

## THE INFLUENCE OF ARMENIAN THEATRE-MAKERS ON THE PRESENCE OF SHAKESPEARE IN IRAN

Although the earliest Anglo-Iranian encounter is dated as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there are no records of Shakespeare's plays being performed in Iran until 1879. While Iranian diplomats who were sent to Europe, Russia, and Britain during the era of the Qajar dynasty (1789-1925), such as Mirza Abul Hassan Khan in 1809-1810<sup>1</sup> and Mirza Saleh Shirazi in 1815-1819<sup>2</sup>, refer in their travelogues to Shakespeare and his plays' performances in Britain, the earliest recorded productions of Shakespeare came to Iran not via Britain or even via these diplomatic routes of influence but predominantly by way of travelling theatre troupes from the Caucasian regions bordering Iran. The most important of these groups in helping Shakespeare's plays to establish a presence in Iran were undoubtedly those from Armenia. This article will provide an overview of the various Armenian groups and Armenian theatre practitioners who played a role in introducing Shakespeare's plays to Iran and attempt to demonstrate how the Armenian and Armenian-Iranian artistic community have been instrumental at crucial stages in the development of Shakespeare's performance and translation-history in Iran.

Armenia has one of the earliest Shakespeare translation and performance traditions among countries of (what are commonly denoted as) the Near or Middle-Eastern regions of Asia. Edward Alexander dates the first Armenian translation of Shakespeare to 1822 when extracts from

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- 1 Mirza Saleh Shirazi gives a brief mention of Shakespeare in his Travelogue writing "Shakespeare is one of the greatest poets to have existed." See: JAMSHĪD MALIK'PŪR, *Adabiyāt-i namāyishī dar Irān*, Intishārāt-i Tūs, Tehran 1364/1984 (Vol. 2), 75.
  - 2 MIRZA ABUL HASSAN KHAN, *A Persian at the court of King George 1809 – 10*, *The Journal of Mirza Abul Hassan Khan*, ed. and trans. Margaret Morris Cloake, Barrie & Jenkins, London 1988, 92.

the plays were published by the Calcutta-based Armenian weekly *Shde-maran*. According to Alexander, «complete (if not perfect)» Armenian translations of Shakespeare's plays were being produced by the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>. However, one of the first renowned and prolific translators of Shakespeare's plays into Armenian was the Armenian-Iranian diplomat Hovhannes Khan Masehian Mosa'ed. Masehian began his career at the Shah of Iran's court in 1884 as a translator before becoming a diplomat and eventually gaining ambassadorial posts in Germany and Japan. George A. Bournoutian explains that Nâser al-Din Shah «[took] advantage of Armenian linguistic and trade contacts» during his reign, and identifies Masehian specifically as one of these Armenian envoys employed by the Shah to strengthen Iran's diplomatic ties with Europe<sup>4</sup>.

Alexander observes that Masehian was a highly-respected scholar who «devoted 40 years of life to studying and translating Shakespeare». Indeed, Masehian was «invited to participate at Stratford-upon-Avon in the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration of [Shakespeare's] death» in 1916. In all, Masehian translated twelve Shakespeare plays (*Hamlet* twice), five of which have been published and seven of which have been lost<sup>5</sup>. According to Alexander, Masehian «stands out unquestionably as the foremost translator of Shakespeare in Armenian»<sup>6</sup>. However, it is also believed that many other Armenian and non-Armenian theatre groups active in Iran during the late-Qajar era may have based Persian translations of Shakespeare's plays on Masehian's Armenian translations. However, none of these early Persian translations appear to exist today.

As a result of Armenian translators, such as Masehian, providing theatre groups operating in Iran at this time with texts for the performance of Shakespeare's plays, touring Armenian theatre groups were also largely responsible for presenting the earliest performances of Shakespeare's plays to Iranian audiences. Beginning with George Chemshigian in 1866 with his performance of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, professional Armenian actors such as Petros Adamian, Apelian,

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3 EDWARD ALEXANDER, *Shakespeare's plays in Armenia*, in «Shakespeare Quarterly» 9.3 (Summer 1958): 389-390.

4 GEORGE A. BOURNOUTIAN, «Armenians in Nineteenth-Century Iran», in *The Armenians of Iran*, ed. Cosroe Chaqueri, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1988, 59.

5 ALEXANDER, *Shakespeare's plays in Armenia*, cit. (n. 3), 388.

6 Ivi, 389.

Zarfian, Manvelian and Siranoush helped to establish the reputation of the Armenian Shakespeare performance tradition throughout the Caucasus and Russia<sup>7</sup>. Due to its proximity to the Caucasus and its considerable Armenian community, perhaps it is unsurprising therefore that the first Shakespeare performances recorded in Iran took place in the north-western Iranian city of Tabriz. The earliest Shakespeare performance recorded in Iran is Fr Mesrop Papazian's (the Principal of the Armenian School in Tabriz) play *Court of Justice*, an adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* based on a production of this play he had seen in Russia<sup>8</sup>. In fact, most of these early productions of Shakespeare's plays in Tabriz were performed by Armenian theatre groups. According to Christoph Werner, «the presence of religious and linguistic minorities created a multicultural atmosphere that proved to be particularly stimulating» to the development of a theatre culture in Tabriz<sup>9</sup>.

On December 26<sup>th</sup> 1888, a theatre group run by a Mr S. and Mrs Alma Safrazian came from Tbilisi to Tabriz to perform *Othello* in Turkish<sup>10</sup>. According to Willem Floor, «[t]hat performance was attended by Amir Nezam, the governor-general of Azerbaijan and government officials and notables». Furthermore, the governor-general showed his appreciation to the Safrazian's by giving «a donation of 80 *tumans* for the [Armenian] school [...] as well as a shawl for Mr. S. Safrazian and his wife Alma Safrazian and one shawl for the director of the theatre». The popularity of this performance can be inferred from the Safrazians' return to Tabriz the following year to perform *Othello* in Turkish again<sup>11</sup>. Later in this period (dated some time before 1921), the well-known Armenian theatre practitioner and founder of the Akturel-e Taleshchian

7 Ivi, 390.

8 MAHMUD RANJBAR FAKRI, *Namāyesh dar Tabriz āz Enqelāb-e Mašrunṭa tā nezāt-e meli-ye naft/Theatre in Tabriz from Constitutional Revolution to Oil Nationalization Movement*, Entešārāt-e Sāzmān-e āsnād va ketābkāna-ye Meli-ye jomhuri-ye eslāmi-ye Irān, Tehrān 1383, 20.

9 CHRISTOPH WERNER, «Drama and operetta at the Red Lion and Sun: Theatre in Tabriz 1927 – 41», in *Culture and Cultural Politics Under Reza Shah: The Pahlavi State, New Bourgeoisie and the Creation of a Modern Society in Iran*, eds. Bianca Devos and Christoph Werner, Routledge, Abingdon 2014, 205.

10 Fakri quotes an extract from Akhtar Newspaper that dates the performance as 26th December, 1888. See: FAKRI, *Namāyesh dar Tabriz*, 21-22.

11 WILLEM FLOOR, *The History of Theatre in Iran*, Mage Publishers, Washington D.C. 2005, 240.

theatre group, M. Mgardich Taleshchian directed an Azeri-language performance of *Othello* in Tabriz<sup>12</sup>.

The predominance of Armenian theatre groups performing European playwrights, such as Shakespeare and Molière, at this early period was not only due to these groups' greater exposure to European-style theatre and their recourse to a larger volume of Armenian translations of these European playwrights at this time but also to the more relaxed attitude of these Armenian communities to the presence of women on stage and in the audiences of their performances. Unlike many Muslim women in Iran at this time, Armenian women «not only visited the theatre but also performed in plays»<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, Hovian Andranik observes that the Armenian Prelate of Tabriz, Khalifeh Parduqimus, supported these theatre groups<sup>14</sup>. Maḥmud Ranjbar Fakri records Mesrop Papazian's *Court of Justice* as one of the first theatre productions to feature a female actor (Papazian's daughter)<sup>15</sup> and Floor also mentions that a female teacher at the Armenian school, Shushanik Tessian, participated in the Safrazians' first production of *Othello* in Tabriz.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the presence of Armenian women on the stages of Iran did not become a more widespread practice until the beginning of twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> In the absence of dedicated theatre spaces in Tabriz, these early performances were also supported and facilitated by members of the Armenian community, such as Tigran Guruyistan and Abraham Panvarlian who made their homes available for performances by these Armenian theatre groups.<sup>18</sup>

Outside of Tabriz also, Armenian theatre groups, such as the Anjoman-e dустaran-e te'atr (The Club of Theatre Lovers) established in Tehran in 1881, staged productions of Shakespeare using Armenian translations provided to the group by Hovhannes Khan Masehian Mossa'ed. As mentioned above, these Armenian translations are believed to have been used as the source texts for the group's performances of Shakespeare's plays in Persian as well<sup>19</sup>. However, no records of which

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12 Ivi, 242.

13 Ivi, 231.

14 ANDRANIK HOVIAN, *Honarmandān-e Armani-ye Irān*, Farhangestan-e Honar Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran, Tehran 1388/2009, 81.

15 FAKRI, *Namāyesh dar Tabriz*, cit. (n.8), 20.

16 FLOOR, *The History of Theatre in Iran*, cit. (n.11), 240.

17 Ivi, p.218.

18 HOVIAN, *Honarmandān-e Armani-ye Irān*, cit. (n.14), 82.

19 FLOOR, *The History of Theatre in Iran*, cit. (n.11), 214.



Shakespeare plays the group performed in Persian or Armenian appear to have survived. In Isfahan (central Iran) at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there also existed a considerable Armenian community in the town of New Jolfa who had established a theatre tradition in the city. While the first Armenian theatre group (Bashgah-e Te'atr) was established in 1888, Floor observes that the arrival of Fr Esayi Astuasaturian to Isfahan (the leader of the Armenian community in New Jolfa in 1890) ostensibly brought theatrical activities in the city to a standstill for seven years when he expressed his opposition to theatre performances. However, Floor explains that in 1897, «the board and the teachers of the Armenian school blew new life into theater in Jolfa and started performances again», beginning with the Club of Theatre Lovers (Anjoman-e dust-daran-e te'atr), which was formed in 1278/1899<sup>20</sup>. Andranik describes how one of the goals of this theatre club was to persuade women to participate in theatre performances. According to Andranik, the members of the Board of Directors consulted Mkrtych Khirmian, the Catholicos of the Armenian Apostolic Church on this issue. The Catholicos advised them that as long as the content of the play was not contrary to religion then there was no obstacle to women participating in performances<sup>21</sup>. According to Floor, the Bashgah-e Te'atr (Theatre Club) performed *The Merchant of Venice* in 1900, and to celebrate the Club's 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 1913, a production of *Othello* was in the repertoire<sup>22</sup>.

In 1925, Reza Shah Pahlavi appropriated monarchical authority from the Qajar dynasty, crowning himself Shah of Iran and inaugurating the period of the Pahlavi monarchy (1925 – 1979). As well as introducing a number of social, economic, and political reforms, Reza Shah Pahlavi also placed particular emphasis on the nationalisation and centralisation of Iran. One of the ways in which he attempted to achieve this nationalisation was to establish Persian as the official national language of Iran, a goal he attempted to achieve by imposing wide-ranging language restrictions on various institutions and activities in Iran. As Christoph Werner points out, «the language of modernist intellectuals [in Iran] was Persian and the Pahlavi state did everything in its power to strengthen the role of Persian as the national language of Iran»<sup>23</sup>. In fact, Majid

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20 Ivi, 250.

21 HOVIAN, *Honarmandān-e Armani-ye Irān*, cit. (n.14), 78-79.

22 FLOOR, *The History of Theatre in Iran*, cit. (n.11), 250.

23 WERNER, «Drama and operetta at the Red Lion and Sun: Theatre in Tabriz 1927 – 41», cit. (n.9), 219.

Sharifi cites an editorial published in 1925 in the newspaper *Ayandeh* that claimed that Iran could only attain «national unity» by «extending the Persian language throughout the provinces» and «[removing] traditional differences between [...] communities that reside within Iran»<sup>24</sup>. These restrictions were felt acutely by the Armenian community, the new prohibition resulting in the closure of many Armenian schools where the language of instruction was Armenian. James Barry observes that «[f]rom 1927 onwards, Armenian schools, along with Azeri schools, were threatened with closure if they failed to introduce Persian as the main language of instruction» and eventually «in 1938 Reza Shah stripped Armenian schools of their right to teach and nationalised their institutions»<sup>25</sup>.

Furthermore, theatre groups who performed the majority of their repertoire in Armenian were often denied permits for performance by the authorities<sup>26</sup>. However, even the theatre groups willing and able to conform to these language restrictions faced the problem of finding large enough Persian-speaking audience-bases to sustain their performances (e.g. in multilingual cities such as Tabriz). Werner describes a petition made in 1932 by «three Armenian actors [asking] the Ministry of Culture directly for help». In this petition, the actors attempted to explain to the Ministry that «despite their eager intentions of playing in Persian, the majority of the population has not yet even an elementary education and is illiterate in Persian [...] [s]o nobody shows up for their performances»<sup>27</sup>. Although Werner highlights that Armenian theatre groups suffered «a lot of pain, disappointment, and economic hardship» as a result of this language restriction, many of these groups endured in spite of these difficulties<sup>28</sup>. In February 1931, Misha and Margo Kostantian staged a production of *Othello* with the Goruh-e Te'yatr-e Honarpi-shegan-e Deramatik-e Armani (Theatre group of Armenian Dramatic

24 MAJID SHARIFI, *Imagining Iran: The Tragedy of Subaltern Nationalism*, Lexington Books, Plymouth 2013, 79.

25 JAMES BARRY, *Armenian Christians in Iran: Ethnicity, Religion, and Identity in the Islamic Republic*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019, 68.

26 WERNER, «Drama and operetta at the Red Lion and Sun: Theatre in Tabriz 1927 – 41», cit. (n.9), p. 220. See also: HOVIAN, *Iranian-Armenian Artists*, cit. (n.14), 76.

27 WERNER, «Drama and operetta at the Red Lion and Sun: Theatre in Tabriz 1927 – 41», cit. (n.9), 220.

28 *Ibid.*

Artists) in Tehran<sup>29</sup>. As late as the 1940s in the city of Kermanshah, a performance of *The Merchant of Venice* by the Armenian group Hey'at-e Te'atr-e Armaneh led by Mirza Taqi Khan is also recorded<sup>30</sup>.

Indeed one of the most high-profile performances of Shakespeare during this period was staged by the renowned Armenian actor-director Vahram Papazian who performed *Hamlet* and *Othello* in Tehran in 1934. In fact, Papazian's production of *Hamlet* appears to be the first major performance of this play to have been staged in Iran up to this date. Papazian recalled that he had been invited by the Red Lion and Sun organization in association with the Soviet Red Cross to perform five plays, including *Othello* which he performed on the 11<sup>th</sup> January, 1934 at the Palace Theatre in Tehran and again for an audience of students just over a week later. Although the effect of Reza Shah Pahlavi's prohibitions on non-Persian languages had been felt by other Armenian theatre groups prior to 1934, Papazian's productions were performed by a group of Armenian actors based in Tehran and Papazian recalls that the group performed Molière's *Don Juan* and *The Physician in Spite of Himself* in Russian and Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Hamlet* in Armenian<sup>31</sup>. Bakhtiar Hovakinyan points out that *Hamlet* was not originally among the plays that Papazian intended to perform in Iran. However, Papazian added the play to his repertoire as a result of audience-demand<sup>32</sup>. According to Muştafâ Usküyî, however, in order for Papazian's production of *Hamlet* to be rendered suitable for public performance, it was required that when «Hamlet approaches the king with the sword, the king fearlessly leaves the scene» rather than be killed by Hamlet. Claudius' survival was necessitated by the fact that depictions of regicide were prohibited in theatre performances in Iran at this time. As Usküyî reflects, «in the dictatorial era of Reza Shah, the police censor [would] not allow Papazian [...] to kill the king in the presence of an audience»<sup>33</sup>. In this case, Papazian had been allowed to present an amended *Hamlet* to comply with this restriction.

29 FLOOR, *The History of Theatre in Iran*, cit. (n.11), 226.

30 Ivi, 270.

31 Papazian quoted in BAKHTIAR HOVAKINYAN, *Papazian in Iran*, Copyright Edition, Yerevan 2018, 69.

32 *Ibid.*

33 MUSTAFÂ USKÜYÎ, *Sayrî dar târîkh-i ti'atr-i İran/Brief overview of the History of Iran's Theatre*, Ânâhîtâ, Tihân 1378/1999, 501.

In addition to these six performances, Princess Shams Pahlavi (then-president of the Red Lion and Sun) also requested Papazian's cooperation in the establishment of a national theatre in Iran<sup>34</sup>. Papazian recalls that he gave instruction to a group of Iranian theatre artists with whom he subsequently staged *Othello* and Lermontov's *Masquerade* as the inaugural performances at the newly-established National Theatre<sup>35</sup>. Since Papazian (who performed the title role of *Othello*) could not speak Persian, he performed this particular production of *Othello* in French while the Iranian actors performed their supporting roles in Persian<sup>36</sup>. According to Papazian, the inaugural performance at the National Theatre was an «unparalleled success» and marked an important first step in the cultivation of Iran's modern performing arts<sup>37</sup>. In fact, according to Saeed Talajooy, so overwhelming was Papazian's influence on these Iranian theatremakers that «for a time some [of these non-Armenian] actors spoke their lines in translated plays with an Armenian accent» in an attempt «to create a stage language different from the erudite Persian of classical literature and vulgar street Persian»<sup>38</sup>.

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the relative abundance of Shakespeare performances by Armenian theatre practitioners has declined, reflecting the overall decline in the numbers of the Armenian community in cities across Iran since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Indeed, James Barry writes that «[f]rom a peak of perhaps as many as 250,000 at the time of the Revolution, the [Armenian] population has been depleted [...] [to] about 35,000 [in 2010]» and that in 2014 Armenian-Iranians were estimating their numbers to be approximately 25,000-30,000. After the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the rules governing artistic practice in Iran also changed. Barry observes that for many Armenians these new regulations were regarded as «incomprehensible, contradictory, and unfair». While Barry describes how «[s]ome were able to beat the system [...] most did not» and «[t]he majority either learned to live with the new order or left the country». Barry

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34 Papazian quoted in HOVAKINYAN, *Papazian in Iran*, cit. (n.31), 35-36.

35 Ivi, 40.

36 Ivi, 8.

37 Ivi, 42.

38 SAEED TALAJOOY, «The impact of Soviet contact on Iranian theatre: Abdolhossein Nushin and the Tudeh Party», in *Iranian-Russian encounters: empires and revolutions since 1800*, ed. Stephanie Cronin, Routledge, Abingdon 2013, 340.

quotes one Armenian interviewee who recalled that in the early years of the Islamic Republic «[Armenian] dance groups were banned» and «[t]he theatre company had to submit all plays in Farsi translation to be censored and retranslated before performances»<sup>39</sup>. According to Barry, the instability caused by the more recent economic sanctions in Iran has also been a contributing factor to the departure of many Armenians from the country in recent years<sup>40</sup>.

Despite this depletion in numbers and the radical change in the regulations governing artistic practices in the Islamic Republic, Armenian artists continue to occupy the vanguard of Shakespeare production in Iran. In 2009, the Armenian-Iranian film director Varuzh Karim-Masihi directed *Tardid* (Doubt), the first major feature-length Persian-language film adaptation of a Shakespeare play in Iran. *Tardid* premiered at the International Fajr Film Festival on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009, almost 17 years after Karim-Masihi's previous film *Pardeh-ye Akhar*<sup>41</sup>. Although *Tardid* is based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Karim-Masihi adapts the main plot of the play to a contemporary Iranian setting. The film focuses on Siavash (the film's Hamlet counterpart) in the aftermath of his father's death and follows this character's growing awareness of the corruption at the heart of his family's business, now run by his uncle. While the majority of the action takes place in an affluent Tehran suburb, the film also features scenes set in the south-Iranian region of Baluchistan and incorporates references to the Zar ritual (a religious ceremony practiced in southern Iranian regions). Furthermore, Karim-Masihi includes several Armenian characters in the film, including Garo (the film's Horatio counterpart) and Garo's mother. At one point in the film, an Armenian theatre group of which Garo's mother is a member, perform *Hamlet* as the play-within-a-play for Siavash's mother and uncle. Karim-Masihi was recognised by the festival organisers of the International Fajr Film Festival when he won the Crystal Simorgh Award for Best Film and Adapted Screenplay for *Tardid*.

In this article, I have attempted to provide an overview of the significant influence that Armenian theatre practitioners and translators have exerted on the presence of Shakespeare's plays in Iran, from their

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39 BARRY, *Armenian Christians in Iran*, cit. (n.25), 125.

40 Ivi, 259.

41 HOVIAN, *Honarmandān-e Armani-ye Irān*, cit. (n. 14), 116.

inaugural appearance on the stages of Tabriz in 1879 to their presence on the cinema screens of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This article, however, provides only the smallest glimpse into the prolificacy of these theatre groups in Iran. Outside of their performances of Shakespeare's plays, Armenian theatre companies performed the plays of other European playwrights (such as Molière and Schiller) in Iran and brought the plays of their own Armenian, as well as other Caucasian playwrights, to Iranian audiences also. Their prominent role in Iranian theatrical cultures is also mirrored in their contributions to the cinema, art, and music of Iran.

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## Ամփոփում

ՀԱՅ ԹԱՏԵՐԱԳԵՏՆԵՐՈՒ ԱԶԴԵՑՈՒԹԻՒՆԸ  
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## ՇՈՆԱ ՕՊՐԱՅԸՆ

Թէեւ առաջին անգլո-իրանական հանդիպումը տեղի ունեցած է Ժ.Զ. դարուն, այսուհանդերձ, մինչեւ 1879 փաստեր չկան Շէյքսպիրի թատերախաղերու բեմադրութեան իրանի մէջ: Իրանցի դիւանագէտներ ուղարկուած են Եւրոպա, Ռուսիա եւ Մեծն Բրիտանիա Ղաջարներու թագաւորութեան շրջանին (1789-1925), ինչպէս Միրզա Աբուլ Հասան Խան 1809-1810-ին եւ Միրզա Սալէհ Շիրազի 1815-1819ին, որ իրենց ուղեգրութիւններուն մէջ կ'անդրադառնան Շէյքսպիրին եւ իր թատերերգութիւններու բեմադրութիւններուն Անգլիոյ մէջ:

Առաջին ակնարկները Շէյքսպիրի գործերու ներկայացումին իրանի մէջ չեն դար սակայն պրիտանական խողովակներէ կամ այս դիւանագիտական ազդեցութեան ճամբաներէն, այլ գլխաւորաբար իրանի սահմանակից՝ Կովկասէն եկած շրջող թատերախումբերէ:

Անկասկած, այս խումբերէն ամենազդեցիկները իրանի մէջ Շէյքսպիրի ներկայութիւնը հաստատելու համար, Հայաստանէն եկածներն էին: Այս յօդուածը ընդհանուր պատկեր մը կը պարզէ բազմաթիւ հայկական թատերախումբերու եւ հայ թատերագէտներու, որ կարեւոր դեր ունեցան Շէյքսպիրի թատերերգութիւնները իրանի մէջ ծանօթացնելու:

Հեղինակը նաեւ կը փորձէ փաստել, թէ ինչպէս հայ եւ պարսկահայ ճարտաստագէտներ վճռական դեր խաղացին Շէյքսպիրի բեմադրութիւններուն եւ թարգմանութեան պատմութեան համար իրանի մէջ: