World(s) in Balance in *Antony and Cleopatra*: Wole Soyinka's "Shakespeare and the Living Dramatist" Revisited

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Abstract Shakespeare's plays stand as powerful examples of the simultaneous appeal to the local and the global: though he most immediately wrote for his local audiences in sixteenth-century London, his choice of subject matter often takes on an international and even global scope, and his representations of what to his immediate audience/readership would be considered exotic and unfamiliar have inspired numerous responses from a global and/or postcolonial perspective, by authors such as Wole Soyinka and many others. This paper takes Wole Soyinka's 1983 essay "Shakespeare and the Living Dramatist," a reading of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* and a discussion of responses to that play from the Arab world, as inspiration for an examination of *Antony and Cleopatra* as a literary work/world comprising many examples of opposing forces in balance with one another, and Soyinka's essay as an effort to bring a similar balance to postcolonial literary criticism. As Soyinka demonstrates in his essay, Shakespeare's portrayals in *Antony and Cleopatra* of the delicate balances between East and West, women and men, passion and reason, history and legend, and life, death, and immortality continue to make the play attractive to readers throughout the world.

Key words Shakespeare; Wole Soyinka; *Antony and Cleopatra;* postcolonial criticism; interculturation

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Introduction

Shakespeare's plays stand as powerful examples of the simultaneous appeal to the local and the global: though he most immediately wrote for his local audiences in sixteenth-century London, his choice of subject matter often takes on an international and even global scope, and his representations of what to his immediate audience/readership would be considered exotic and unfamiliar have inspired numerous responses from a global and/or postcolonial perspective, by authors such as Wole Soyinka and many others. These responses serve as reminders that a writer who chooses to depict a culture not his/her own in a literary work engages in a precarious balance between the two extremes of idealization of that culture on the one hand and demonization on the other, in part stemming from the impossibility of completely escaping one's worldviews and biases. This in turn can affect responses to the work by readers from the culture the work endeavours to represent, especially if that work is accepted as a "classic" or canonical text. Readers in this situation may then be faced with the choice of rejecting the work and/or its portrayal of their culture, or accepting it on its own terms and providing some justification for why they still choose to read it. This is the position in which many African, specifically Arabic-speaking, even more specifically Egyptian, readers have found themselves on encountering texts such as Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. The play is an archetypal example of "Western" literature, having been written by probably the best-known English writer and based on English translations of Roman historical texts, and its central figure has long been regarded, by Roman historians and English writers alike, simultaneously as a racial, cultural, and gendered "other" who has been called "an example of dissoluteness in Western literature" (Darragi 358), and as a great queen who inspires the devotion of the most powerful men in the ancient world and ultimately makes "a supreme sacrifice for love and freedom" (Darragi 369). Yet, as this paradoxical view of Cleopatra as both other and heroine demonstrates, *Antony and Cleopatra* is a play that depicts a

world, or worlds, existing in a delicate balance, and its portrayal of the interactions between East and West, women and men, passion and reason, history and legend, and life, death, and immortality continue to make it attractive to readers throughout the world.

Wole Soyinka and African/Egyptian/Arab Responses to Shakespeare

The question of how African readers in general and Egyptian readers in particular respond to *Antony and Cleopatra* was especially intriguing to the Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka, who addressed it in the essay "Shakespeare and the Living Dramatist," originally "a lecture to the International Shakespeare Conference at Stratford-upon-Avon on 17 August 1982, and […] first published […] the following year" (Graham 29). In his essay, Soyinka notes that, quite apart from the numerous translations and adaptations of the play into Arabic, many Arabic readers have embraced and adopted Shakespeare by attempting to connect his fascination with and use of imperial Roman/Egyptian history to "the unrecorded things he actually did in real life" (1). He further alludes to an ingenious, if somewhat facetious, attempt to justify the appeal of Shakespeare to Arabic readers: in 1964 — the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth — M.M. Badawi suggested in his essay "Shakespeare and the Arabs" that, given what little we know of his life, Shakespeare might possibly have been Arabic himself. According to this theory, his 'real' name would have been "Shayk al-Subair […] as dune-bred an Arabic name as any English poet can hope for" (Soyinka 2). Badawi, in fact, was not the originator of this hypothesis: according to Ferial J. Ghazoul, it "started in the late nineteenth century with the Lebanese writer Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq (1804–1888), who claimed that Shakespeare was an Arab whose real name was Shaykh Zubayr" (9). It has resurfaced throughout the Arab world over the years in varying degrees of seriousness, even, as Cork Milner points out, having been referred to "in 1989 when Radio Tehran announced that […] [Muammar al-Qadhafi] had declared that an Arab sheik named Zubayr bin William, who had been born in the sixteenth century, was Shakespeare" (qtd. in Litvin). Soyinka's attitude toward the Shakespeare-as-Arab idea is a combination of amusement and admiration: though he has fun with it by suggesting that perhaps it was Shakespeare's wife and not the playwright himself who was of Arabic descent (10), he does recognize that "even the most esoteric of their claims lead one […] to the productive source itself, and to the gratification of celebrating dramatic poetry anew" (10). Indeed, Soyinka's essay is itself an example of this process, as he uses the Shakespeare-as-Arab hypothesis as a way into his "celebrating dramatic poetry anew" with his reading of *Antony and Cleopatra*.

The "Shayk al-Subair" claim is a particularly striking example of intercultural appropriation in which the literature of the dominant power is adopted and adapted by the subordinate culture, not merely by rewriting that work to suit the needs of the subordinate culture in the mode of "the empire writing back" (Graham 41), but by claiming the dominant culture's writer as one of its own. Although Shakespeare wrote in English and is considered the quintessentially "English" author, his literary skill and multifaceted presentations of Egyptian, Jewish, and African characters in *Antony and Cleopatra, The Merchant of Venice,* and *Othello* and *Titus Andronicus,* respectively (cf. Soyinka 4), suggest to adherents of this hypothesis that he could not have been entirely English to describe non-English characters in such believable and sympathetic ways, even where those characters are placed in stereotypical, oppositional, and/or antagonistic roles. On the other hand, Shakespeare's "allegedly unflattering views of Jews, Turks, and the British" (Litvin) in those plays and others have also been cited to support this claim in the belief that, as Margaret Litvin notes, "Who but an Arab could harbor unfavourable views of precisely these three groups?" Indeed, in positing characters such as Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice,* Aaron in *Titus Andronicus,* or even Othello as "proof" of possible Arabic origins for Shakespeare or his plays, "Soyinka's irony is at its heaviest" (Graham 31). No matter which plays and characters are put forth as evidence of such a reading, however, and whether for serious or humorous/ironic reasons, this sort of appropriation of a "canonical" author from one culture by readers and writers from another further serves as a countermeasure to the "political turn that saw postcolonial cultural influence in terms of the stark alternatives of oppression and resistance" (Graham 29) to which Soyinka's essay was itself a reply.

Soyinka observes that not all African cultures that have produced translations and/or adaptations of Shakespeare have embraced the author and his works in the same way that Badawi and other proponents of the "Shayk al-Subair" hypothesis have done. For example, there have been no known attempts to claim Shakespeare as Nigerian, even as his plays are translated into local languages and adapted into distinctly African settings (Soyinka 2–3). One reason Soyinka cites for this seeming discrepancy is that, in general, European colonies in Africa such as what is now Nigeria have historically taken an approach to education in which "the [colonizer's] literature is always centrally placed" (2), with the result that the colonizer's literature is seen as imposed from above rather than emerging from the colonized community itself. Another reason is the interconnection of Arabic literature and Islamic culture, "from which European culture became not merely a liberating, but, in certain aspects, even a revolutionary force" (Soyinka 2–3) because European

literatures provided representational possibilities that were different from those to be found in Arabic/Islamic cultures and literatures. His use of the words "liberating" and "revolutionary" further demonstrate his efforts "to challenge the belief that the historical influence of colonizing cultures is always harmful" (Graham 31), though, as Kenneth J.E. Graham admits, "such a history is not Soyinka's focus" (31) in the essay as a whole. Soyinka further notes that Arabic readers have also recognized the parallel, though not entirely identical, uses of Elizabethan/Jacobean English and classical Arabic as the languages of both literary and religious texts, where "Arabic is the conscious vehicle of Islamic piety" (Soyinka 3) while the King James translation of the Bible, widely praised for its poetic language, was also a product of the era in which Shakespeare lived and wrote.

Antony and Cleopatra as an Intercultural Text

Antony and Cleopatra is a key text for Soyinka and, in his reading, for African and Arabic readers of Shakespeare in general, because of its vivid descriptions and portrayals of the intercultural contacts and balances between Rome and Egypt in virtually all their forms. These interactions transcend simple binary oppositions and "systematic antitheses" (Kermode 1392), and also demonstrate that the processes of colonization and interculturation were by no means new phenomena. As Soyinka asserts, "It is not entirely by accident that the physical terrain […] was the meeting point of the Orient and the Occident" (4), both in the geographical and the mental/cultural senses. The play's Egyptian scenes take place in Alexandria, which was historically the home of Greek colonists in Egypt — and it is worth noting here that as a member of the Ptolemy family, descended from the half-brother of Alexander the Great, Cleopatra was partly of Greek origin herself (Archer 8; Darragi 365; Loomba 112–114) — as well as "a center of learning to rival Rome [that] never really adopted Roman customs" (Crane 12) even after the Roman conquest of Egypt depicted in the play. In that respect, Alexandria is an analogue in the ancient world to Shakespeare's London, as Cleopatra herself, like many of Shakespeare's strong female characters, can be read as a counterpart of sorts to Elizabeth I, "a political and social model whose passion stands as a bold challenge to the Puritan values of the time" (Darragi 362). Conversely, the Egypt of *Antony and Cleopatra* is also a society in transition. Just as the play depicts the shift in the balance of power between Egypt and Rome, Shakespeare's immediate audience would also be reminded that "London was increasing in economic power and metropolitan centrality while Cairo was becoming less and less important, hampered since the fifteenth century by European competition" (Archer 6). Indeed, as an emerging

colonial power and a beneficiary of international trade, Shakespeare's England was, in many ways, just as much an analogue of the Roman Empire as depicted in *Antony and Cleopatra* as it was of Cleopatra's Egypt, though Shakespeare's interest in the Roman Empire was "not [so much] because England was already an empire, but because empire was one of the subjects of his play" (Loomba 119). As Rafik Darragi further points out, *Antony and Cleopatra* was written amidst a period of ideological as well as sociopolitical transition, as it first appeared "in 1606, at a moment of spiritual, Puritan upheaval in England" (362) to which a play whose heroine is a woman who rules, and is ruled, by passion — and whose strength of character evoked still-fresh memories of the Elizabethan era that had so recently ended — was a powerful act of resistance. The analogies between Shakespeare's England and both Cleopatra's Egypt and Antony's Rome have influenced Arabic treatments of the same theme, such as the Egyptian poet laureate Ahmad Shaqui's 1927 play *Masra' Cleopatra,* known in English as *The Fall of Cleopatra* (Soyinka 4) or *The Death of Cleopatra* (Darragi 360), upon which Soyinka touches briefly in his essay as an archetypal example of a postcolonial response to a canonical Western text. Shaqui's play was inspired "by the Egyptian struggle for independence from the British [and] recreates Cleopatra as a woman torn between her love of her country and her love for a man" (Soyinka 4).

Cleopatra's love for Egypt as much as for Antony is evident throughout Shakespeare's play, even though Soyinka regards her as "unpatriotic, […] ready to sacrifice her country on the altar of love" (4). It is especially demonstrated in contrast to the Romans' attitude toward "the wide arch / Of the rang'd empire" (*A&C* I.i. 33–34) of which Egypt is, to them, just another part. Antony and the other Triumvirs refer to Rome, both in itself and as the centre of the empire, as "the world" (e.g. *A&C* I.i. 12), a "'world' [that] is composed largely of hard, opaque, human-fashioned materials, and its surface is divided into almost obsessively named — and conquered — cities and nations" (Crane 2). Cleopatra, meanwhile, constantly refers specifically to Egypt, as her historical counterpart was known to have done. Several times throughout the play, she is referred to as "Egypt" (e.g. *A&C* I.iii. 41; V.ii. 115), not just as metonymic shorthand for "the Queen of Egypt" (*A&C* V.ii. 112), but also as a symbol of how strongly she is identified with her country. Even though "[f]or the Romans, an identification between Cleopatra and Egypt was strategically necessary in order to highlight an absolute division between Rome and Egypt" (Loomba 114), within the world of the play this identification does not necessarily "other" her as it did for the Roman historians. Rather, it serves as a means of self-definition informed by a favourite theme of Shakespeare: the

paradigm of the ruler's two bodies — a single individual who at the same time represents his/her entire nation. Cleopatra's self-assertion and "steely patriotism" (Soyinka 5) ultimately influence her choice of death over dishonour (see esp. *A&C* V.ii. 111–233) and her refusal to allow the Romans to define her life or her death in their terms. Her decision to commit suicide by allowing a snake to bite her, and dressing in her royal robes as she prepares herself for this final step (*A&C* V.ii. 207–313), further illustrates her self-definition as both a queen and an Egyptian, as the "serpent of old Nile" (*A&C* I.v. 25) — Antony's affectionate and foreshadowing nickname for Cleopatra — was a symbol of Egyptian royalty in general, and more specifically "of her control of Upper Egypt, Lower Egypt, as well as the additional territories which Antony gifted her" (Loomba 114).

It is Shakespeare's emphasis on Cleopatra's self-definition and identification with Egypt that provides much of the balance in *Antony and Cleopatra*, which otherwise might have remained a series of simple binary oppositions between Egypt and Rome as embodiments of East and West, rule by women and rule by men, or emotion and reason. Cleopatra is constantly dismissed by the Romans — including Antony — in such terms as "gipsy" (*A&C* I.i. 10), "strumpet" (*A&C* I.i. 13), and "wrangling queen" (*A&C* I.i. 48) in the opening scene alone, and these racially- and sexually-charged descriptors and others throughout the play mark her, from the Romans' point of view, "as a typical wanton, extravagant sexually […] whose devilish charms ensnared and destroyed the noble Antony" (Darragi 359). Soyinka too remarks that, despite Shakespeare's depictions of Cleopatra's positive qualities as well as her flaws, "every act, […] every caprice, every clownish or imperious gesture confirms that she deserves every one of these accolades and more" (5). The Romans' report of a victory feast in Egypt (*A&C* II.ii. 175–183), followed by Enobarbus's famous description of Cleopatra's first meeting with Antony (*A&C* II.ii. 190–242), solidify the Roman perception of Egypt as a place ruled by appetites, sexual and otherwise, as Shakespeare "contract[s] the pomp and panoply of love and royalty into a gastronomic experience, yet unfailingly elevate[s] both into a veritable apotheosis without a sense of the ridiculous or the inflated" (Soyinka 9). Cleopatra is herself aware of the Roman opinions of her and her kingdom, and in a metatheatrical passage marked by ironic references to the world of author and audience, expresses her fear that if she surrenders to them,

> Saucy lictors
> Will catch at us like strumpets, and scald rhymers
> Ballad's out a' tune. The quick comedians

> Extemporally will stage us, and present
> Our Alexandrian revels: Antony
> Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
> Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
> I'th' posture of a whore. (*A&C* V.ii. 214–221)

She thus becomes all the more determined not to give the Romans the opportunity to do so, and in the process displays the character traits of both a noble Roman and a passionate Egyptian, in her choice of taking the honourable way out rather than submitting to almost certain humiliation by Caesar.

By contrast, Octavia, "whose beauty claims / No worse a husband than the best of men; / Whose virtue and whose general graces speak / That which none else can utter" (*A&C* II.ii. 127–130), is presented as an example of the Roman ideal, a foil to the self-indulgent and passionate Cleopatra — and thereby, to many readers, far less interesting a character than her Egyptian counterpart. However, Enobarbus's characterization of Cleopatra as one who "makes hungry / Where most she satisfies; for vildest things / Become themselves in her, that the holy priests / Bless her when she is riggish" (*A&C* II.ii. 238), while meant to define Egypt in general and Cleopatra in particular as the 'other' to which Rome stands in opposition, also establishes her as the embodiment of all the Romans have tried to deny in themselves, so that Octavia's "beauty, wisdom, modesty" (*A&C* II.ii. 240), values that the Romans admired, become statements of repression. Thus, within the world of the play, the Egyptians in general and Cleopatra in particular play a similar role for Antony and the Romans to that which Soyinka identified for English literature within the Arab world: "not merely a liberating, but, in certain aspects, even a revolutionary force" (Soyinka 2–3), albeit one tinged with irony in the conquest of Egypt by Rome at the end of the play.

It is Antony who serves to bridge the gap and maintain a balance between the virtuous/repressed Romans and the passionate/liberating Egyptians; though he clearly defines himself as his peers do, as a Roman warrior/co-ruler and "The triple pillar of the world" (*A&C* I.i. 12), he alone of the Romans makes an effort to understand the culture of the Egyptians. This is most clearly illustrated in Act II, scene vii, in which he explains to Caesar the Egyptian custom of marking the cycle of the year by the flooding of the Nile:

> Thus do they, sir; they take the flow o' th' Nile
> By certain scales i' th' pyramid; they know,

> By th' height, the lowness, or the mean, if dearth
> Or foison follow. The higher Nilus swells,
> The more it promises; as it ebbs, the seedsman
> Upon the slime and ooze scatters his grain,
> And shortly comes to harvest. (*A&C* II.vii. 17–23)

This passage serves to remind the Romans, and the readers, that the Egyptians are "a people to whom […] fertile land is both worship and life" (Soyinka 9), and that as the ruling powers, the Romans must respect that if they are to gain the respect of the Egyptians. The association of Egypt and the Egyptians with the land provides a further contrast to the Roman perspective that equates themselves and their country to "the world" (*A&C* I.i. 12). As Mary Thomas Crane observes, where the Romans speak of the "world," the "Egyptians […] inhabit the 'earth,' in which they imagine themselves to be immersed and which they perceive and understand through all of the senses" (2). Furthermore, the Egyptian perception of the "earth" is influenced more by "the Aristotelian system of elements and humours" (Crane 2) than by the separation between "humanity" and "the world" that marks both the Roman and Elizabethan/Jacobean mindsets. Ironically, however, the battle that seals the fate of Antony, Cleopatra, and Egypt itself is fought "By sea, by sea" (*A&C* III.vii. 40), due not so much to any perceived advantage but primarily to Cleopatra's "refusal to occupy and defend hard ground […] upon which the Roman world is based" (Crane 10). Yet, even despite the triumph of the "world" of Rome at the play's close, in the end "the earth of Egypt dominate[s] Rome" (Soyinka 8), both within the world of the play as Caesar acknowledges "No grave upon the earth shall clip in it / A pair so famous" (*A&C* V.ii. 359–360), and in the world of readers and audience as "Egypt, as depicted in the play, represents something other than (or in addition to) an orientalizing stereotype" (Crane 12) and becomes a vivid example of what Soyinka characterizes as "local colour" (4).

Shakespeare's Balance Between History and Legend

Shakespeare's affinity toward Egyptian culture and "local colour" in *Antony and Cleopatra* goes beyond acknowledging the people's co-existence with the land; it also encompasses what Soyinka calls "the esoteric cults of Egypt and allied religions, including Islam" (6) in a much more balanced, even sympathetic, manner than typical depictions of non-Western religions by Elizabethan/Jacobean writers. As with Egyptian culture in general, Cleopatra also embodies Egyptian religion through her association with the goddess Isis, whose symbol is the moon (e.g.

A&C I.ii. 67–69; cf. Soyinka 6–7), and this is another feature the Shakespearean Cleopatra shares with her historical counterpart, who, "[l]ike Ptolemaic queens before her, […] encouraged identification of herself with Egyptian goddesses" (Loomba 114). The association is appropriate because of Cleopatra's constantly changing moods (e.g. *A&C* I.ii. 2–5), reminiscent of "th'inconstant moon / That monthly changes in her circled orb" (*R&J* II.ii. 109–110). It also contrasts her further to Octavia and Roman women in general, because the Greco-Roman moon goddess, Diana, was traditionally regarded as a personification of "the cold fruitless moon" (*MND* I.i. 73), associated with virginity and purity rather than with emotion and mutability. Even Cleopatra's farewell speeches to Antony (*A&C* IV.xv. 21–30, 73–91) and her suicide illustrate the Egyptian views of the afterlife, "of death as a place of physical habitation" (Soyinka 7), as well as the principal myth of Isis and Osiris that was used to explain the Egyptian funeral ritual (cf. Kermode 1393). As well, Antony's description of the flooding of the Nile not only shows his respect for Egyptian culture, but his position in the play's mythological/religious subtext as "Osiris to [Cleopatra's] Isis. The union of these divinities assures the fertility of Egypt" (Kermode 1393); and, within the context of the play and its historical base, the union of Antony and Cleopatra assures the endurance of Egyptian identity even as Egypt becomes part of the Roman — and, centuries later, the British — Empire.

In tracing a line of descent between Egyptian religion and Islam (Soyinka 6–7) through the imagery in Cleopatra's elegy for Antony (*A&C* IV.xv. 73–91), Soyinka remarks that "the pagan Greeks, who borrowed from [the Egyptians] much of their cults and religions […], would have no difficulty in identifying the Osiris-prowed Hadithic boat of death with Charon's canoe, scything through the River Styx" (6). His observation of the similarities between Greco-Roman and Egyptian mythologies serves as a reminder that just as Antony and Cleopatra are associated with Osiris and Isis, they are also counterparts to Greco-Roman mythical figures, in both the historical world and the world of the play. Antony in particular is described as a "Herculean Roman" (*A&C* I.iii. 84) both literally and figuratively, claiming descent from Hercules as well as sharing character traits with him. On the one hand, this connection plays upon Antony's reputation as a fierce and determined warrior who could endure the most inhumane conditions (e.g. *A&C* I.iv. 55–71) until the battle was won, recalling the legends of Hercules's twelve nigh-impossible tasks by which he earned divinity. On the other, however, Cleopatra's dressing Antony in her "tires and mantles" while she takes "his sword Philippian" (*A&C* II.v. 22–23) recalls Hercules's similar humiliation at the hands of Queen Omphale, as told by Herodotus and Didorus Siculus — both of whom claimed possible Egyptian origins for "the

seemingly most Greek, and later Roman, of heroes" (Archer 13; see Archer 12–18). Antony is ultimately forsaken by his legendary ancestor and guardian (*A&C* IV.iii. 12–16), prefiguring his supplication to "teach me / Alcides, thou mine ancestor, thy rage" (*A&C* IV.xii. 43–44) as he accuses Cleopatra of betraying him "To the young Roman boy" (*A&C* IV.xii. 48) in a parallel to Hercules's ultimate defeat brought about in part by a woman he had loved (*A&C* IV.xii. 43–49).

Meanwhile, Cleopatra, as the exotic idealized woman who inspires the love of Antony, and before him Julius Caesar and others, can be read as a counterpart to Venus, the Greco-Roman goddess of love (see e.g. Kermode 1393). Indeed, the historical Cleopatra fostered an association of herself with Venus just as much as she did with Isis (Darragi 365), playing upon her mixed Egyptian/Greek ancestry as well as her alliance with Antony, and in this way creating an intercultural synthesis of their respective mythologies in a similar manner to the Shakespearean Antony's description of Egyptian timekeeping customs in Act II, scene vii of the play. Antony's account of the seasonal cycle of the Nile occurs in the midst of the "Egyptian bacchanals" (*A&C* II.vii. 104) aboard Pompey's galley, which further points to the syncretism between Egyptian and Greco-Roman religions by alluding to the historical association of Antony with Bacchus (Darragi 365), himself often regarded as a Greco-Roman counterpart of Osiris (Archer 15–18), alongside Cleopatra's identification with both Venus and Isis. As a figure of fertility and pleasure, Bacchus represents the casting off of inhibitions, the fear of which Caesar expresses in his reluctance to "wash my brain / And it grow fouler" (*A&C* II.vii. 99–100) by participating in the festivity. Within the play-world's establishment of Rome and Egypt as the domains, respectively, of virtue/repression and passion/liberation existing in a delicate balance with each other, Caesar's apprehension over the revelries further represents his insistence on defining himself as a Roman and on not giving in to "the foreign god's power over his subjects" (Archer 18) — or, for that matter, the foreign queen's power over hers.

Shakespeare's mixture of history with both Egyptian and Greco-Roman mythologies in creating the world of *Antony and Cleopatra* represents yet another example of balances between seemingly opposing forces, and one that, like the juxtaposition of Rome and Egypt in the world of the play, or of Arabic and English literary traditions as characterized by Soyinka, opens up possibilities that enrich both the world of the play and the world of the readers. In depicting "[t]he transitions from the physical to the metaphysical" (Soyinka 9), Shakespeare reminds his readers/audience that the characters of whom he writes were actual historical figures, of a time and place far removed from his own. At the same time,

and in part thanks to the play and its sources in Roman historiography, they have transcended their historical origins and taken on a legendary dimension that may well rival that of the Greco-Roman and Egyptian gods and heroes to whom they are frequently compared, as Caesar's elegy for Antony and Cleopatra at the end of the play acknowledges. Indeed, in this respect, *Antony and Cleopatra*, much like Shakespeare's other Roman tragedies and history plays, may be regarded as an example of the figurative 'colonization' of historiography by poetry, alongside the literal colonization of Egypt by Rome. And just as historical colonization eventually gave rise to postcolonialism in all its facets, as Soyinka's essay exemplifies, so has the encroachment of poetry upon history led to revisionary and/or revisionist readings of and responses to those plays and their sources, quite often taking "an oppositional stance to Shakespeare in order to speak for themselves" (Graham 41; cf. Darragi 361–362). Even so, in much the same way that Soyinka's essay serves in part to remind his fellow postcolonial critics that interculturation is not always a zero-sum game that benefits only the dominant social group at the expense of the subordinate, works of historical poetry and/or poetic historiography such as *Antony and Cleopatra* and Shakespeare's other plays with historical themes remind readers of the balance that these works establish between "the actual world of the past" (Dolezel 84) and the legendary/mythic domain to which the characters and the story now belong.

Probably the most powerful imagery in *Antony and Cleopatra* of the protagonists' transcendence of the historical world into that of legend is not so much the play's numerous references to Egyptian and Greco-Roman divinities as counterparts to the title characters, however, as its frequent juxtaposition and balancing of life and death, as "ritual transformation steps towards the mystic moment of transition" (Soyinka 7). Antony's reference to the fate of his mythical ancestor Hercules in Act IV, scene xii, for example, leaves unspoken the hero's ascent to Olympus to join the gods, though those of Shakespeare's audience who were familiar with the story would thus be prompted to remember it; similarly, the association of both the historical and literary Antony and Cleopatra with Osiris and Isis serves to remind readers of the Egyptian views of "the secret house of death" (*A&C* IV.xv. 81) and what comes afterward (cf. Soyinka 6–8). But it is not merely death and immortality that Shakespeare juxtaposes in the play's final scenes. With Cleopatra's comparison of the snake that bites her, already established as a symbol of her status as the queen of Egypt and as an embodiment of both Egyptian and Greco-Roman goddesses, to "my baby on my breast / That sucks the nurse asleep" (*A&C* V.ii. 309–310), he joins "approaching bodily corruption with the essence-

draining paradox of birth and infancy [and] closes the fatal cycle of the union of opposites" (Soyinka 7) that has been the driving force behind the play and its world — and, in Soyinka's reading, the responses of modern readers in the Western and Arab worlds alike *to* the play and its world. Cleopatra's death and her burial beside Antony bring together all the opposing elements within the world(s) of the play — East and West, Egypt and Rome, reason and emotion, male and female, queen and soldier, human and divine, birth and death — into the unifying force of immortality, both in the literal sense of entering the afterlife and in the figurative sense of the remembrance of how, in Caesar's words that end the play:

> High events as these
> Strike those that make them; and their story is
> No less in pity than his glory which
> Brought them to be lamented. (*A&C* V.ii. 360–363)

Conclusion

Soyinka closes his essay with several playful responses to the "Shayk al-Subair" theory he had addressed at its beginning, acknowledging its similarity to other alternative authorship claims for the works of Elizabethan writers such as Shakespeare and Marlowe, as well as to the various hypotheses surrounding the largely unknown biographical details of the playwright and his wife, which he claims "will, I hope, provide endless preoccupation for at least a dozen doctoral theses" (10). Facetiousness aside, the desire of Arab readers such as Shidyaq, Badawi, and others who have taken up their claims, to envision Shakespeare as a transplanted Arab, or descendant of one, writing in English does stem to a great extent from the essential paradox of an English writer contributing to the definition of a non-English culture, especially with the British occupation of Egypt long after Shakespeare's time in mind. So, in its way, does Soyinka's response to this Arab appropriation of Shakespeare and to the world of *Antony and Cleopatra* as a whole. It is part of his larger reminder to readers, audiences, and critics that, just as the play depicts a world existing in many simultaneous balances each having some influence on all the others, so can, and perhaps should, postcolonial literary criticism keep in mind the "rich and multivocal mixture of local cultures, and Shakespeare as part of a continuing conversation within and between these cultures" (Graham 41) that act upon, and are acted upon by, one another, rather than merely choosing "to see society as a structure of oppression and exploitation, and to read Shakespeare accordingly" (Leggatt viii). The Arab world's relationship to Shakespeare in general

and *Antony and Cleopatra* in particular is a definite example of "a passionate compliment to those qualities in Shakespeare" (Soyinka 10) that readers admire, "but above all the paradox of timelessness and history" (Soyinka 10), which transcends temporal, ethnic, and geographical boundaries even as the plays remain documents of their own time and place. It is that "paradox of timelessness and history" that can be said to be the fundamental balance present in the world(s) of *Antony and Cleopatra*, if not of Shakespeare's work in its entirety and the responses that work continues to elicit throughout the world.

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