Spencer points out, the play was not designed for a Western audience, even though it was commissioned by the

Shakespeare World Festival: “The political message – hammered home to me both by Daood [sic] and his actors – is aimed at their Iraqi, not British audience.” The somewhat pejorative expression “hammered home” underlines the production team’s resolve to subvert Shakespeare: this play is resolutely Iraqi, whatever the hypotext on which it is based, and is not intended to be didactic. The History Professor paradoxically does not teach the audience about sectarian violence in Iraq: the character, who in turn acts as chorus and a wise advisor reminiscent of both Friar Laurence and Prince Escalus, does not provide any historical perspective. Rather, his rejoinders are limited to broad injunctions: “Enough. All you can talk about is religion and religion has nothing to do with what you claim it does. It’s been years. Haven’t you had enough of killing? Haven’t you had enough of animosity?” (95) As a seemingly secular figure, the Professor merely acts as the arbitrator between the two feuding families, therefore depriving the play of a structural tool for historicisation. The programme handed out before the performance in England is the only source of contextual information to guide British audiences: “Understand that we live in a place where terrorists break our homes over our heads. We are the family of *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad*, living in the time of the neo-barbarians” (qtd. in Steele Brokaw 8). The inability of British viewers to think of the eruption of unimaginable violence into the mundane may have, for some critics and members of the audience, downplayed the intrinsic horror of the final scene.

The last scene takes place in Baghdad’s Cathedral of Our Lady of Sorrows, where the History professor has advised Romeo to go hide. He has already been there for forty days when Juliet comes to find him. As a battle rages outside, gunshots can be heard and an explosion throws Juliet to the ground: thinking his beloved is dead, Romeo kneels over her body and cries out in despair. The stage, bathed in a cold blue light, contrasts with the spotlights shining on the actors, enveloping them in a softer glow, like a cocoon shielding them from the rest of the violent, cruel world. Merely stunned, Juliet wakes up and the two lovers profess their love for each other. Paris then barges

in wearing an explosive belt: “*Paris approaches them and blows himself up. The two families enter. They find Juliet’s scarf with that of Romeo. The History professor hands them to the families. The two brothers shake hands and exit. The end*” (105). The sobriety of the final stage direction contrasts with the audience’s feelings about the ending of the play:

On the night I saw the production in Stratford, this conclusion had a visceral effect on the audience. In the accelerated seconds between Paris’s arrival on stage and his fatal move, there was a sense of chilling recognition among some, but far from all, of the audience that this is what it would be like: to know what comes next and to have no power to change the outcome, that this was probably the end of one’s life. Even as I had that thought, I was also aware that others around me had no idea at all; their innocence was palpable and somehow deeply sad. (Bennett 9)

The visceral reaction Bennett first describes is nuanced: only a few people in the audience seem to be truly aware of what is going to happen on stage, while others, shielded by their relatively serene daily lives in the United Kingdom, are not expecting a suicide bombing. The play reaches its climax by depicting what Iraqis experience on a day-to-day basis, and by widening the gap between the different levels of interpretation: what is for some the tragedy of everyday life is for others a horrible realisation. That the final scene should unfold in this particular Cathedral is highly symbolic, and sadly familiar, to Iraqis: in 2010, it was the target of a terrorist attack which killed 48 people, perpetrated by a group close to Al-Qaeda. The location is therefore significant on three counts, since it is also located just a few steps from both the Iraqi National Theatre, where the play is performed, and Daoud Albayati’s flat (Spencer).

While knowledge of the hypotext is not crucial to understand the play, many cultural references specific to Iraq may have been lost on a British audience. Reviews and accounts of the show, according to Bennett, have not been particularly complimentary, and the use of this hypotext has been criticised:

Overall, the play’s few reviews, both of the Stratford and London performances, were generally not enthusiastic—that Daood [sic] might have

done much better to have written an original play if he had wanted to teach English audiences about conditions in Baghdad and that he should have left Shakespeare's classic play alone. (18)

That one should reproach Daoud Albayati's play with lack of originality seems unfair: by writing an original play, the playwright would never have had the opportunity to tour it in the United Kingdom.⁹ The Shakespearean canon thus seems to be a necessary hypotext in order to familiarise an English-speaking audience with the suffering in Iraq and make the country's tragedy more visible. Paradoxically, Iraqi theatre critics have chided Daoud Albayati for not drawing more from his country's rich literary tradition: "The production has also been criticised by Iraqi reviewers for its use of colloquial language and for not exploiting the rich poetical history of Iraqi literature" (Amjad and Makki 9). Transcultural adaptation therefore becomes the *locus* of tensions between the hypotext and the hypertext, and, in the case of this play, challenges a British audience who does not share the same frame of reference. Shakespeare's global status and influence in the Western literary canon can be conducive to processes of (re)appropriation leading to such friction. The term, defined by Fischlin and Fortier, "suggests a hostile takeover, a seizure of authority over the original in a way that appeals to contemporary sensibilities steeped in a politicized understanding of culture" (3). The notion of adaptation as conflict therefore needs to be historicised and placed in the perspective of Shakespeare's presence in the Middle East.

Globalised Shakespeare: (re)appropriation of the Shakespearean canon

The spread of Shakespeare's works around the world has been studied under the label of "globalisation" since the 1960s. Bosman points out, however, that the term covers a much older reality: "[t]he term names a condition as ancient as the experience of empire and diaspora, of nations and the states they create" (qtd. in de Grazia and Wells 285). More specifically, Margaret Litvin, Avraham

Oz and Parviz Partovi detail Iraqi productions of Shakespearean plays in the twentieth century: “Iraq saw nine professional Shakespeare productions between 1962 and 1985. All were tragedies except *The Merchant of Venice* (1965) and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1982), both directed by Sami Abdel Hamid” (102). From 2001 onwards, the Anglo-Kuwaiti playwright Sulayman Al-Bassam established himself as the leading director and adapter of the Shakespearean canon in the Middle East. His *Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*, published in 2014, consists of three adaptations: *Al-Hamlet Summit* turns Hamlet into a jihadist, *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* analyses the consequences of the invasion of Iraq by Coalition forces and *The Speaker’s Progress*, based on *Twelfth Night*, examines the political forces behind the Arab Spring. The omnipresence of Shakespeare in this region is partly explained by the frequent use of these plays, especially in countries under political and cultural censorship, to thwart prohibitions and comment on contemporary socio-political problems. Shakespeare is particularly present in Iraq: “Shakespeare is well-read here and, when one looks beyond Baghdad’s recent history and to the traditions of an intellectual and cultural past that ended relatively recently, more revered even than in other countries with a theatrical history” (Spencer).¹⁰ Under British mandate from 1920 to 1932, Iraq was exposed to Shakespeare, whose plays were used as a tool for British cultural imperialism. As Edward Said points out in *Culture and Imperialism*, the education provided in Arab countries gave pride of place to the Western literary canon: “Young Arabs dutifully read Milton, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Austen, and Dickens as they might have studied Sanskrit or medieval heraldry; no emphasis was placed on the relationship between English and the colonial processes that brought the language and its literature to the Arab world” (305).

Literature is one of the tools of cultural imperialism, and Shakespeare in particular was used by the British Empire to promote the English language, as Julie Sanders argues:

Shakespeare was undoubtedly deployed as a tool of empire, taught in schools across the world as a means of promoting the English language and the British imperial agenda. As a result, postcolonial texts that “talk back”

to the colonizing culture frequently deploy Shakespeare as a means of achieving this. There are complex reasons at stake: as products of imperial and imperialist educational structures, many of these writers share knowledge of Shakespeare with the dominant culture they seek to critique. If adaptation requires foreknowledge of the source for the system of analogue and juxtaposition to succeed [...] then Shakespeare is a reliable cultural touchstone, a language “we all understand”. (52)

It is therefore not surprising that Daoud Albayati chose *Romeo and Juliet* to evoke the fate of Iraq after its invasion by the Coalition forces. By choosing a hypotext from the Western canon, the play becomes more easily accessible to the British and can be performed abroad; moreover, by responding to a commission for a global festival, Daoud Albayati ensures that the plight of the Iraqi people is visible to a Western audience. The World Shakespeare Festival’s very approach, however, is marked by a form of cultural imperialism: if the aim is to celebrate a globalised Shakespeare and to honour transcultural adaptations, one might also argue that this event has reinforced British cultural prestige and influence throughout the world, and particularly in its former colonies. Although Emer O’Toole welcomes the geographical and cultural diversity of the productions in an editorial published in *The Guardian*,¹¹ she nevertheless laments the fact that these foreign companies have been invited to Britain for the sole purpose of staging Shakespeare’s plays: “[...] wouldn’t it be better if re-imagining the British canon were not a pre-requisite for invitation to the UK’s biggest professional theatre festival?” (2012). The festival’s website boasts that it is the biggest Shakespeare event ever organised, bringing thousands of international artists to England. It also points out that almost 50% of the world’s children study Shakespeare at school, a total of 64 million pupils: “The Festival is creating a community of teachers across the world who are passionate about teaching Shakespeare, creating a legacy for young people everywhere” (World Shakespeare Festival website). The cultural prestige of this legacy, and the economic motive that goes with it (one million tickets were sold), have turned Shakespeare into an industry.¹²

The (re)appropriations of Shakespeare's plays over the centuries offer insights into historiographical approaches to this canon:

[...] a historiographical approach to Shakespearean appropriation becomes in many respects a study of theoretical movements; many theories which had their intellectual foundation in recent decades, such as feminism, postmodernism, structuralism, gay and lesbian studies or queer theory, and postcolonialism, have had a profound effect on the modes and methodologies of adapting Shakespeare. (Sanders 46)

In a postcolonial context, it seems crucial to bring Shakespeare down from his pedestal: Marjorie Garber sees him as a monument to be toppled (10), while Stephen Bottoms criticises his status as a deity and a figure of authority against whom we must now try to measure ourselves (qtd. in Adiseshiah and Lepage 78). With the advent of postcolonial studies, many critics are arguing for an emancipation from the cultural prestige attached to this author, following Bottoms' argument:

I want instead to argue for an 'emancipated' approach to working with Shakespeare – one which acknowledges the inevitability of his influence (as the author of tales and phrases that now form part of our everyday cultural currency), while removing Colossus from his pedestal and restoring him to the status of fellow theatrical citizen. (qtd. in Adiseshiah and Lepage 60)

This new paradigm seeks to place Shakespeare on an equal footing with other authors in Western literary history, and to put an end to a form of "bardolatry" (60). The process of (re)appropriation offers a welcome decentring: using Shakespeare as a diversion, a gap, to comment on a contemporary situation would encourage other perspectives. By referencing Iraq's rich culture as well as the fallout from the invasion of the country by Anglo-American troops, Daoud Albayati decentres Shakespeare and uses a well-known tale in order to stage Iraq's plight as the main focal point. While he had to "adapt the local and collective Iraqi memory to the tradition of Shakespearean tragedy" (70), Daoud Albayati also reminds his audience in the foreword of the play that "[he] is the true heir of tragedy. [He] wrote while [his] clothes were drenched in blood" (70).

Conclusion

With *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad*, Daoud Albayati appropriates the Shakespearean matrix and uses it to shed light on Iraq's tragedy. Although the play was commissioned as part of a festival meant to celebrate Shakespeare, the playwright chooses, to some extent, to risk the alienation of part of its European audience by writing a play meant for Iraqis: as such, transcultural adaptations may become spaces of friction. Using Shakespeare as hypotext to denounce the consequences of the invasion of Iraq by the forces of the Coalition helps question our relation with the Western canon and the way it is built. In *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation* (2014), Douglas Lanier argues in favour of a rhizomatic conception of the Shakespearean canon, rather than a simply arboreal one: the structure of the tree invites us to think of Shakespeare's cultural authority as residing exclusively at the root, in the original texts. The horizontal network of rhizomes, on the other hand, provides a form of decentring:

Within the Shakespearean rhizome, the Shakespearean text is an important element but not a determining one; it becomes less a root than a node that might be situated in relation to other adaptational rhizomes. To think rhizomatically about the Shakespearean text is to foreground its fundamentally adaptational nature—as a version of prior narratives, as a script necessarily imbricated in performance processes, as a text ever in transit between manuscript, theatrical and print cultures, as a work dependent upon its latter-day producers for its continued life. (Lanier qtd. in Huang and Rivlin 29)

The rhizomatic conception of the Shakespearean canon encourages us to consider rewritings, adaptations and (re)appropriations as an integral part of this canon. Shakespeare's status as a cultural authority is diluted, to the benefit of counter-hegemonic appropriations of his work: a web of references and texts related to Shakespeare is thus woven, with the aim of deconstructing the influence of this literary canon. I would add, however, that even if this rhizomatic web offers the possibility of creating other nodal points, it continues to make Shakespeare a central point: to start from one of his plays in order to

deconstruct it is to continue perpetuating the cultural authority of this literary figure (Lanier qtd. in Huang and Rivlin 6). Despite this, the rhizome has the advantage of placing Shakespeare's plays within an interconnected whole, in which each work has its place.

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¹ More recently, Swiss theatre director Milo has also adapted Aeschylus' *The Oresteia* to the context of Iraq in his play *Oreste in Mosul* (2019).

² Jonathan Lichtensein's *The Pull of Negative Gravity* (2004), Simon Stephens' *Motortown* (2006), Gregory Burke's *Black Watch* (2006), Colin Teevan's *How Many Miles to Basra* (2006), Caryl Churchill's *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* (2006) or David Hare's *The Vertical Hour* (2006) are some of the many British plays written about the war in Iraq.

³ As underlined by Georges Banu, the rise in popularity of certain authors from the Western repertoire is uncertain. Banu sees the theatrical canon as an ocean, in which each playwright comes and goes as waves do: "In the repertoire, Brecht, Chekov, Shakespeare and the Greeks sometimes take precedence – not exclusivity. They all seem to respond, one after the other, to what the theatre of a particular period needs" (8, translation mine).

⁴ There are several spellings of the playwright's name: I will use in this article the one that can be found in *Contemporary Plays from Iraq* (2017), edited by Amir Al-Azraki and James Al-Shamma.

⁵ In a terrifying echo of the fear Iraqi people experience on a daily basis, real explosions were heard on the morning of the premiere of the play (Arango).

⁶ The footnote included in the text explains that some versions of the tale end with a warning: "In one telling, it concludes after the death of the rat, with the moral 'Don't marry a rat'" (qtd. in Al-Azraki and Al-Shamma 106).

⁷ Other examples of cultural and idiomatic references are listed in Fazel, Asadi, and Makki, Salam Hasan. "Al-Bayati's *Romeo And Juliet In Baghdad* And The Call For Love And Harmony: A Study In Adaptation And Its Concept Of Indigenization." *Mutlicultural Education* 7.3 (2021): 23-29.

⁸ The four employees tried in the United States and found guilty of the massacre were later pardoned by Donald Trump in 2020.

⁹ *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* is the only play from *Contemporary Pays from Iraq* to have been staged in the United Kingdom.

¹⁰ The dictatorial regimes of the Middle East seem to have favoured this canon for the themes it tackles to their advantage, such as the legitimacy of power, but also for the anti-Semitic use they could make of it. Daoud Albayati's wife, Deborah Shaw, explains: "For instance, *The Merchant of Venice*, with its Jewish villain, was a staple of school curriculums under Mr. Hussein" (Arango 2012).

¹¹ O'Toole refers to productions of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Richard II* et *All's Well That Ends Well*: "Bitter Pill's visually gorgeous Swahili *The Merry Wives of Windsor* managed to inject the most brainless and boring of Shakespeare's comedies with vitality and belly laughs. Palestinian collective Ashtar made a powerful political statement about displacement through its stripped-down *Richard II*. The festival has offered UK audiences their first chance to watch the National Theatre of China, and this week sees India's Arpana theatre perform in

Britain for the first time with an all singing all dancing Gujarati *All's Well That Ends Well*' (2012).

¹² Fischlin and Fortier speak of an actual industry dedicated to Shakespeare. Apart from these economic issues, the permanence of Shakespeare's texts can also be explained by the fact that they have fallen into the public domain: "There are also economic and legal factors: Shakespeare is helpfully outside copyright law, making him safe as well as interesting to adapt" (48).