

Shakespeare and Extremism

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Abstract: What is at stake in reading, studying, and staging Shakespeare in an age of ‘extremism’, and in a context where responses to extremism are at best misguided and at worst counterproductive? Incorporating analysis of policy documents, contributions from anthropology, and discussions of literary texts, this paper explores what Shakespeare will mean under the UK Government’s ‘Prevent’ agenda, and the effects such an agenda might have on how we engage with extraordinary renderings of Shakespeare on stage now, not least those created by Sulayman Al Bassam.

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Shakespeare and Extremism

ADAM HANSEN

To arrest the meanings of words once and for all, that is what Terror wants.¹

INTRODUCTION

This paper joins the contributions of others in exploring some of the challenges of talking and thinking about Shakespeare in an ‘age of terror’, that is, at a time of growing violent political and religious extremism.² As part of the current UK Conservative government’s ongoing efforts to maintain the prosperity and security of hard-working ordinary people in the face of perceived threats of such extremism, in 2015, they issued *The Counter-Terrorism and Security Act*. It is a fascinating document, perhaps too fascinating for the space available here. But we can focus on just one aspect of it, Section 26, which states:

A specified authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.³

For many hard-working ordinary people in the UK, in specified authorities like ordinary hospitals, nurseries, schools, or universities, there are far-reaching consequences of this section of the act. It has the potential to affect how we teach, how we study, what we read, what we write, and how we think. This includes how we study, read, think and write about Shakespeare. To understand these effects and consequences, we need to understand where Section 26 came from. It is based on an earlier policy document, from the previous Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government: the 2011 *Prevent Strategy*. In its own words, *Prevent* aimed to:

...respond to the ideological challenge of terrorism and the threat we face from those who promote it; prevent people from being drawn into terrorism and ensure that they

are given appropriate advice and support; and work with sectors and institutions where there are risks of radicalisation which we need to address.⁴

One of the things that makes this document so fascinating is that it tries to define what some of these terms mean. For example:

Radicalisation refers to the process by which a person comes to support terrorism and forms of extremism leading to terrorism.⁵

In turn, thanks to *Prevent*, we learn what extremism is:

Extremism is vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. We also include in our definition of extremism calls for the death of members of our armed forces, whether in this country or overseas.⁶

To prevent threats to these ‘fundamental British values’, the aims of *Prevent* translate into a range of concrete policies and plans:

We remain absolutely committed to protecting freedom of speech in this country. But preventing terrorism will mean challenging extremist (and non-violent) ideas that are also part of a terrorist ideology. ... There should be no ‘ungoverned spaces’ in which extremism is allowed to flourish without firm challenge and, where appropriate, by legal intervention. ... Statistically, it is clear that in this country and overseas most terrorist offences are committed by people under the age of 30. We therefore regard it as vital that *Prevent* engages fully – though in differing ways – with schools, higher and further education.⁷

However, *Prevent* also identifies problems with putting these plans into action. Not everyone is as committed to them as they might be. *Prevent* cannot allow this:

This lack of engagement must be addressed. We believe that staff in every university and college have a responsibility for the welfare of individual students as well as the

wider student body. University and college staff should have access to support if they suspect one of their students may be becoming radicalised.⁸

Having sketched out the political context in which many people are now studying or teaching Shakespeare in universities and elsewhere, it is worth considering what this context means. To do so, it is necessary to take the ‘responsibility’ invested in us *very* seriously. It is also necessary to respectfully acknowledge what one independent reviewer of the *Prevent* documentation said:

This new strategy is designed to endure. Already it has to deal with a range of terrorism threats, including Al Qa’ida and right-wing extremism. None is singled out for special treatment outside the operational demands of current threat levels.⁹

Accordingly, we can ignore the fact that such policies disproportionately affect some members of the community more than others: between 2012 and 2013 57.4% of the referrals under *Prevent* legislation involved Muslims, despite the fact that, according to the 2011 national census, Muslims represented 5% of UK population.¹⁰ In turn, we should overlook the concerns of the very people tasked with implementing *Prevent*:

The police chief leading the fight [via *Prevent*] to stop people becoming terrorists has said government plans targeting alleged extremists are so flawed they risk creating a “thought police” in Britain.¹¹

Putting these quibbles aside, we are better able to concentrate on what matters, to ask: what does this mean for teaching and studying Shakespeare?

SHAKESPEARE AND NATIONAL SECURITY

Maybe nothing. Shakespeare is not the first writer or subject you might think would be affected by *Prevent* legislation, for several reasons. Firstly, he is probably one of the least likely people we would care to consider as in any way promoting extremism in opposition, or as a threat, to ‘fundamental British values’. He is, we might suggest, quintessentially, fundamentally British.

To Ben Jonson, writing in praise for the first Folio of Shakespeare's works in 1623, his contemporary was an all-conquering, autochthonic genius, a personification of his nation:

Triumph, my *Britaine*, thou hast one to showe,
To whom all Scenes of *Europe* homage owe.¹²

In the eighteenth century, this figuring of Shakespeare as icon of Britishness was renewed:

The promotion of Shakespeare as both symbol and exemplar of British national identity...began in earnest...in the 1730s and reached its climax at [David] Garrick's Jubilee in 1769.¹³

As Arthur Murphy put it in 1753: 'with us islanders *Shakespeare* is a kind of established religion in poetry'.¹⁴ What happened in the 1700s exerted a massive influence on what happened later.¹⁵ Sir Walter Raleigh asserted in 1918: 'Anyone who reads and understands [Shakespeare] understands England.'¹⁶ During World War Two, as many have observed, Shakespeare was frequently enlisted as part of the British war effort to promote patriotic solidarity.¹⁷ More recently, in a wraparound advert in the *Metro* newspaper (31 May 2012, the Thursday before the Queen's Jubilee), Carling lager listed '60 reasons why Britain is so brilliant'. At number 26 came 'Shakespeare. When thou can understandeth it.' So Shakespeare and Shakespeareans have nothing to fear from *Prevent*.

Secondly, capacious and copious as Shakespeare's plays are, they did not directly address the religious turmoil and extremism many experienced in the early modern period, and so have nothing to say to us about our period's problems. Indeed, some critics have noted 'Shakespeare's silence on the sectarian violence of his time'.¹⁸ He could have been vocal, like contemporaries such as Christopher Marlowe, in plays such as *The Massacre at Paris*, staging the St. Bartholomew's Day attacks on Protestants in France in 1572. But Shakespeare's 'silence' on such matters suggests he is simply a safe space for us to escape from the tensions of our moment. It also suggests, again, that *Prevent* presents no problems for studying Shakespeare.

Lastly, and connected to this, we might observe that according to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘extremist’ and ‘radicalisation’ were coined in the nineteenth century, though, notably, becoming attached to ‘Muhammadan agitators’ as early as 1921. So it would apparently be entirely inappropriate to link Shakespeare with terms unknown to him. For Shakespeare, ‘extremes’ had spatial or physical connotations, meaning, for example, the furthest area of a body (as Falstaff uses the word to describe where sherry has an effect in *2 Henry IV*, 4.1.442), or something very big (‘wonder in extremes’, as in *3 Henry 6* 3.2.116).¹⁹ ‘Extremes’ could also be experienced as ‘hardship, tribulation, privation’ (as in *1 Henry 6* 4.1.38), or a form of painful punishment for heinous offenses, ‘extremes beyond extremity’ (*The Rape of Lucrece*, 969).²⁰

PREVENTING SHAKESPEARE

However, in Shakespeare, exhibiting ‘extremes’ could also mean to be ‘tainted’ with intense emotions or violent passions (*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, 4.2.113), the ‘deep extremes’ (3.1.216) into which Titus Andronicus falls as he sees Rome decay, and his family suffer. Thus, if recent events teach us anything it is that we must always be vigilant to guard against complacency, when belligerent tendencies lie in wait. Like Shakespeare’s contemporaries, we should not and cannot trust his ‘silence’:

How much of the dark and seditious narrative of Elizabethan Catholicism, of which Shakespeare did *not* speak, can be projected...into the bright spectacular spaces of which he did?²¹

Extreme, radical opposition to ‘fundamental British values’ can exist in seemingly innocuous places, including, sad to say, Shakespeare. Indeed, we might ask, does Shakespeare – on page, on stage, or in discussion – represent one of those ‘‘ungoverned spaces’’ that *Prevent* is trying to govern?

Arguably, yes, for several reasons. Firstly, Shakespeare makes it hard to see what ‘fundamental British values’ are or might be because he makes Britain hard to see. Shakespeare rarely referred to ‘Britain’. Perhaps, with the benefit of hindsight, this can be overlooked or accommodated as reflecting contemporary understandings of national identity: ‘During Elizabeth’s reign ‘Britain’ was an ancient land of myth, not a political reality.’²² Thus, we can hear a reference by a French lord to ‘Queen Guinevere of Britain’ in *Love’s Labours Lost* (4.1.119), but this is precisely a land of myth. Queen Margaret wonders ‘Is this the government of Britain’s isle?’ (2 *Henry 6*, 1.3.34), prior to England descending into the brutality of the Wars of the Roses, which evokes a geographically coherent but politically conflicted island, possibly including Wales and Scotland, but excluding Ireland. Similar confusion, but in reverse, occurs in *Richard II*, where ‘this England’, is referred to as ‘this sceptred isle’, when it is not an island (*Richard II*, 2.1.40-50).

The accession in 1603 of James I from Scotland to the English throne, uniting the kingdoms, brought Britishness into clearer focus. Thankfully, the Jacobean play *Cymbeline* is full of talk about ‘Britain’ (see 1.4.), and sometimes this helps us get a sense of what Shakespeare’s Britain stands for. When Innogen’s beloved, Posthumus, is banished to Rome, he is, we are falsely told by the conniving Iachimo, called ‘the Briton reveller’ (1.6.66), because he becomes increasingly morally and sexually degenerate. This prompts Innogen to worry ‘My lord, I fear / Has forgot Britain’ (1.6.129). Whatever Britain is, it is not continental debauchery. This view of Posthumus is wrong, of course, and Posthumus still has the interests of Innogen and their ‘not-fearing Britain’ (2.4.21) at heart: again, we can perhaps infer Britishness means being tough, loyal and steadfast.

But in the same play, British exceptionalism is derided. Cloten tries to argue ‘Britain’s / A world by itself’ (3.1.12-13). But he is called a ‘harsh ... simple nothing’ by Innogen, who goes on to trash Britain’s image as a special place:

Hath Britain all the sun that shines? ...

I'th' world's volume

Our Britain seems as of it but not in't,

In a great pool a swan's nest. Prithee, think

There's livers out of Britain. (3.4.137-41).

Even if we accept the idea that 'Britain' was not a political reality until the accession of James I in 1603, and forgive Shakespeare for his lack of foresight, it is difficult not to see this as a deliberate attempt to undermine a coherent sense of British identity, and thus 'fundamental British values'. Shakespeare did not learn his lesson: in another Jacobean play, *Henry VIII*, 'Britain' is synonymous or interchangeable with 'the English' (1.1.25-6). Indeed, throughout his career, Shakespeare was just as likely to use the word 'Britain' to signify someone from, or the location that is, Brittany in France (see *Richard III* 4.3.40, 4.4.521, 5.3.318 5.3.334, for examples). Little wonder the Irishman MacMorris in *Henry V* asks 'What ish my nation?' (3.2.91). Wouldn't we like to know? By offering only confused and unclear definitions of Britain, and Britishness, Shakespeare casts doubt on the future of England and Britain (not to mention the United Kingdom). Questions remain about and conditions attach to who 'we' are, *where* we are, and what our 'values' are:

BASTARD Nought shall make us rue,

If England to itself do rest but true. (*King John*, 5.7.121-2)

Such matters have prompted commentators on Englishness (if not Britishness) to affirm that there is 'no comforting assertion of English superiority or triumphant nationalism to be found anywhere in Shakespeare'; that Shakespeare's 'English kings' are 'hardly...exemplars of the truly English virtues'; and that, therefore, Shakespeare is not a 'promising candidate for the role of early English nationalist'.²³

Most worrying of all, Shakespeare's role in querying national identity is not restricted to the past, and his unsettling agendas secrete into the national bloodstream. We can see this in some of the comments that greeted the BBC's celebration of Shakespeare for the

quatercentenary commemorations on Friday 22 April 2016, when a cast of actors and celebrities (including Prince Charles Saxe-Coburg and Gotha) paid homage to the Bard. The ‘right-on script’ aggregated by Gregory Doran featured an ‘immigration-friendly passage’ culled from the multiple-authored play *Sir Thomas More*, prompting Peter Bone, a backbench Conservative MP, to thunder to *The Daily Mail* (in comments recirculated in *The Daily Express*): “They’ve gone out of their way to find a piece of writing which fits the left-wing establishment’s pro-immigration agenda. It’s a shame.”²⁴ What some perceive favourably as Shakespeare’s ‘famed hospitality to migrant meanings’ is actually a ‘fatal *Cleopatra*’: his propensity for punning betrays a desire to adulterate and bastardize linguistic and national integrity.²⁵

Hand-in-hand with this dangerous inclusivity, as Shakespeare queries Britain, and thus ‘fundamental British values’, so he also presents all-too compelling and seductive portraits of extremist behaviour, in places where we might not expect it. We are all familiar with the timeless love story of Romeo and Juliet. But we are perhaps less familiar with seeing them as dangerous radicals. The lovers see themselves as suffering hardships due to their society, and so they respond with their own kind of extremism, setting their individual desires against the values of their community:

CHORUS But passion lends them power, time means, to meet,

Temp’ring extremities with extreme sweet. (2.Chorus.13-14)

So extreme are these mistakenly idealized lovers, so misguided is their sense of what their community is doing to them, that they are prepared to commit suicide to fulfil their deranged antisocial ideology:

JULIET ’Twixt my extremes and me this bloody knife

Shall play the umpire (4.1.63-4)

Little wonder Juliet’s father thinks her rejection of the values of family and respect deserves the kind of punishment reserved for traitors in early modern England:

CAPULET [To Juliet]

But fettle your fine joints gainst Thursday next,

To go with Paris to St Peter's Church,

Or I will drag thee on a hurdle thither. (3.5. 156-59)

Even the lovers' accomplices have their reservations about their extremism:

FRIAR LAURENCE These violent delights have violent ends,

And in their triumph die, like fire and powder,

Which as they kiss consume. (2.5.9-11)

The priest here anticipates that their suicides will harm themselves, but also others, as their self-consuming passion becomes violent and explosive. And we presume to idolise these people? If only they had *Prevent!*

Like Marlowe, Shakespeare's plays are full of intolerance fuelled by unreasonable and extreme adherence to religious difference. Shakespeare embodies this in a figure like Shylock, who says, of Antonio, 'I hate him for he is a Christian' (*The Merchant of Venice*, 1.3.29). And, as with Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* or *Edward II*, Shakespeare's plays are also full of insurgents, taking up arms against their own community and legitimate rulers, and causing civil unrest and war, whether they are from the lower orders (Jack Cade in *2 Henry 6*) or the upper ranks (Coriolanus and Henry Bolingbroke).

So as we look at Shakespeare's plays, we see a wide range of extreme positions and radical behaviours. But Shakespeare's status as mouthpiece for extremist views only increases when we consider how his works have been used by extremists and radicals of all sorts since his death. A 1935 edition of the Fascist magazine *Blackshirt* in the month of the anniversary of Shakespeare's birth confidently claimed: 'Shakespeare would have been a Fascist'.²⁶ To prove her point, Kathleen Texera weaves together a tissue of quotes from plays including *King John* (5.7.112-118), *Coriolanus* (3.3.115-117, 124), *Troilus and Cressida* (1.3.32-3), *Macbeth* (1.7.18), *Hamlet* (4.5.122-23), and, inevitably, John of Gaunt's speech about England from

Richard II. Texera is not always bothered about reproducing these references accurately, as when she misquotes *Richard III* (5.2.15-16) or *Henry V* (2.Chorus.6). Neither does Texera attribute the lines she uses to the characters who speak them, or reproduce them in the verse forms they were spoken. Nor is she troubled by the fact that some of the lines she quotes are conditional and equivocal (not to say cynical) in their patriotic fervour. What matters is that she has discerned that the ‘keynote’ of Shakespeare’s plays is ‘loyalty’, and that he impresses upon us the importance of ‘fidelity’ to ‘king’ and country (though we might ask: *which* country – ‘Britain’ or ‘England’?). With no time for ‘self-seeking Communists’ (an oxymoron, or anachronism, surely?) Shakespeare had realized that ‘England’s strength lies in her unity’, and that ‘nothing could be achieved without a struggle’.

Nazi Germany, too, would realise the benefits of employing Shakespeare in its service. For Hitler, Shakespeare was one of those cultural icons a degenerate era could not appreciate, as he notes with irony:

But after all, what are Schiller, Goethe or Shakespeare compared to the heroes of the newer German poetic art? Old, outmoded, nay, obsolete. ... The baser and more contemptible the products of the time and its people, the more it hates the witnesses to the greater nobility and dignity of a former day.²⁷

So it was that in 1940, the Nazi writer Hermann Burte declared Shakespeare to be a symbol of German identity, and anti-semitic truth:

...we boldly assert that as Germans of 1940 we in truth are closer to the spirit of the Elizabethan English and their genius William than the Englishmen of today, behind whose throne lurks and rules that Shylock whom Shakespeare recognized and rejected.²⁸

Nazified Shakespeare seems to have been most eagerly put to work in locations where a need to construct an emphatically German and Nazi identity was most urgently felt. For example, a production took place in Byelorussian Minsk ‘during the liquidation of the last Jewish ghettos’

there in 1943. In this hellish environment, where Jewish back-stage workers ‘extended their lives by a few weeks’ by working on the production, a modified Shakespeare underwrote, emboldened, and consolidated genocide.²⁹

Other political extremists have used Shakespeare too.³⁰ The Communist Bertholt Brecht envisaged a post-War staging of *Coriolanus*, that would make it difficult for spectators, ‘many of whom were still under the influence of Nazi myth and glamour’, to ‘see the story in terms of the true patriot and military hero, stabbed in the back by the cowardly masses under Red labour leaders’: ‘The production must show that no leader, however talented, is indispensable’.³¹ How are we to square this with ‘fundamental British values’?

We can come to only one conclusion. In the interests of preserving such ‘values’, the logical, non-extreme, demand hard-working ordinary people must make is this: *ban Shakespeare*. He is too dangerous, too extreme, and too amenable for dangerous extremism. We must agree, then, with the words of a character in *The Speaker’s Progress: A play in the shadow of revolution*, a 2010-11 work by the Anglo-Kuwaiti dramatist, Sulayman Al Bassam:

Speaker (*To the audience.*) Civil harmony is strained from the moment we begin to play with theatre. It contaminates. It sours. It poisons.³²

SHAKESPEARE AND CRITIQUE

Al Bassam’s character is tasked with overseeing the production in a laboratory somewhere in the Arab world of a retelling of a version of *Twelfth Night* from 1963, ensuring the reproduction does not offend the censors and sensibilities of a totalitarian Islamic state, in a revolution’s ‘shadow’: ‘we do not in any way seek to question or reflect our reality’ (148).

But, of course, that is what drama does by definition, and Al Bassam is being ironic. While I have not been able to match the sophistication of his irony here, I have said much of what I have said with my tongue firmly in my cheek. I do so not to make light of the human costs of religious and political violence, here and elsewhere; nor do I mean to appease or

apologize for terrorism. But the absurdity of the effects of legislating against thinking about religious and political violence warrants an absurd response.

My aim has been to point out how reactions to ‘terror’ can threaten the very things they are meant to preserve. This is clearly understood by those concerned about *Prevent*, as can be observed in a statement backed by Liberty, Index on Censorship, the Muslim Council of Britain, and Sir Peter Fahy, the former chief constable of Greater Manchester: ‘[T]he proposed counter-extremism and safeguarding bill will feed the very commodity that the terrorists thrive on: fear. These proposals will serve to alienate communities and undermine free speech, but there is scant evidence that they will tackle the terrorism we all want to confront’.³³ Building on many years of field-work with ‘extremist’ groups of all persuasions, the anthropologist Scott Atran makes a comparable point a different way:

By itself contemporary terrorism cannot destroy our country or our allies or even seriously damage us. However, we can do grievous harm to ourselves by taking the terrorists’ bait and reacting in ill-conceived, uninformed, and uncontrolled ways that inflate and empower our enemies, alienate our friends, and frighten our own citizens into believing that they must give up basic liberties in order to survive. It is in this sense that terrorism does pose an existential threat: to our most sacred values of individual freedom and choice, to our sense of personal and collective security, and to any hope of peace of mind.³⁴

What do these arguments mean for the study of Shakespeare, and extremism? Shakespeare wrote generically, politically, morally, and ideologically, ambiguous plays, containing many contradictory perspectives and voices, for diverse audiences, and this affords those audiences the right to make their own minds up about things. And so Shakespeare *is* a space to critique ideas of ‘fundamental British values’ – and the idea that ‘values’ of any sort are fundamental or native to (or impossible in) any individual nation or community. But this is to be celebrated, not censored, liberated not policed, cherished not feared. Moreover, we can use Shakespeare

to think about how people become ‘radicalised’, but also to challenge in theory *and* in practice the models currently in place to think about radicalisation.

Richard Wilson, for one, has argued persuasively that Shakespeare’s plays were shaped as ‘critiques of martyrdom’, and that he ‘takes a stand in resistance to resistance’ by hard-line Catholics in his era.³⁵ Building on the work of Richard Simpson in the 1800s, Wilson has brilliantly historicized the long-standing construction of Hamlet as a suicidal killer, showing how Shakespeare unsettles ‘all who found a meaning in martyrdom, whether of treason or truth’, and whether or not they were part of his ‘relatives’ suicidal terrorism’, as evidenced in the Catholic Throckmorton plot to kill Queen Elizabeth in 1583, rooted in Shakespeare’s home county of Warwickshire.³⁶ As Wilson notes: ‘Shakespeare made a drama out of his refusal of a terror which... we recognize all too well’.³⁷ But we can only ‘recognize’ these arguments and histories by acknowledging Shakespeare’s relations to religious violence in his own era, and also his resonance now, in our era of jihad and crusade.

Furthermore, we can ‘recognize’ exactly this resonance, and these arguments and histories, in appropriations of Shakespeare in the Muslim world. That world, of course, currently bears the brunt of accusations of extremism and radicalisation; Muslim individuals, states and communities endure most charges – and bloody consequences – of ‘terror’. And yet, Muslims, notably Al Bassam, are more than willing and able to use Shakespeare to explore how extremism comes into being. In other words, Arab Shakespeares are the place to look, if we want to see the opportunities for critical thinking about religious terror afforded by the ‘‘ungoverned space’’ of the Shakespearean stage. We might, then, see such opportunities as being in parallel with actual, effective efforts to respond to extremism, in which, as Atran notes ‘deradicalization, like radicalization itself, engages mainly from the bottom up, not from the top down’.³⁸ Atran continues:

The only organizations I've found that have actually enticed significant numbers of voluntary defections from the ranks of would-be martyrs and jihadis...are Muslim religious organizations.³⁹

Perhaps the most powerful and effective responses to 'terror' come from those places and people mistakenly accused of accommodating it.

EXTRAORDINARY RENDITIONS

Al Bassam is the author of three plays that have become known as the 'Arab Shakespeare Trilogy', conceived and performed between 2002 and 2011: *The Al-Hamlet Summit* (first performed in English in 2002 as part of the Edinburgh Festival), *Richard III, an Arab Tragedy*, and *The Speaker's Progress*, a reworking of *Twelfth Night*. Al Bassam is acutely aware of working within and between 'the prejudice of Arab Nationalism, on the one hand and Western reductionism, on the other'.⁴⁰ Such is Al Bassam's subtlety, his Hamlet anticipates what will happen to him if he is exiled in London: 'I will ... grow thin, write tracts and become the prized animal of European liberals.'⁴¹ The fate of Hamlet the character could be the fate of *Al-Hamlet* the play: patronising absorption into Western discourses of self-loathing. While mindful of such problems, with his *Al-Hamlet*, Al Bassam instead tried to answer this question:

How to render *Hamlet* a story about the birth of Islamic religious fanaticism fuelled by domestic corruption and Western opportunism?⁴²

Wilson perceives the famous soliloquy uttered by Hamlet, 'Shakespeare's most terroristic protagonist', as 'a deeply disturbing meditation on the absolute antagonism of the *jihad*': 'To be or not to be' is a question that takes us right into the mind of what we would now call a suicide bomber'.⁴³ Al Bassam rendered just this kind of 'antagonism' through drama in *Al-Hamlet*:

In response to this context of corrupt and repressive power-politics, characters such as Hamlet and Ophelia find strategies of resistance and subversion that belong to the

contemporary context, rather than to Shakespeare's play. Hamlet becomes a jihadist, and Ophelia a suicide-bomber.⁴⁴

Polonius equates Hamlet being 'drawn further and further into extremist circles of thought and action' as the same as being 'mad'.⁴⁵ Claudius and Polonius' attempts to sound out Hamlet using Ophelia take on the form of an anti-terror investigation, akin to what is proposed under *Prevent*:

Claudius Ask him – 'Do you go to the mosques?'

Polonius 'Who are your friends? What are they called?'

Claudius 'What are you reading?'⁴⁶

What stops such a retelling from confirming the worst stereotypes all too many in the West hold about Muslims? Several factors. Firstly, Al Bassam dramatizes the desperation and impotence that makes someone extreme. Mimicking but elaborating on Shakespeare, and without endorsing extremist violence, Al Bassam gives us insight into mental states we might not otherwise wish to consider or inhabit. Atran notes: 'People radicalize along the path to violence when personal rage resonates with moral outrage'.⁴⁷ We can see this in the portrayal of Ophelia, as she announces her martyrdom in fractured verse:

I want people outside to know this
that I will express with my body what is not
able for to express politics and mighty nations
so I go to my God pure in my soul in my dignity⁴⁸

Secondly, Al Bassam does an amazing job of explicating the complexity and heterogeneity of Muslim identities, reminding his audiences that Islam is not homogeneous, (despite the idea of the 'Ummah', or community of believers), but is as fragmented and diverse as post-Reformation Christianity. As Hamlet berates his mother for being Claudius' lustful whore, he enjoins her three times to 'Remember Allah!', with his weapon pointed '*to her womb.*' But his effort to speak with divine and moral authority is undermined by the verses from '*the Holy*

Qur'an' he and the audience then hear '*Over the loudspeaker*': 'And never say to your father or mother tut, nor hold their names in vain.' This '*Qur'anic voice*' leaves Hamlet '*cowed and amazed*', as this scene also complicates our perception of Muslims and Islam speaking with only one voice, message or morality.⁴⁹ We might compare this with what happens in another of Al Bassam's Shakespearean reimaginings, *Richard III, an Arab Tragedy* (2005), when Catesby contemplates murdering the princes in the tower:

Catesby I swear I turned back twice. But He put out his hand. The Book was on the pillow. 'No!' I said, 'it's the Qur'an. It's haram. Can't do it. Haram.' Then one of them opened his eyes: a boy. Same age as my own. Can't do it. Can't. God, what did you make me of? ... it was the devil, the devil put out his hand.⁵⁰

Here we see a nominally Muslim character acting in ways expressly forbidden by Islam, and wondering what it is that impels them to do so. This diversity is important because it humanizes and personalizes religious experience, and reminds us that contrary to what we are often told by a bigoted press or presidential candidates, not all Muslims think or act in the same way. In his *Hamlet*, and other plays, Al Bassam 'offers an alternative, and urgently needed alternative, to mutual misunderstanding and reciprocal violence.'⁵¹

Finally, Al Bassam shows how contemporary Middle Eastern or Islamic identities are fashioned in opposition to yet through influence by Western power, even as this power draws on Muslim histories and voices. We can see this in an exchange in *Al-Hamlet*, between the Prince and a Western Arms Dealer. Significantly, this play does not feature the Ghost of Old Hamlet. Instead, at one of the points where we might expect that Ghost to appear, an Arms Dealer does, sometimes speaking the words of Old Hamlet. Yet those words are themselves the words of Al-Sayid Qutb, the Egyptian founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, seen by many as the primary ideologist for Islamic fundamentalism and extremism.⁵² As rhetoric impels actions, and as a father begets children, so the Arms Dealer generates Hamlet's sense of himself:

Arms Dealer Mmm ... Your father was a great man, the world is not the same for his loss.

Hamlet Are you American?

Arms Dealer (*Quoting*. [Al-Sayid Qutb, the ideologist of the Muslim Brotherhood])

‘Vast oceans of savagery consume the world, false authority towers from Mecca to Jerusalem, from Jerusalem to the Americas and man is on the brink of a great precipice.’

Hamlet How do you know that? Those are his words.⁵³

In this haunted, hybrid text, Hamlet’s father is Qutb, the ideologue, but also the exploitative, cynical Arms Dealer. Hamlet becomes who he is in this rendering in part because of the legacy of the words of his father, and the legacy of a Western presence. As Prince Edward observes of another colonial power in *Richard III, an Arab Tragedy*:

They know how to play history, those British. ...

The robes of Empire grow thin,

they settles today for the tidy plunder

of gun running and pesticides.⁵⁴

The Arms Dealer will later go on to teach Polonius, and thus the court, to define and identify extremists, like Hamlet is becoming. Yet he does so not to preserve order and the rule of law, but in order to then provide weapons to those intent on waging a war on terror:

Arms Dealer We call them terrorists.

Polonius I like this word. Will you write it for me? (*Offering a pen.*)

Arms Dealer Of course. (*Writing.*)

Polonius Terro-ri!

Arms Dealer Terro-rist.

Polonius Terror-roo!

Arms Dealer Terror-rist.

Polonius Terror – um!

Arms Dealer Terrorist!

Polonius Terrorist! Excellent word, much money in this word.

Arms Dealer Yes ... About the money.⁵⁵

An exchange like this ridicules the construction of the figure of the ‘terrorist’, but also exposes the arbitrary, mercenary, self-serving nature of that construction. Al Bassam returns to make this point in other plays. In *Richard III, an Arab Tragedy*, Richard and Buckingham think about how to make pruning heads ‘legit’:

Buckingham I can make a mockery of the judiciary; thread an axis of evil through the eye of a press; turn democracy into tyranny and keep it all as clean and transparent as a Security Council resolution.

Richard I love you. But how?

Buckingham War on Terror!⁵⁶

The language of terror serves ruling elites at home and abroad, as despots and demagogues use the spectre of global terror to silence internal dissent. Islam is abused to the same ends, as Mr Richmond in Al Bassam’s play holds and invokes a Qur’an as he drives his supporters on to battle.⁵⁷ As factions try to impose order, with help from forces beyond their borders, they create ideological and actual chaos, a context where politic religion is taken to its illogical conclusion at the play’s end:

...a Jihadi song builds in the background until it is intolerably loud.

A figure with masked face (*Loading and firing a rocket-propelled grenade.*) Allah-U-Akbar!⁵⁸

Given the contexts in and about which he writes, Al Bassam has a strong sense of the limits of what his texts, or anyone’s, might achieve. In *Richard III, an Arab Tragedy*, as the performance of *Twelfth Night* in controlled conditions gets out of control. This prompts an angry reaction from the envoy who is Representative of the Council of Virtue (playing ‘**Mullah Farhan** – a

reactionary', a version of Malvolio).⁵⁹ As spokesman for a very strict and state-sanctioned interpretation of Islam he says:

Rep. Council of Virtue (*To the Speaker.*) I don't want Shakespeare, I don't want politics, I don't want theatre. No more art.⁶⁰

In the nexus of repressive religion and politics, his denunciations resonate, and can be heard in Al Bassam's other works. Thus, as Hamlet subscribes to a militant strain of Islam, and brings civil war to a head, he affirms:

Hamlet Our enemies comprehend only the language of blood, for this, the time for the pen has passed and we enter the era of the sword. ...words are dead ... now we must mouth meaning with our flesh.⁶¹

In such an 'era', drama, composed of words, does and can do nothing. Yet Hamlet's words accrue added, chilling resonance because they are not his words: he is citing Osama Bin Laden, from a 2001 speech. But there is a paradox, too: words' power is being denied with words, and Bin Laden's words are being critiqued and subverted through their repetition. On stage, meanings are mouthed 'with...flesh' as well as with actual mouths. The play containing these words and acts is a counter to Bin Laden's words and acts, and the terrible words and acts he orchestrated or provoked. Al Bassam knows it is hard to say it, but the 'time of the pen' has *not* passed.

CONCLUSION

What gives the pen the power to persist, and resist? Al Bassam repeatedly signals the liberty and nuance afforded him by the diversity of indigenous Arabic expression and register, 'dialect, colloquial, Qur'anic, classical'.⁶² Drama can bring different voices together, in conflict or in concord. Yet he also insists Shakespeare's voice (or voices) also provide space for critique to exist, especially in hybrid creations shielded by bearing some connection to his work: 'The

body armour provided from the censor's whip by the Shakespeare label could be moved around the body but not removed entirely.⁶³

Al Bassam's version of *Twelfth Night* shows characters of varying persuasions experiencing a 'progress from oppression to freedom', and coming to a conclusion that 'freedom is a city with many points of entry'.⁶⁴ For Al Bassam, so too is theatre itself:

...culture and theatre...permit complexity and difference and they permit the weak to be other than pitied and the cruel to be other than hated. Theatre challenges the accepted world views and breaks the mirrors of authority. Shakespeare understood that power very well.⁶⁵

Rendering Shakespeare in this extraordinary way impresses a critical point upon us:

The terrorists aren't nihilists, starkly or ambiguously, but often deeply moral souls with a horribly misplaced sense of justice. Normal powers of empathy can penetrate them, because they are mostly ordinary people. And though I don't think that empathy alone will ever turn them from violence, it can help us understand what may.⁶⁶

Will it be possible to think like this, and write or teach about thinking like this, under *Prevent*? To recollect the epigraph with which we began, not only 'Terror' seeks to prevent ambiguity and arrest the meaning of words; without care and critique, wars on terror and extremism can do the same, whether those words are Shakespeare's or our own.

¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *Rudiments païens* (1977), cited in Michel de Certeau, 'Reading as Poaching', from *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), in *Readers and Reading*, ed. Andrew Bennett (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 151.

² See, for example, *Shakespeare After 9/11: How a Social Trauma Reshapes Interpretation*, ed. Matthew Biberman and Julia Reinhard Lupton (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011); Robert Appelbaum, *Terrorism Before the Letter: Mythography and Political Violence in England, Scotland, and France 1559 – 1642* (Oxford: OUP, 2015); and Richard Wilson,

Worldly Shakespeare: The Theatre of Our Good Will (Edinburgh: EUP, 2016), esp. chapters 5 and 6.

³ HM Government, *The Counter-Terrorism and Security Act* (2015), accessed 5 June 2016, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/6/section/26/enacted>

⁴ HM Government, *Prevent Strategy* (2011), accessed 5 June 2016, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf, 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6, 9, 64.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁹ Lord Carlile of Berriew QC (June 2011), 'Preface', *Prevent*, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf

¹⁰ Farhid Qurashi, "Prevent gives people permission to hate Muslims," *The Guardian* (4 April 2016); accessed 3 June 2016: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/04/prevent-hate-muslims-schools-terrorism-teachers-reject>

¹¹ Vikram Dodd, "Anti-radicalisation chief says ministers' plans risk creating 'thought police'," *The Guardian* (24 May 2016); accessed 24 May 2016: <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/may/24/anti-radicalisation-chief-says-ministers-plans-risk-creating-thought-police>

¹² Ben Jonson, "To the memory of my beloved, The Author Mr. William Shakespeare," in *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies* (1623), reprinted in *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage, I, 1623-1692*, ed. Brian Vickers, (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 23-25, 24. 22

¹³ Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660-1769* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 185.

¹⁴ *Gray's Inn Journal*, 12 (15 December 1753), cited in Dobson, 7.

¹⁵ See *This England, That Shakespeare: New Angles on Englishness and the Bard*, eds. Willy Maley and Margaret Tudeau-Clayton (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010); Graham Holderness, *Cultural Shakespeare: Essays in the Shakespeare Myth* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001), 56-81; Willy Maley, "'This sceptred isle': Shakespeare and the British problem," in John J. Joughin, ed. *Shakespeare and national culture* (Manchester: MUP, 1997), 83-109; and Terence Hawkes, *That Shakespeherian Rag: Essays on a Critical Process* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), 51-72.

¹⁶ Sir Walter Raleigh, *England and the War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1918), 120.

¹⁷ See, for example, Jeffrey Richards, "National identity in British Wartime Films," in *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War*, ed. Philip M. Taylor (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 42-61.

¹⁸ Richard Wilson, *Secret Shakespeare: Studies in theatre, religion and resistance* (Manchester: MUP, 2004), 1.

¹⁹ Unless otherwise stated, all references are to Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, ed. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2007).

²⁰ David Crystal and Ben Crystal, *Shakespeare's Words: A Glossary and Language Companion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002), 162.

²¹ Wilson, *Secret Shakespeare*, 117.

²² Susan Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds: The Rule of the Tudors 1485-1603* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), 13.

²³ Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English Identity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), 118.

²⁴ Fraser Moore, “Outrage as BBC bosses ‘use Shakespeare to push pro-immigration agenda’,” *Daily Express* (25 April 2016), accessed 2 July 2016,

<http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/664069/bbc-shakespeare-pro-immigration-agenda>

²⁵ Wilson, *Worldly Shakespeare*, 174; Samuel Johnson, “Preface to Shakespeare,” in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, Volume VII: Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 74.

²⁶ Kathleen Texera, *Blackshirt* (April 18 1935): 4. On the relationship between the Shakespearean G. Wilson Knight and the British fascist, and equally Shakespearean, A.K. Chesterton, see David Baker, *Ideology of Obsession: A.K. Chesterton and British Fascism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 97-120.

²⁷ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (1925/6), transl. Ralph Mannheim (London: Pimlico, 1992), 235-36.

²⁸ Andrew G. Bonnell, *Shylock in Germany: Antisemitism and the German Theatre from The Enlightenment to the Nazis* (London and New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2008), 141.

²⁹ Bonnell, *Shylock*, 164.

³⁰ For discussions of Shakespeare’s function in other more or less totalitarian twentieth-century regimes, see *Shakespeare in the Worlds of Communism and Socialism*, ed. Irena R. Makaryk and Joseph G. Price (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); and Murray J. Levith, “Shakespeare and Mao, 1949-1966,” in *Shakespeare’s Local Habitations*, ed. Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney and R.S. White (Łódź: Łódź University Press, 2007), 43-55.

³¹ Margot Heinemann, “How Brecht read Shakespeare,” in *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Manchester: MUP, 1989), 221.

³² Sulayman Al Bassam, *The Speaker’s Progress*, in Sulayman Al Bassam, *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*, introd. Graham Holderness (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 156.

³³ Cited in Dodd, “Anti-radicalisation”.

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- ³⁴ Scott Atran, *Talking to the Enemy: Violent Extremism, Sacred Values, and What it Means to be Human* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2011), 267.
- ³⁵ Richard Wilson, *Secret Shakespeare*, ix, 5.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 112, 193; on Wilson's reading of Simpson, see 111-17.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 295.
- ³⁸ Atran, *Talking*, 291.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 415.
- ⁴⁰ Al Bassam, "An Essay on *Richard III, an Arab Tragedy*; On the Burden of Text, Nation and Histories," in *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*, 62.
- ⁴¹ Al Bassam, *Al-Hamlet*, in *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*, 46.
- ⁴² Al Bassam, "Author's Introduction," in *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*, xix.
- ⁴³ Wilson, *Worldly Shakespeare*, 118, 125.
- ⁴⁴ Graham Holderness, "Introduction," in Al Bassam, xi.
- ⁴⁵ Al Bassam, *Al-Hamlet*, 17.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.
- ⁴⁷ Atran, *Talking*, 55-6.
- ⁴⁸ Al Bassam, *Al-Hamlet*, 49.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 44-5.
- ⁵⁰ Al Bassam, *Richard III, an Arab Tragedy*, 120.
- ⁵¹ Graham Holderness, "Arab Shakespeare: Sulayman Al-Bassam's *The Al-Hamlet Summit*," *Culture, Language and Representation*, 4 (2007): 147.
- ⁵² See, for example, Robert Irwin, "Is this the man who inspired Osama Bin Laden," *The Guardian* (1 November 2011), accessed 14 March 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/nov/01/afghanistan.terrorism3>
- ⁵³ Al Bassam, *Al-Hamlet*, 13.
- ⁵⁴ Al Bassam, *Richard III*, 99.

⁵⁵ Al Bassam, *Al-Hamlet*, 25.

⁵⁶ Al Bassam, *Richard III*, 109.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁵⁹ Al Bassam, *The Speaker's Progress*, 140.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁶¹ *Al-Hamlet*, 52.

⁶² Al Bassam, "An Essay on *Richard III*," 69.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 68

⁶⁴ *The Speaker's Progress*, 139, 178.

⁶⁵ Sulayman Al Bassam, in Shirley Dent, "Interview: Sulayman Al-Bassam," *Culture Wars* (2003), accessed 3 March 2016, <http://www.culturewars.org.uk/2003-01/albassam.htm>

⁶⁶ Atran, 5.