

NILE QUEENS, ARABIAN PRINCES HARD-  
WORKING TURKS, AND DIRTY OLD ARABS:  
IMAGES OF EASTERNERS IN MODERN WESTERN  
PLAYS

by Robert Myers

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Almost immediately after Amanda Wingfield discovers near the end of the first act of Tennessee Williams' 1942 play *The Glass Menagerie* that her son Tom has invited his co-worker Jim to their modest St. Louis apartment, she exclaims that she will have to "work like a Turk" to impress the long sought-after "gentleman caller" whom she hopes will secure her daughter Laura's future (27). Since she then immediately proceeds to inquire about Jim's ethnic background, and instantly assumes from the response to her inquiry—Irish—that he may be an abuser of alcohol, the reader can be forgiven for assuming that her use of the word "Turk" also constitutes a racial slur. At the beginning of the play, for example, she has longingly recalled the afternoons on the front porch of Blue Mountain, the estate where she grew up in the Mississippi Delta, when she herself entertained gentlemen callers. "Why sometimes," Amanda says, "there weren't chairs enough to accommodate them all. We had to send the nigger over to bring in folding chairs from the parish house" (4).

Upon more careful consideration, however, the reader may conclude that in comparing the impending Herculean labor that she must undertake to quickly transform their modest tenement into a suitable scene for successful courtship and herself into an appropriately coquettish hostess, she is in fact praising the "Turk's" work ethic. The Turks she is referring to may even include Arabs—that is Lebanese or Syrian immigrants, who migrated to the Gulf Coast of the U.S. in the late 19th- and early 20th-century and quickly developed a reputation as industrious merchants. Moreover, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, completed five years later, Williams seemingly celebrates the ethnic diversity of the French Quarter of New Orleans, and his character Stanley Kowalski defends himself against Blanche's use of the ethnic slur "Polack," by saying: "I am not a Polack. People from Poland are Poles, not Polacks. But what I am is a one

hundred per cent American, born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud as hell of it, so don't ever call me a Polack" (86).

In Scene X of the play, Stanley claims not to have been fooled by the act Blanche has put on since her arrival in New Orleans: "You come in here and sprinkle the place with powder and spray perfume and cover the light-bulb with a paper lantern, and lo and behold the place has turned into Egypt and you are the Queen of the Nile! Sitting on your throne and swilling down my liquor" (100). Although immediately after this scene, he enters the bedroom, closes the door and rapes Blanche, what seems clear is that from his perspective, and perhaps Williams' also, Egypt and the role of the Queen of the Nile are associated not only with deceit and treachery but also a kind of dangerous theatrical enchantment which Stanley has decided to ruthlessly dispel.

Precisely the same image from the East appears in a much more benign context in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, a play written a dozen years later. Asagai, a Nigerian who is courting Beneatha Younger, questions why the young African-American woman would want to disfigure her hair—i.e. straighten it in an attempt to "assimilate"—when she has the profile of "a queen of the Nile" (46). Soon after he departs, she leaves the apartment to, as she puts it, "become a queen of the Nile" (51). When she reappears at the beginning of Act Two she is wearing a Nigerian robe and headdress, which she abruptly removes to the obvious dismay of George Murchison, her well-to-do, assimilated boyfriend; when he interrupts the Nigerian dance she is performing with her brother Walter for his wife Ruth:

George: (To BENEATHA) Look honey, we're going to the theatre—we're not going to be in it...so go change, huh?

(BENEATHA looks at him and slowly, ceremoniously, lifts her hands and pulls off the headdress. Her hair is close-cropped and unstraightened.

GEORGE freezes mid-sentence and RUTH's eyes all but fan out of her head)

George: What in the name of—

Ruth: (Touching BENEATHA'S hair) Girl, you done lost your natural mind!?

Look at your head. (64)

The fact that for Beneatha this mythic Eastern figure is inextricably linked to the African-American quest for identity—in much the same way that, for example, Islam as a pan-Arab, pan-African, multi-racial movement, would eventually come to represent liberation for Malcolm X—is reinforced by the fact that Asagai explicitly says that the first words she uttered to him were, “You see, Mr. Asagai, I am looking for my identity!” (46). Moreover, at the end of the play she announces to her mother and incredulous brother that Asagai has proposed to her and hints that she wishes to marry him so as to practice medicine in Nigeria, and undergo, as it were, a “Hajj” in search of her identity.

One sees this trope of the East as a sphere of romantic illusion even more clearly in Scene V of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, when, as Blanche is preparing for a date with Mitch, a “Young Man” appears at the door collecting for the newspaper. In spite of the fact that she has no money, she tries to entice him to stay by praising his beauty, which she compares to that of a prince in *The Arabian Nights*:

Blanche: You make my mouth water.

Young Man: Well, I'd better be—

Blanche: Young man! Young, young, young, young—man! Has anyone ever told you that you look like a young prince out of the Arabian Nights?

Young Man: No, ma'am.

(*The YOUNG MAN laughs uncomfortably and stands like a bashful kid.*

*BLANCHE speaks softly to him.)*

Blanche: Well, you do, honey lamb. Come here! Come on over here like I told you! I want to kiss you—just once—softly and sweetly on the mouth.

(*Without waiting for him to accept, she crosses quickly to him and presses her lips to his.)* (65)

Clearly, for Blanche—and Williams—and perhaps even for Beneatha and Hansberry, a large measure of the lure of the romantic East is its suggestion of forbidden sexuality, which, as Edward Said reminds us, was turned into a commodity by the 19th- and 20th-century Orientalists:

Virtually no European writer who wrote on or traveled to the Orient in the period after 1800 exempted himself or herself from this quest...What they looked for often...was a different type of sexuality, perhaps more libertine and less guilt-ridden; but...[i]n time ‘Oriental sex’ was as standard a commodity as any other available in the mass culture. (190)

More significant, however, is the fact that in both *A Raisin in the Sun* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the images of the East—the young prince of *The Arabian Nights* and especially the Queen of the Nile—are themselves tied to theatricality and illusion. In Scene X of the latter play, Stanley explicitly states his intention to unmask as a fraud the prolifically theatrical Blanche who, after all, has arrived in the French Quarter with a trunk full of costumes, the most garish of which—described by Stanley as a “worn-out Mardi Gras outfit, rented for fifty cents from a ragpicker! And with the crazy crown on! What queen do you think you are?” (100)—she is wearing in this scene. (The importance of the image of the “Queen of the Nile,” and the stakes

for Stanley in his quest to expose Blanche's role as a guise is underscored by the fact that he too is preparing to take on a role, to don a costume, the pajamas made of that most Oriental of fabrics, silk, which he wore on his wedding night, and which, he says, "When the telephone rings and they say, 'You've got a son!' I'll tear this off and wave it like a flag" (99). That Stanley sees his battle with Blanche not as simply a fight for space and an attempt to reclaim his home but a struggle to the death between two people posing as potentates is reinforced by his words in Scene VIII when Stella tells him to, "Go wash up and then help me clear the table":

*(He hurls a plate to the floor.)*

Stanley: That's how I'll clear the table! *(He seizes her arm.)* Don't ever talk that way to me! "Pig—Polack—disgusting—vulgar—greasy"—them kind of words have been on your tongue and your sister's too much around here! What do you two think you are? A pair of queens? Remember what Huey Long said—"Every Man's a King!" And I am the king around here, so don't forget it! *(He hurls a cup and saucer to the floor.)* My place is cleared! You want me to clear your places? (84)

In the case of *A Raisin in the Sun*, it is the image of the "Queen of the Nile" more than any other in the play that forces the viewer to re-think the facile view of Hansberry as a straightforward, realist chronicler of the northern, urban, working-class African-American experience. The metatheatricality of Beneatha and Walter's dance should clue the viewer in to the fact that for Hansberry, as for Williams, questions of identity are intimately tied to the nature of theatre. Besides the obvious ironic humor of George Murchison announcing to a character who is performing a play-within-a-play that she and he are "going to the theatre, not going to be in it," Beneatha's transformation is a reminder of how many metatheatrical moments tied to

questions of identity this ostensibly realistic play contains. Not the least of these is Walter's rehearsal and subsequent performance of what is, in effect, a minstrel show for Lindner, the representative of the white block association which has offered to pay the Youngers not to move into the house Mama has already purchased in Clybourne Park.

Although Williams', and to a lesser extent Hansberry's, ostensibly positive metaphors are inevitably freighted with the accumulated baggage of 18th- and 19th-century Western academic and literary images of the East and, especially in the case of Williams, the scent of the hackneyed perfume of forbidden sexuality, their representations of the East appear quite benign beside some of their dramatic counterparts in Europe and the U.S. in the 20th-century. If Williams' images, for example, run the risk of insidiousness, others in modern and contemporary Western films and plays disparage Arabs and Easterners much more directly, and are likely to strike even the most casual reader as gratuitous. I will argue that on closer examination, these outbursts are reflective of prevailing perceptions of Arabs and the East at the time they were written.

Jack Shaheen has covered somewhat similar territory in his study of cinematic portrayals of Arabs and others from the East in *Reel Bad Arabs*. With ample support, Shaheen asserts that Hollywood has manufactured what amount to mythic prototypes of Arabs—"Villians, Sheikhs, Maidens, Egyptians and Palestinians"—which are simply reactivated and inserted almost automaton-like into pre-packaged scripts (13). In a seemingly endless catalogue of plot summaries of what audiences have seen and heard in recent mainstream Hollywood films, Shaheen describes the carefully crafted images of machine-gun-toting child murderers and incoherent, wild-eyed bombers and dark-skinned, bloodthirsty villains that have peopled movie screens around the world for the past ten decades. These manufactured mythic images of Arabs and Easterners, according to Shaheen, are clearly designed to upset "our cozy modern world"

with the disturbing persistence and re-emergence of the “primitive” (6), a trope that Said has described at length in *Orientalism* and summarily dismantled. Said’s analysis notwithstanding, as Sam Keen says in Shaheen’s study: “You can hit an Arab free; they’re free enemies, free villains —when you couldn’t do it to a Jew or you can’t do it to a black anymore” (quoted in Shaheen 6).

Although Shaheen expends the bulk of his study analyzing movies about terrorism, action movies and desert adventures, he does briefly discuss what he calls “gratuitous scenes and slurs” from popular films such as *Back to the Future*, *Bonfire of the Vanities*, *Network*, and *Young Sherlock Holmes* (27). Perhaps the most egregious and unlikely example of a gratuitous slur is from *Black Stallion*, a 1979 film directed by Francis Ford Coppola. The film is adapted from William Farley’s book about a boy and an Arabian stallion, which has sold more than twelve million copies worldwide. “In the book,” writes Shaheen, “a benevolent Arab sheikh befriends an American boy, giving the youth the Arabian’s first foal” (102-103). However, in the film the Arab is transformed into an animal-abusing villain, who tries to drown the boy during a shipwreck. “Credits [for the movie],” writes Shaheen, “tag the villain simply ‘Arab’” (103).

If one accepts Shaheen’s thorough—although not necessarily systematic—assembly of data, one would be hard put to find a more nefarious example of what Theodor Adorno has dubbed “the culture industry” than the barrage of anti-Arab propaganda dispensed in Hollywood films during roughly the past century. Nonetheless, this “manufactured prejudice,” as William Greider describes it in the foreword, is perhaps different only in intensity and duration from other images Hollywood has produced that simply reinforce ingrained prejudices (viii). After all, as the character Lee, quoting the Hollywood producer Saul Kimmer, says in Sam Shepherd’s 1978 play *True West*, “In this business we make movies, Americans movies. Leave the films to the French” (30). The Hollywood style of filmmaking intentionally delimits possible interpretations

for the same reason it delimits possible responses. As the 20th-century heir to the French boulevard melodramas of Scribe and Sardou, many of the Hollywood movies Shaheen studies are not created as multi-faceted aesthetic objects designed to elicit a variety of valid responses and interpretations. One could argue that their style presupposes a collective and uniform response, and thus the fact that they would be employed as a means to reinforce a hegemonic ideology, as Antonio Gramsci would describe it—in this case anti-Arab sentiment in the West—may be disturbing but it is hardly surprising, especially when one considers the other ideological positions promulgated by Hollywood films through product placement, sexual roles, consumer behavior, racial prejudices, etc.<sup>i</sup>

This study, however, principally concerns plays, not films. Therefore, Raymond Williams' concept of “the structure of feeling” presents itself as a much more fruitful model for reading what are ostensibly serious artistic texts. The three plays that will be analyzed here—*Heartbreak House*, by George Bernard Shaw; *Look Back in Anger*, by John Osborne; and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, by Edward Albee—were written by individual artists who obviously expected audiences and critics to treat the written and performed texts as complex works of art. Nevertheless, all three contain seemingly gratuitous anti-Arab eruptions that, at least in the case of Osborne's and Albee's plays, are not dissimilar to the ones Shaheen describes in *Black Stallion* and other Hollywood films.

Raymond Williams, who devotes much of his theoretical work to refining and refuting Marx's concepts of “base” and “superstructure,” offers as an alternative the much more fluid and an all-encompassing notion of “structure of feeling,” which both produces and is reflected in cultural products. The term, which obviously owes much to Hegel's *zeitgeist*, is defined as follows in his essay “Film and the Dramatic Tradition”:

[D]ramatic conventions...are fundamentally related to the structure of feeling in that period. All the products of a community in a given period are... essentially related...In the study of a period, we may be able to reconstruct... the material life, the general social organization, and, to a large extent, the dominant ideas...And it seems to be true, from the nature of art, that it is from such a totality that the artist draws; it is in art, primarily, that the effect of the totality, the dominant structure of feeling, is expressed and embodied. (33)

George Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House* would seem to provide an excellent example of precisely the kind of work of art that Williams describes here. Written in 1917, during the height of World War I, by the most renowned playwright working in Great Britain at the time, *Heartbreak House* was not produced until 1920, two years after the end of the War. Shaw, who had been denounced as a traitor for expressing in "Commonsense About the War," an essay published in 1914, less than wholehearted support for the war, postponed production of the play because he believed that the theatre-going public was unprepared for the critique of British politics and its pro-war policies contained in his play (Dietrich 128). Apparently, as Shaw suspected, another couple years of futile, mechanized slaughter softened up the British audience, in spite of the nominal allied victory in the war, and the play was well-received when it was first staged in 1920, and five years later Shaw was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. There are a number of seemingly obvious targets in the play—technology used for warfare, rich industrialists, self-righteous British nationalists, the British political system, and the supposed saviors of European civilization—but Arabs and the East would not seem, at least at first glance, to be among them. And one can be forgiven, if one reads the play instead of seeing it performed, for minimizing the effect on an audience of seeing one of the principal characters, Hector

Hushabye, dressed in what Shaw describes as “a handsome Arab costume” for the entire second half of the play.

Although in the stage directions Shaw describes Hector’s costume as “handsome,” the character wearing it clearly does not share the author’s opinion (791). When told by Randall Utterwood—who is in love with his own brother’s wife, who is also Hector’s sister-in-law—that Hector is “what women consider a good-looking man,” he replies:

I cultivated that appearance in the days of my vanity; and Hesione insists on my keeping it up. She makes me wear these ridiculous things [*indicating his Arab costume*] because she thinks me absurd in evening dress (791).

Following Raymond Williams’ model one could read Hesione’s appearance in Eastern attire in terms of the numerous Orientalist spectacles and operas with Eastern themes that were presented in the second half of the 19th-century on the British stage. As Edward Ziter shows in his study *The Orient on the Victorian Stage*, the theatre and the exhibition hall became places where Easterners were exoticized, exhibited as ethnographic specimens, observed, and commercialized, often in an ostensibly “realistic” but entirely faux Orient in which the *The Arabian Nights*, Islamic motifs, and elements of ancient Egypt were conflated. As a theatre and music critic, Shaw saw such exhibitions, plays, and operas (including, for example, Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* and *Abduction from a Seraglio* and the play *Sardanapulus*, based on a dramatic poem by Byron).

A number of critics have read *Heartbreak House* as the culmination of Shaw’s discussion plays, which began with *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, a play that like its model, Ibsen’s *Doll’s House*, addresses the so-called “woman question.” Since one of the motifs of *Heartbreak House* concerns men supposedly being disempowered by the allure of attractive women, one could

obviously read Hector's Arab attire as a form of feminization. And indeed in the same scene, Hector asks Randall: "Is there any slavery on earth viler than this slavery of men to women" (793). He admits that he is tied to his wife's "apron-strings" and chastises Randall for falling under the "spell" of Lady Utterword, whom he describes, along with Hesione, as one of the "demon daughters" of Captain Shotover and a "black witch from Zanzibar" (793).

Shaw, however, offers ample hints elsewhere in the play that Hector's Arab attire also alludes to acting and storytelling, and more specifically fantastical tales such as those Othello used to enchant Desdemona (and the ones woven throughout *Heartbreak House*).<sup>ii</sup> In the first act, Ellie, who is seen when the play begins reading a copy of Shakespeare's play, confides to Hesione Hushabye that she is enchanted with a man she knows as Marcus Darnley, whom she will soon discover is Hesione's husband, Hector. When she tells Hesione what a wonderful experience it must have been for Desdemona to listen to Othello's stories, the following exchange ensues:

Mrs. Hushabye: Ellie darling: have you noticed that some of those stories  
that Othello told Desdemona couldn't have happened.

Ellie: Oh no. Shakespear thought they could have happened.

Mrs. Hushabye: Hm. Desdemona thought they could have happened. But  
they didn't.

Ellie: Why do you look so enigmatic about it? You are such a sphinx: I  
never know what you mean.

Mrs. Hushabye: Desdemona would have found him out if she had lived,  
you know. I wonder was that why he strangled her!

Ellie: Shakespear was not telling lies.

Mrs. Hushabye: How do you know?

Ellie: Shakespear would have said if he was. (765)

In spite of the fact that, for obvious reasons, the world-weary Captain Shotover is viewed by most critics as the inscription of Shaw in the play, Hesione Hushabye is almost certainly speaking here for the play's author. She offers one of the play's best examples of the perfectly logical paradoxes that are hallmarks of Shavian wit, which is compounded in its comic effect when "Darnley" shows up and turns out to be Hector Hushabye. Moreover, Hesione's lines appear to be taken directly from a similar critique Shaw makes of *Othello* in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, written over two decades earlier.<sup>iii</sup> In Shakespeare's play, Othello—the "Moore of Venice," whom Greenblatt defines as a "Muslim of the mixed Berber and Arab people," and whom he suggests was likely sub-Saharan—is the embodiment of Eastern otherness in modern literature (2101). He has traveled as far East as Aleppo, he defeats the Turkish fleet in what is almost certainly a fictional rendering of the 1571 Battle of Lepanto.<sup>iv</sup> When Othello marries Desdemona he, of course, brings her with him to the East, to the play's principal setting, Cyprus. Although in the play one associates lying, acting, and creating reality out of rhetoric with Iago, Othello—as Hesione points out—uses words to seduce Desdemona, which, if she and Shaw are to be believed, are no less disingenuous than Iago's. When, in the first act, Brabantio accuses Othello of enchanting his daughter, Othello explains to the Duke that he wooed her by telling her stories that Desdemona devoured "with a greedy ear":

Wherein I spoke of most disastrous chances,  
Of moving accidents by flood and field,  
Of hair-breadth scapes i'th' imminent deadly breach,  
Of being taken by the insolent foe

And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence

....

And of the cannibals that each other eat,

The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads

Do grow beneath their shoulders... (2110)

Obviously, Shaw invites the reader to read his play as a parody of *Othello*, in which, unlike the original, jealousy is just one more source of comedy in the landlocked ship of fools that is “Heartbreak House,” and Hesione, who is supposedly the progeny of a “black witch,” wields so much power in her marriage that she chooses to dress her husband as an Arab. One could easily read this re-writing of Shakespeare as the reactivation of insidious stereotypes—that are apparently intended to be comic—which Shaheen describes and Said has identified: the Easterner who is crafty, lying, seductive, and feminized. Shaw, however, clearly wishes to displace Shakespeare as the canonical English-language playwright, in this play and more generally. Thus his critique of the Bard is inevitably bound up with the other targets of his critique in *Heartbreak House*: World War I and the British political and industrial classes who led the country into slaughter with tales of glory that echo the ones Othello told Desdemona. Moreover, Hector’s “handsome Arab costume” with its opposing functions—of providing humor and entertainment by invoking the supposed inherent theatricality of the East that it embodies while implying that such theatre is built on deception—is but one of numerous examples in the play of Shaw’s paradoxical use of metatheatre to denounce acting, storytelling, and other theatrical ruses outside the theatre. Near the end of Act Two, when Hector tells Randall that “jealousy does not belong to your easy man-of-the-world pose,” Randall asserts that “a man may be allowed to be a gentleman without being accused of posing.” To which Hector replies:

It is a pose like any other. In this house we know all the poses: our game is to find out the man under the pose. The man under your pose is apparently Ellie's favorite, Othello. (792)

Perhaps the clearest example in the play of the use of metatheatricality to critique deception in life takes place when the supposedly wealthy Mangan reveals that his wealth is illusory. Soon after, he begins to disrobe and says, "What shame is there in this house? Let's all strip stark naked. We may as well do the thing thoroughly when we're about it. We've stripped ourselves morally naked: well, let us strip ourselves physically naked as well..." (797). Not surprisingly, when the play ends soon after with a quite arbitrary air attack—the virtual intrusion of the war taking place offstage at the time of the play's writing—interrupting the bizarre idyll, the only characters who are killed are Mangan and the burglar who insists on being arrested. Mazzini, Ellie's father, the anarchist, announces the death of "Mangan and the burglar." "The two burglars [my emphasis]," says Hector, still dressed in his handsome Arab costume (802).

The supposed inherent theatricality of Eastern garb reinforced by both *Heartbreak House* and the Eastern spectacles that preceded it was dramatically demonstrated in the period between the writing of the play and its production in 1920. Lowell Thomas, an American reporter who, accompanied by a cameraman, had shot film footage of T.E. Lawrence during a two-week stay in Arabia in 1918, gave a lecture-show, illustrated by a film entitled *With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia*, which opened at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden in London in March 1919. In the lecture, which was produced by Percy Burton, who had once managed Sarah Bernhardt, Thomas said that when he met Lawrence the latter "was dressed in the garb of an Oriental ruler, and at his belt he carried the curved gold sword worn only by the direct descendants of the prophet Mohammed" (quoted in Wilson 623). The show, which

contained an elaborate prologue in which “a Welsh Guards band played in front of the backdrop of the ‘Moonlight on the Nile’ setting from...Handel’s opera *Joseph and his Brethren*,” ran to “full houses and seems to have been seen by all the notables of England, including the Royal Family, Lloyd George and his cabinet” (Mack 274, 275). According to Thomas’s estimate, one million people came to see it in London (275).

Although, oddly, Shaw was apparently not among them,<sup>v</sup> it is intriguing to conjecture whether *Heartbreak House*, as originally written, prefigured such fascination among the British populace with a Westerner dressed in Eastern garb. Alternatively, upon hearing of the audience’s response to Thomas’s show in 1919, Shaw may have decided to send up or appropriate the ostensibly heroic figure of Lawrence—“the last crusader” and “the uncrowned King of Arabia”—for comic and serious purposes in a play he had already written but which had not yet been produced. What is clear is that Lawrence and Shaw met in March of 1922, approximately two years after the first production of *Heartbreak House*, and soon became friends. Lawrence kept up a prolific correspondence with Shaw’s wife, Charlotte, until his death in a motorcycle accident in 1935, and Shaw avidly promoted *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, which he described as a “masterpiece” (Weintraub 20). Moreover, in 1923, Lawrence, for whom the Shaws became substitute parents,<sup>vi</sup> changed his name to Shaw in an attempt to shun publicity and to enlist in the Army, and in Shaw’s 1931 play *Too True to Be Good*, Lawrence is “caricatured as Private Napoleon Alexander Trotsky Meek” (50). Perhaps even more significant in the context of the relationship between Lawrence and Shaw’s theatrical creations is Weintraub’s assertion that *Saint Joan*, for which many critics believe Shaw won the Nobel Prize for Literature, bore, while Shaw was writing it, an “uncanny resemblance...to the book at his elbow—the Oxford *Seven Pillars*—and its enigmatic author” (47). In an even more uncanny turn of events, Lawrence

actually willed an Arab robe to Shaw which he, like his character Hesione Hushabye, apparently used as a dressing gown.<sup>vii</sup>

Perhaps the most egregious and seemingly gratuitous outburst disparaging Arabs and Easterners in a 20th-century Western play occurs in John Osborne's supposedly groundbreaking drama *Look Back in Anger*, which premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1956. Kenneth Tynan gave his blessing to the play as the harbinger of a new theatre movement in Britain, referring to its "instinctive leftistishness"—a characterization echoed in Dominic Shellard's history of the period *British Theater Since the War*—and praising it as "the best young play of its decade" and a "minor miracle" because of its "automatic rejection of 'official' attitudes" and its "surrealist sense of humor."<sup>viii</sup> It is, therefore, exceedingly odd to revisit the play—even if to simply read it as a significant text in the history of the English-speaking theatre or, in Raymond Williams' term, as an aesthetic embodiment of the structure of feeling of the period—and discover quite how ferociously does this supposedly left-wing play flaunt its, or at least its protagonist's, apparent loathing of women and Easterners. A short while after the curtain goes up on the dreary Midlands' attic apartment where the play's trio resides, on a Sunday afternoon when Jimmy and Cliff are reading the newspapers while Alison, Jimmy's upper-class wife, stands ironing clothes, Jimmy, without any provocation, turns to Cliff and says:

Have you ever noticed how noisy women are? (*Crosses below chairs to L.C.*)

Have you? The way they kick the floor about, simply walking over it? Or  
have you watched them sitting at their dressing tables, dropping their weapons  
and banging down their bits of boxes and brushes and lipsticks.

*He faces her dressing table.*

I've watched her doing it night after night. When you see a woman in front of

her bedroom mirror, you realize what a refined sort of butcher she is. (*Turns in.*) Did you ever see some dirty old Arab, sticking his fingers into some mess of lamb fat and gristle? Well, she's just like that. Thank God they don't have many women surgeons! Those primitive hands would have your guts out in no time. Flip! Out it comes, like the powder out of its box. Flop! Back it goes, like the powder puff on the table.

Cliff: (*grimacing cheerfully*). Ugh! Stop it!

Jimmy: (*moving upstage*). She'd drop your guts like hair clips and fluff all over the floor. You've got to be fundamentally insensitive to be as noisy and as clumsy as that. (24)

As Peter Buse observes in his essay "What does Jimmy Porter want? – Osborne with Lacan," Jimmy is, according to contemporary critical consensus, viewed as little more than "a misogynist lamenting the decline of British imperial hegemony" and the play is a source of interest principally because "its first production was...a crucial event in the social history of modern Britain" and not because it constitutes a "highly significant piece of theatre" (10). Nonetheless, a brief examination of the play and its protagonist both in terms of Raymond Williams' framework and Buse's Lacanian reading offers possible meanings for this outburst in which seemingly gratuitous scorn is heaped simultaneously upon women and Arabs.

Jimmy, as Gilleman writes, is from the opening of the play a "master devourer" who consumes newspapers, reading material, tea, food, and coffee (55). Buse, citing Slavoj Žižek, attributes this restless hunger to an insatiable desire for "something more" (15). Shortly after the opening of the play, even before the outburst cited above, Jimmy exemplifies this relentless hunger by demanding, perhaps surprisingly, that Alison feed his desire for words:

Jimmy: (*To Alison.*) What about you? You're not a peasant are you?

Alison: (*Absently.*) What's that?

Jimmy: I said do the papers make you feel you're not so brilliant after all?

Alison: Oh—I haven't read them yet.

Jimmy: I didn't ask you that. I said—

Cliff: Leave the poor girlie alone. She's busy.

Jimmy: Well, she can talk, can't she? You can talk, can't you? You can express an opinion. Or does the White Woman's Burden make it impossible to think? (11)

It is obviously ironic for the contemporary reader to see Alison attacked here, near the beginning of the play, because of her father, the imperial colonel who has served in India, and because of her wealth, and then to see her attacked soon after because as a woman she is like the vilest of colonial subjects: "a dirty old Arab."

Buse sees Jimmy's hunger as a sort of limitless desire that cannot be expressed and as a rejection by Osborne of the stale sentimental fare of writers like Terence Rattigan. He contrasts this insatiable hunger with the straightforward, melodramatic desires of Helena and Alison, who have no problem in declaring their love for Jimmy directly. Buse also suggests that this ineffable desire is, in spite of Jimmy's critique of Alison's father as an imperialist, linked to Jimmy's view of "India as place of plenitude" (24). Shortly after Jimmy goads Alison to speak by linking her to Kipling and the colonial regime—and long before her father, the Colonel, appears in their attic apartment and recounts his feelings of displacement upon his return to England after the "dream" that was India—Jimmy himself looks back with melancholy at the entire imperial enterprise:

I hate to admit it, but I can understand how her Daddy must have felt when he

came back from England. The Edwardian brigade do make their brief little world look pretty tempting...What a romantic picture. Phony too, of course...Still, even I regret it somehow..." (17)

What Buse ignores in his Lacanian reading are two statements Jimmy makes in the same speech that point to the relationship between his misogyny, his rant against "the dirty old Arab," and the structure of feeling of the era in which the play was written that seems clearly embedded in its text. Just before he looks longingly at the colonial enterprise in India, Jimmy says, "Somebody said—what was it—we get our cooking from Paris (that's a laugh), our politics from Moscow, and our morals from Port Said" (17). Not only does Jimmy, and by extension Osborne, again disparage the Arabs here, he does so by simultaneously suggesting that they are amoral and, perhaps unconsciously, offering as an example one of the last bastions of the British Empire. It is indeed a striking coincidence that later in 1956, the same year that *Look Back in Anger* was first produced, the Suez crisis, which had been brewing for several years and which signaled the final collapse of the French and British colonial enterprises, was centered in Port Said.<sup>ix</sup> The newly powerless colonialists, or sympathizers like Jimmy, at least, lashed out with anger at the only ones they still had some power over—women, like Alison, standing at her ironing board. Moreover, Jimmy, right after his admission that he understands the Edwardians' imperialist nostalgia, laments the fact that "it's pretty dreary living in the American Age—unless you're an American of course. Perhaps all our children will be Americans" (17).

Edward Albee was obviously not one of Jimmy's children—he was twenty eight when *Look Back in Anger* was produced, and two years later he would begin his own career as a dramatist with a German-language production in Berlin of *Zoo Story* on a double bill with *Krapp's Last Tape*, a premiere that inevitably linked his aesthetic project with that of Samuel

Beckett. George, one of the two principal characters in Albee's 1962 play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, does, however, seem clearly related to Osborne's protagonist. Not only are words the principal weapon George uses against women—both Martha and Honey—he, like Jimmy, is a physically ineffectual intellectual. Among Martha's most vicious provocations against George are her recounting of how she once knocked him down when he refused to box with her father and her relating of the humiliating story of George's novel and her father's refusal to allow George to publish it. Unlike Colonel Redfern, Martha's father never appears on stage in the flesh—although George's rendition of him as an ancient, giant white mouse with beady red eyes may lead some viewers to believe he has—but George does follow Jimmy's lead in taking a swipe at Martha by comparing her, quite gratuitously, to a barbaric Arab:

It's perfectly all right for you...I mean, you can make your own rules...you can go around like a hopped-up Arab, slashing away at everything in sight, scarring up half the world if you want to. But somebody else try it...no sir. (151-152)

Earlier in the play, George displays uncharacteristic ignorance when, while offering a litany of the drinking habits of various nationalities and ethnic groups, he boldly states that "Arabs don't drink" (106), which is why, the reader assumes, he believes that if they get "hopped-up" they will scar up half the world. In the same way that Jimmy laments the loss of the British Empire, George, the erudite and articulate academic from the fictional New England town of New Carthage, presages imperial attitudes received from the British—and their allies at Suez, the French and the Israelis—along with a woeful ignorance about the world that will soon come to haunt the burgeoning American Empire.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *Look Back in Anger*, Arabs are convenient scapegoats, who, like women, supposedly need to be dominated because they lack the ability to

control themselves. These analogous outbursts by the male protagonists of these plays directed at their female counterparts underscore the fact that Samuel Beckett's plays were not the only source for Albee's. Jimmy, with his anti-Arab misogyny, seems a clear precursor of George, just as the British Empire was a clear precursor of the American. In Albee's text and at the time his play was first produced, the abuse of Arabs by Americans was largely confined to the verbal (191),<sup>x</sup> although the "structure of feeling" would change dramatically at the beginning of the 21st-century. To look back at the portrayal of Arabs and Easterners in Western drama is, in one sense, to trace the transformation of powerful images and words that were first manifested onstage into actions offstage that continue to haunt both East and West.

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- i Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, if one were to examine Hollywood portrayals of Arabs and Easterners beside those of African-Americans and Native Americans, one would hardly be surprised to discover similar, simplistic manufactured cultural products that reinforce prevailing cultural norms and manifest prejudices and power relations prevalent at the time of production. To pick but one obvious example: although the book *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, by Dee Brown (which recounts the history of the Sioux Indians and the litany of betrayals they experienced at the hands of the U.S. government), was a very commercially successful book in the U.S. in the 1970s, no film of it was made until over thirty years after its publication, and even then the film was made for HBO, a cable television network. Moreover, two European-American characters who are not in the book were arbitrarily inserted into the film as principal characters with the explicit purpose, according to the producers, of garnering a larger, general audience. According to Daniel Giat, the writer who adapted the book for HBO, “everyone felt very strongly that we needed a white character or a part white, part Indian character to carry a contemporary white audience through this project” (Wyatt).
- ii By focusing on Hector’s Arab costume and the play’s clear critique of *Othello*, one also cannot avoid seeing the similarities between Shakespeare’s title character’s storytelling as a form of seduction and that of Scheherazade, from *One Thousand and One Nights*.
- iii Shaw, 196-197.
- iv In the introduction to the Norton edition of the play, Cohen writes that “By having the Venetian state send Othello to the island to protect Christian interests from the forces of Islam, Shakespeare projects his protagonist into one of the defining struggles of the age, particularly in the Mediterranean” (2091).
- v As Weintraub writes in *Private Shaw and Public Shaw*, “[b]y 1922, after Lowell Thomas’s illustrated lecture ‘With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia’ had played a season at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, Queen’s Hall and Albert Hall, G.B.S. could not have helped hearing of the young man” (1).
- vi Weintraub, 36.
- vii According to the website of Emma Telford, a textile conservator, the garment was willed to the National Trust by the actor Sir Alec Guinness, who wrote: “It is a garment that (Sir Sidney) Cockerell bought from an Arab when he and Wilfred Blunt (I think) were wreck off Sinai sometime in the 1880s. He paid a sovereign for it—to protect himself against the sun. Later he gave it to T.E. (Lawrence) as a dressing gown, and eventually T. E. left it to G.B.S. (George Bernard Shaw), who also used it as a dressing gown. It was finally sent back to Cockerell who gave it to me” (“Lawrence of Arabia’s Dressing Gown”).
- viii Shellard writes that “it was difficult to perceive which aspect of Jimmy’s critique should be construed as the more heterodox: the passionate and implicitly left-wing nature of the attack, or the confident and riveting new idiom in which it was formulated. To many, in particular the young and the university-educated, this depiction of a re-invigorated eloquent, liberal conscience at work was the revelation they had been waiting for” (52-53).
- ix Brown provides an excellent overview of the crisis and the events leading up to it. He attributes the crisis to “ingrained racism.” As he writes: “When the revolutionaries in Cairo dared to suggest that they would take charge of the Suez canal, the naked prejudice of the imperial bubbled to the surface. The Egyptians, after all, were among the original targets of the epithet, “westernized (or wily) oriental gentlemen. They were Wogs.”
- x *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was first produced in 1962, two years after the release of Otto Preminger’s *Exodus*, a film in which, according to Shaheen, Arab fighters are at one point equated with “storm troopers” and the word “Palestinian,” at least referring to an Arab, is never mentioned (191).