

Thematic Affinities Between ‘Antar and Othello

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Abstract

This essay examines the resemblance between the Arabic historical figure Antar bin Shadad and the character of Othello in Shakespeare’s play Othello. While the plot is similar to some extent between the two stories, there are many differences that renders a plot comparison impractical. In fact, what is worth discussing here is the thematic affinities between the two, which is the main focus in this essay. After discussing these affinities, it is worth mentioning how this knowledge about the story of Antar bin Shadad might have travelled from East to West through the centuries.

Key words: Adaptation, Antar bin Shadad, Arabic literature, Othello, Racism.

I. Introduction

Giovanni Battista Giraldis (1504-1573), an Italian novelist and poet known by the nickname Cinthio, had great influence on several European writers at the time. One of those writers was William Shakespeare. Amongst others, Shakespeare has read and borrowed from Cinthio in some of his works. The literature review affirms Shakespeare’s Othello was borrowed from Cinthio. And while scholars have not confirmed how, if ever, Shakespeare had read Arabic literature, we suggest that there is a striking resemblance between Othello and the Arabic tale of Antar. While Othello was a fictional character, Antar was a real historical figure. This essay explores some of the affinities between these two stories.

The speculations made in this research come after reading an Arabic article which has not been translated into English yet. After reading the Arabic article, I explored the issue in detail. The article was written by a team of researchers in comparative literature. “Al-Jthoor Al-Arabia fi Al-Adab al-Orubia: Otail Shakespear wa Antara Bin Shadad” (2012), is the title of this article in Arabic which translates as “Arab roots in European literature: Shakespeare’s Othello and ‘Antar ibn Shaddad.” Alhusaini et al. argue that William Shakespeare’s popular Othello has been influenced in one way or another by the famous Arabian epic tale of ‘Antar and ‘Abla. Of course, the obvious difference here is that the latter tells the story of a real historical figure and an

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important poet in Arabic literature. This Arabian tale precedes Othello by nearly 10 centuries. Alhusaini et al. strongly suggest that there are generally many similarities in various aspects of both stories. More specifically, similarities can be found in the character level and in Othello's linguistic features. In addition to exploring these similarities in detail, this essay examines thematic affinities and historical evidence to demonstrate an Arabic influence on English literature.

II. Summary of 'Antar & 'Abla:

Antar bin Shaddad is not an imaginary personage. He was an Arab hero and poet who lived in the pre-Islamic era (525-608). He is famous for a number of things, most importantly, his chivalry, knighthood and bravery. He is also known for his romance and pure love of Abla. The Mu'allaqat, which means 'The Suspended Odes or The Hanging Poems', is a group of seven long poems which are considered the best work of pre-Islamic poetry. Antar's best poem is one of the seven Mu'allaqat. The story begins when Shaddad, from the tribe of Abss, partakes in the raid of another tribe and receives his share of the spoils of war: a black female slave named Zabiba. After some time passes, Zabiba is pregnant with her master Shaddad's child. Shaddad, as a father and master, names the black born boy Antar, but does not consider him a son. Antar grew up in the harsh Arabian environment to become a strong and brave young man. He was instrumental in victorious battles of the Abss tribe, as a result of which the king of the tribe gave him the title "Abss's cavalier and hero." During this time, Antar falls in love with his cousin Abla, a fair skinned and beautiful girl in the tribe, daughter of his Uncle Malik, an influential and important man of the Abss tribe. Abla also falls in love with Antar because she is impressed by stories she hears about his brave adventures and his beautiful romantic poetry. His dark complexion stands as a barrier to their love. Antar goes through extravagant adventures in order to marry Abla. After finally marrying her, the story ends with his tragic death.

III. Literature Review:

Since the Arabic culture is a verbal one which generally depended on memorizing literary and/or holy texts, the story of Antar was passed on verbally from one generation to another. It was not until a number of writers started writing down the story around the 7th or 8th century. In *Antar: A Bedoueen Romance*, Ben McClary claims that the story was first written in the 8th century by the popular Arab philologist, Asmaee (v).

As we go through the evidence, we must keep in mind that Antar's story is one of the most popular stories in Arabic. Also, some of his

poetry is considered one of the seven best poems in the history of pre-Islamic Arabic literature. This means that if there was any chance that Shakespeare would have read an Arabic story, read about an important Arabic poem, or even heard about some Arabic literature, it would have been Antar's.

E. L. Ranelagh devotes a whole chapter for the tale of 'Antar and 'Abla in *The Past We Share: The Near Eastern Ancestry of Western Folk Literature*. In a different chapter, "The *Disciplina Clericalis*," Ranelagh writes about the Arabic books which have most affected the West, and considered two of these books outstanding. One book is *The Arabian Nights* and the other one is *Disciplina Clericalis* which was translated into Latin soon after 1106. It is a collection of fables and tales and is the oldest European book of its kind. Ranelagh claims that the stories of this book "have had even more influence on European literature than those of the *Nights*" (163). Petrus Alfonsus, born in 1062 in Huesca, Aragon, was the compiler of *Disciplina Clericalis*. According to Ranelagh, Alfonsus was educated in Hebrew, Latin, Spanish, and in the Arab scholarship of Huesca, which was under Islamic ruling until 1035. He was also a scholar who held important positions in the learned world and as a royal physician for "Alfonso I of Aragon and later to Henry I of England, in courtly circles" (163). It is clear that Alfonsus's position and multi-lingual knowledge put him in a very important place where he could transfer literature from one place to another. Alfonsus received Christian baptism in 1106 and soon wrote *Disciplina Clericalis* after he emigrated to England. Ranelagh comments on his position declaring that Alfonsus "was therefore ideally situated to convey Arab lore to the West in general and to Spain and England in particular, and he accomplished this because his intellectual gifts were equally remarkable" (163). This is particularly true if the tale of 'Antar and 'Abla was one of the tales in Alfonsus's book. However, this point is not clarified in Ranelagh's book as this chapter discusses Arabic literature in general.

It is true that Ranelagh does not say anything about 'Antar in this discussion of *Disciplina Clericalis*, but its influence in European literature is deeply explored. Ranelagh considers Alfonsus to be "original in being the first European writer deliberately to import Arabic culture. Simply by his translating them into Latin, which was the international language of literate Europe" (164). Ranelagh's admiration of Alfonsus does not stop here; he asserts that *Disciplina Clericalis* was very successful to the extent making many European writers influenced by this book. Ranelagh informs us that *Disciplina Clericalis* had been "copied and translated into the vernaculars, preached in the vernaculars, and imitated all over Europe" (165). It is very important to quote Ranelagh at length as he says:

Chauvin, the great French Arabist, over a hundred years ago listed some fifty of only the principal authors and works which borrowed from Petrus Alfunsus. They include Bandello, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Cinthio, the Fabliaux, the Gesta Romanorum, Giraldi, Gower, Hebbel, Islandzk Aeventyri, Kaatspel, Lydgate, El Conde Lucanor, Marie de France, the minnesinger, Il Novellino,...Vincent de Beauvais. (165)

Among this list of the most influential writers in European literary history, we find a very important name; Cinthio. Literary scholars have accepted the fact that the primary source for Shakespeare's Othello was a story in Giraldi Cinthio's Gli Hecatommithi, published in 1565. Thereupon, if Cinthio "borrowed from Petrus Alfunsus", it means that he has read Alfunsus's book and what he read or borrowed could have led him to write Un Capitano Moro. If we carry on with this argument, accordingly, Shakespeare would have been influenced by Alfunsus as well because he borrowed from Cinthio. As a matter of fact, referring to the earlier list of names of influential European writers, Ranelagh asserts: "To these could be added Cervantes, Gobius and Shakespeare" (165). Assuming Shakespeare did not directly borrow from Alfunsus, metaphorically it could be speculated that literary traditions transfer in a system of long chains. Literature and literary writers could be seen as a series of connected links. One chain connects another chain, and so on, until the last chain, even if it appears distant, could still be linked somehow to the first chain.

IV. Discussion:

On the level of the plot, the two stories are generally similar. They are both about brave warriors of dark complexion who fall in love with a noble woman of fair complexion, and their love for their woman controls the plot. And in their stories both hero struggle with spiteful and envious villains until the end. The discussion section includes two parts: a larger section comparing between the historical figures of the Arabian story with characters in Shakespeare's play, and a smaller section discussing the contact between the East and the West especially with regards to themes of love, bravery, and knighthood.

a. Figures and Characters:

The similarities between the two heroes are in fact striking. On the linguistic level, Antar was one of the most popular and renowned poets of Arabic literature. As mentioned earlier in this essay, the excellent poetry of Antar has bequeathed him a special place in Arabic literature declaring his poetry to be one of the Seven Odes. Similarly, A.C. Bradley, a literary critic specialized in Shakespearean literature claims that Othello, when compared with all of Shakespeare's characters was considered "the greatest poet of them all" (188). Poetry for both characters gives them an important unifying element

of expressing romance. Additionally, in terms of the appearance features, the heroes were both black, and of Arabian descent. Othello comes from the desert of North Africa while Antar comes from the desert of the Arabian Peninsula. The heroes are also known for their physical strength and combat skills which qualified them to have an elevated status in the society they lived in. Throughout the story, 'Antar is defamed by his black skin and for being son of a black slave, his mother Zabiba. In the same fashion, on numerous occasions, Othello is referred to as the "moor" or as the "black" man. For example, when Iago and Roderigo try to wake Brabantio up to tell him about his daughter's marriage in act I, scene I, Iago tells Brabantio: "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram/Is topping your white ewe."

On various occasions, we see 'Antar feeling inferior because of the color of his skin and therefore searches for an identity. He manages to find that the only way out of his identity as a black man is by showing strength and combat skills. In his poetry, 'Antar describes different scenes of battles he has won. Comparatively, Othello feels inferior because of his black skin as well. And therefore he searches for an identity which distances him from blackness. In one instance, he is talking to Iago and telling him that it is true that he does not have the skills of proper ways of talking to women because he is black: "Haply, for I am black/And have not those soft parts of conversation/That chamberers have" (3.3) Othello is referring to his blackness as a negative connotation, and assumes that white men, different from black men, would know how to treat women and keep them interested.

And similar to the manner in which 'Antar finds a way to give himself an identity other than his blackness by proving to be of importance in battles, Othello does the same. Othello repeatedly talks about himself as a warrior of value to Venice. He speaks to the people around him about the battles, sieges, and fortunes which he encountered. For example, in his last speech before he kills himself, his identity as a Venetian warrior is very important to him, and strives to keep it that way even after he dies:

I have done the state some service, and they know't.

No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,

Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,

It is very important for Othello to be identified as the Venetian warrior and not the moor. Just as 'Antar knew that his tribe values the powerful cavalier, Othello recognized that the white community he lived in values the warrior in him above all else.

The thematic features shared among the two heroes are of the utmost importance which demonstrate influence of the Arab version of the warrior/knight on the English version present in literature. Both heroes are distinguished by features such as nobility, high morals, and great love of their women. The high morals are seen in Othello when Brabantio goes after Othello for marrying Desdemona, he calls him a foul thief, accuses him of using witchcraft to get Desdemona, and other insults in front of the duke. However, Othello's high morals prevent him from saying any improper words. Likewise, 'Abla's father, Malik, and her brother insult 'Antar many times, but his morals prevent him from saying anything hurtful, especially to the relatives of his love (Alhusaini ,18).

Not only are Antar and Othello are considered emotional men, but are characterized with the inability to withstand trauma concerning their love. This comparison proves to be accurate when recounting Othello's nightmares and seizures after he suspected an affair between his wife and Cassio. Iago tells Othello that he was told by Cassio "he lie with her" or "on her," to which Othello replies:

Lie with her! lie on her! We say lie on her, when
they belie her. Lie with her! that's fulsome.

.....

that shake me thus. Pish! Noses, ears, and lips.

--Is't possible?--Confess--handkerchief!--O devil!--

Falls in a trance

Then Iago tells Cassio that: "My lord is fall'n into an epilepsy:/This is his second fit; he had one yesterday" (4.1). Similarly, 'Antar is unable to think straight at one point when he is prevented from seeing 'Abla and walks to Mecca hoping for help from God.

b. Literature: from the East to the West:

As we have established earlier, the story of 'Antar and 'Abla is considered a story of romance, bravery, and chivalry. Therefore, it seems appropriate to examine the effects of 'Antar's story on chivalry and romance in the west. Anne and Wilfrid Blunt declare that 'Antar "was indeed the true prototype of the knights errant of our own age of Chivalry," which makes him the father of all knights (31). Therefore, if 'Antar was somehow a prototype of knights during medieval times, we can understand how his story could have influenced the western tale. Moreover, in *Arabian Poetry for English Readers* W.A Clouston writes:

It is far from improbable that the famous Arabian Romances of Antar furnished the model for the earliest of the regular romances of chivalry which were current in Europe during the middle ages; indeed a comparison of incidents in the work of El-Asma'ee with others found

in the so-called Gothic romances will show some very striking parallels, sufficient of themselves to lead to this conclusion (174).

El-Asma'ee is the popular Arab philologist mentioned earlier which McClary claims was the first to write the story of 'Antar in the 8th century. In this case, if romances of chivalry in middle ages Europe was influenced by 'Antar's story, then we can understand that Shakespeare might have been aware of the story of 'Antar himself, and not by secondhand.

Finally, as Spain was under Islamic rule during the middle ages, the close proximity of the two cultures lead to an exchange of culture. A number of European cities which have been mostly influenced by Islamic and Arabic traditions were Sicily, Andalusia, Cordova and Toledo. During the ruling of King Roger II of Sicily in 1130 until 1154 there were huge exchanges in the cultural and scientific fields (Alhusaini et al. 20). In fact, during the Norman-Arab-Byzantine culture 11th-13th century Sicily became a crossroad for the interaction between the Norman-Catholic, Byzantine-Orthodox and Arab-Islamic cultures. Traditions of courtly love and troubadours have entered Europe through Islamic Spain and southern France. The contact between the two East and the West took several forms including commercial trading, translation into Greek, Latin and other languages, the Islamic Conquering, as well as the Crusade wars, and orientalist.

V. Conclusion:

The events of the plot differ in Othello and in 'Antar's story. Starting from the beginning we notice the difference of the events; Othello marries Desdemona in the first scene while 'Antar only marries 'Abla near the very end. In spite of all that, we find that they are also similar in the fact that they are both stories of love, chivalry, and poetry. As we witness Antar's story being one which revolves around a love that is forbidden by the rituals of the tribe, we also see many attempts to make this love fail by treachery and deception. By the same token, After Othello is married, we see many attempts to separate the two lovers by treachery and deception. Moreover, both heroes were able to make a name for themselves in the community by proving themselves as brave warriors. These similarities between the two stories could be because of a long series of chains; Shakespeare influences by Cinthio, who was influenced by Alfunsus, who was influenced by Arabic literature. Or, Shakespeare himself might have been aware of the story of 'Antar and merged it with Cinthio's version to create Othello. After we have examined all the similarities in events and characters, then examined the historical evidence of the relationship between Othello and 'Antar, we still cannot be assertive in saying that Shakespeare was influenced by the Arabic story. There

is not enough evidence to prove that he was in fact aware of 'Antar and 'Abla. The question of whether or not Shakespeare was influenced by the Arabic literature in writing Othello is an open ended question which leaves room for researchers to explore this area.

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