Translation, Rhythm, and Meter: Preserving Poetic Form in Arabic-to-English Drama Translations

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Abstract

This study addresses a persistent problem in Arabic-to-English drama translation: how to preserve poetic form, meter, rhythm, rhyme, and lineation, such that it remains performable on Anglophone stages. We integrate equivalence and shift theory with Skopos, polysystem insights, and contemporary metrics to propose a stage-aware framework that prioritizes performable rhythm over foot-for-foot metrical replication. Using paired page-level annotations and actor table-reads, we analyze two verse plays, Ṣalāḥ ʿAbd al-Ṣabūr's Masāʾat al-Hallāj and Aḥmad Shawqī's Masraʿ Cleopatra. Annotations map Arabic quantitative patterns, caesurae, and rhyme architectures to English lineation and prosodic compensation (echo/slant rhyme, alliteration, anaphora). Performance metrics, words-per-minute, stumble rate, cue latency, and pause profiles, evaluate speakability. Findings show that hybrid strategies (blank verse or breath-keyed free verse carrying dialogue, with selective echoes at rhetorical peaks) best preserve periodicity, closure, and lift: they match or exceed strict analogues on pace and fluency while maintaining a clear "poetry signal." Meter-for-meter solutions risk stiffness and semantic dilution; full couplet rhyming slows repartee. We conclude that preserving form for the stage entails breath-aligned lineation and calibrated rhyme management, offering practical guidelines for translators, directors, and pedagogy oriented to performance.

Keywords: Arabic prosody, ʿArūḍ; meter, rhythm, verse drama, performability, prosodic equivalence

الترجمة والإيقاع والمتر: الحفاظ على الشكل الشعري في ترجمات الدراما من العربية إلى الإنجليزية

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الملخص

تناقش هذه الدراسة مشكلة دائمة في ترجمة الدراما من العربية إلى الإنجليزية: كيفية الحفاظ على الشكل الشعري، والإيقاع، والتنغيم، والقافية، وتحديد الأسطر، بحيث تظل قابلة للأداء على المسارح الناطقة بالإنجليزية. نحن ندمج نظرية التكافؤ والتحول مع نظرية سكوبوس، ورؤى النظام المتعدد، والمقاييس المعاصرة لنقترح إطارًا واعيًا بالمسرح يفضل الإيقاع القابل للأداء على النسخ المترية من القدم إلى القدم.باستخدام توضيحات مستندة للصفحة وقراءات طاولة الممثلين، نقوم بتحليل مسرحيتين شعريتين، وهما "مأساة الحلاج" لصلاح عبد الصبور و"مصرع كليوباترا" لأحمد شوقي. تُظهر التوضيحات الأنماط الكمية العربية، والفواصل، وبنى القافية مقارنةً بالتحديد الإنجليزي والتعويض الإيقاعي (قافية الصدى/القافية شبه، والتكرار، والتكرار التناسي). تُقيم مقاييس الأداء، وعدد الكلمات في الدقيقة، ومعدل

التعثر، وزمن التحرك، وملفات التوقف، قابلية الكلام.تظهر النتائج أن الاستراتيجيات الهجينة (القصائد الخالية من القافية أو الشعر الحر الموجه بالتنفس الذي يحمل الحوار، مع صدى انتقائي في ذروة البلاغة) تحافظ بشكل أفضل على الدورية، والإغلاق، والرفع: حيث تتطابق أو تتجاوز الحلول الصارمة من حيث السرعة والطلاقة مع الحفاظ على "إشارة الشعر" الواضحة. الحلول متر مقابل متر تعرض للخطر الصلابة والتخفيف الدلالي؛ القافية الكاملة تبطئ الحوار.نخلص إلى أن الحفاظ على الشكل للمسرح يتطلب تحديد أسطر متوافقة مع التنفس وإدارة قافية محسوبة، مما يقدم إرشادات عملية للمترجمين، والمخرجين، والتدريب الموجه نحو الأداء.

الكلمات المفتاحية :الإيقاع العربي، Arūḍ؛ المتر، الإيقاع، الدراما الشعرية، القابلية للأداء، التكافؤ الإيقاعي.

1. Introduction

The challenge of translating Arabic verse drama for the English theater is unique in that it consists in maintaining the form of the poetry—meter, rhythm, rhyme, and lineation—at a level sufficient to perform the poetry itself if the prosodic system is altered. Whereas much literary translation research foregrounds meaning and style in general (Baker & Saldanha, 2019), drama translation also answers to actors' breath groups, cue pick-ups, and audience processing in real time. In Arabic traditions, quantitative meters and monorhyme patterns can carry semantic emphasis, pacing, and closure; when carried into English, a stress-timed language with different expectations of verse on stage, these same devices can misfire unless adapted with care (Venuti, 2017; Newmark, 1988). The present article tackles this tension by asking what it means to "preserve form" when the target context is not the page but performance.

We treat meter as the abstract template and rhythm as its realized timing, phrasing, and placement of prominence in live delivery. This distinction matters because audiences register periodicity, cadences, and points of rhetorical lift even when the original metrical feet cannot be replicated one-to-one. Sound devices, assonance, alliteration, and calibrated rhyme, aid memorability and cueing and can function as prosodic compensation when quantitative values are lost (Dickins et al., 2016). Following communicative priorities in translation (Newmark, 1988) and broader debates on domestication/foreignization (Venuti, 2017), we frame "faithfulness" to poetic form as preserving performable rhythm and closure, those features that make lines speakable, singable, and theatrically effective, rather than enforcing strict metrical mimicry.

Building on descriptive and pedagogical models that sequence attention from sound to syntax to culture in literary translation (Chesterman, 1997; Baker & Saldanha, 2019), we adapt a five-stage retention model for stage-bound verse: (1) retention of rhythmic form (periodicity, caesurae, cadence), (2) retention of lineation/syntax aligned with actor breath groups, (3) retention of semantic salience under metrical pressure, (4) retention of figurative force with prosodic compensation, and (5) calibrated treatment of cultural prosodic cues (e.g., monorhyme) via domestication, foreignization, or neutralization (Venuti, 2017; Dickins et al., 2016). This scaffold provides translators with a pragmatic

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decision path: starting from what can be done and working backward to the features on the page, connecting literary analysis with rehearsal realities.

Empirically, the article examines selected Arabic verse dramas and their English translations-such as ʿAbd al-Ṣabūr's Masāʾat al-Hallāj (1966)-in order to identify which strategies best preserve periodicity, a sense of closure, and the lift of rhetoric on stage. We ask: (RQ1) Which combinations of metrical analogues and prosodic compensation most reliably yield speakable, rhythmic English lines? (RQ2) How can rhyme density (including monorhyme) be transferred without unintended comic effect in Anglophone performance? (RQ3) What trade-offs arise between semantic precision and metrical fidelity, and how should translators prioritize them scene-by-scene? By aligning close scansion with performance-oriented criteria, we aim to re-specify "preserving poetic form" for Arabic-to-English drama as a problem of performative equivalence grounded in rhythm. (Baker & Saldanha, 2019; Venuti, 2017; Newmark, 1988; Dickins et al., 2016; ʿAbdelsabour, 1966).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Arabic Prosody in Drama

Classical Arabic verse is organized by quantity (long/short syllables) rather than stress, codified in al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad's science of ʿarūḍ, which defines recurring metrical patterns (buḥūr) such as al-ṭawīl, al-kāmil, and al-rajaz, typically realized as bipartite lines with a medial caesura (hemistichs) and often bound by monorhyme (qaafiya) (al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad, 8th c./1981; Allen, 2000). While these norms were developed around the qaṣīda, they also inform scripted poetry for the stage: the regularity of quantity-based feet provides predictable periodicity and points of closure, which actors can exploit for emphasis, while monorhyme and sonic parallelism heighten mnemonic salience for audiences (Stetkevych, 1993; Dickins et al., 2016). In performance, however, the quantitative template must be articulated through Arabic phonology and syllable weight, not merely "read" as metronomic beats, so that breath groups, intonational phrasing, and rhetorical lift align with dramatic intent (Allen, 2000). Modern Arabic theatre has experimented with, adapted, and sometimes relaxed these classical constraints to accommodate dialogue and character voice. From Aḥmad Shawqī's neoclassical verse plays, largely in canonical meters and end-rhyme, to mid-20th-century innovators, dramatists have sought a prosody that is speakable on stage (Badawi, 1987; Jayyusi & Allen, 1995). A crucial development was the migration of free-verse/tafʿīla techniques (associated with Nāzik al-Malāʾika and Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb) into drama, enabling variable line lengths, strategic caesurae, and rhyme thinning without abandoning patterned recurrence (al-Malāʾika, 1962; Badawi, 1987). Poets-playwrights such as Ṣalāḥ ʿAbd al-Ṣabūr leveraged these resources to balance lyric intensity with dramatic naturalness, often alternating denser lyric set-pieces (laments, odes, choral passages) with more flexible, speech-like verse in dialogue (ʿAbd al-Ṣabūr, 1966; Jayyusi & Allen, 1995). In dramaturgy, the goal is a rhythm that works:

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sufficient periodicity to suggest poetry, yet sufficient fluidity to accommodate the needs of characters, dialogue, and plot.

However, this compromise is made more complex by the translation of Arabic verse drama for English-speaking audiences. English is a stress-timed language, with stage verse in English favoring accentual-syllabic rhythms such as iambic pentameter with relaxed rhymes, making it impossible to simply transfer the quantitative feet. Accordingly, it is important to capture the impression of periodicity and closure that Arabic verse implies (Newmark, 1988; Venuti, 2017). Translation theories related to the pedagogical translation of Arabic to English tout prosodicequivalence by means of alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme, and parallelism, in addition to aligning text lines with breath units to capture stage-performable rhythm (Dickins et al., 2016; Almanna, 2016). In monorhymed texts, for example, a monorhymed couplet would be transferred to a text with a slant rhyme to preclude humor in English translation (Badawi, 1987; Jayyusi & Allen, 1995).

In recent years, an increasing number of works of scholarship have located these prosodic relations within broader literary systems. From the polysystem approach, metric relations within translated verse drama occupy an extreme position that is also in flux in relation to destination theatre conventions for prosodic acceptability (Allen, 2005; Baker and Saldanha, 2019). Consequently, stage-oriented strategies privilege speakability, actorly deliverability, cue pick-ups, and audience processing in real time, over page-bound metrical fidelity. This review therefore treats Arabic prosody in drama as a set of performative affordances, quantity-based recurrence, rhyme architectures, and caesural phrasing—that translation must re-instantiate as performable rhythm in English, even when the metrical substrate necessarily shifts.

2.2. English Poetic Forms for Stage

In Anglophone theatre, verse for dialogue has historically been shaped by the accentual-syllabic system, with blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter) as the dominant vehicle from Marlowe and Shakespeare onward. The five-foot line replicates the rhythm of normal English speech but also provides it with an inherent rhythm and pauses that can create the possibility of the flow of the speech continuing into the next line through enjambment (Wright, 1988; Tarlinskaja, 2016). The line's flexibility, permitting inversions, elisions, feminine endings, and varied stress placement, lets playwrights cue emphasis and pace without sacrificing intelligibility, which is one reason iambic pentameter has remained the canonical stage meter (Attridge, 1995; Wright, 1988).

Alongside blank verse, English drama has drawn on a spectrum of verse forms to mark register and closure. Rhymed couplets (heroic couplets) flourished in the Restoration for prologues, epilogues, and whole plays, using end-rhyme to signal wit, containment, or scene breaks; ballad stanzas and shorter accentual patterns appear in songs and choruses; and irregular or mixed meters punctuate

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moments of heightened lyricism (Fussell, 1979; Tarlinskaja, 2016). Even when full rhyme is sparse in modern practice, slant rhyme, alliteration, and assonance persist as organizing devices that increase memorability and audience uptake in performance (Attridge, 1995; Fabb & Halle, 2008).

Twentieth-century playwrights and poet-translators re-interrogated the fit between meter and drama. T. S. Eliot argued that verse drama requires a line that is "near to the colloquial" yet more concentrated than prose, defending meters that yield speakable tension rather than mechanical regularity (Eliot, 1951). Subsequent practitioners (e.g., Eliot himself, Christopher Fry, later poet-translators for Greek tragedy and medieval plays) often mix blank verse with free-verse lineation, reserving denser lyric measures for choruses or ritual set-pieces while allowing dialogue to loosen into patterned but flexible phrasing (Tarlinskaja, 2016; Wright, 1988). This pragmatic pluralism treats meter as a toolkit for dramaturgy rather than a single template.

For actors and directors, the operative criterion is deliverability: lines must align with breath groups, provide clear cue pick-ups, and place semantic nuclei at strong beats. Voice coaches emphasize how scansion informs placement of emphasis and pause, but warn against "counting feet" at the expense of thought-flow; the meter should carry the sense, not throttle it (Berry, 1987; Hall, 2012). Contemporary metrics supports this performance view: the audience perceives prominence patterns and grouping more than abstract metrical schemata, so translators and adapters can preserve the felt rhythm, through lineation, internal echo, and controlled recurrence, even when strict foot-by-foot equivalence is impossible (Attridge, 1995; Fabb & Halle, 2008). These stage-oriented norms frame how Arabic quantitative meters can be rendered into English performance verse: by targeting periodicity and closure rather than replicating quantity directly.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

This study integrates equivalence-oriented and form-sensitive traditions in translation theory with performance-oriented approaches to drama. Following Jakobson's (2021) distinction between referential meaning and the poetic function, we treat poetic form, meter, rhythm, rhyme, and lineation, as meaning-bearing, not ornamental. Catford's (1965) notion of *translation shifts* and Lefevere's (1975) typology for translating poetry frame the inevitability of formal reconfiguration when moving from Arabic quantitative meters to English stress-timed verse. Rather than pursuing foot-for-foot reproduction, we conceptualize "preserving form" as retaining those patterned recurrences that cue closure, lift, and periodicity for audiences in performance.

A Skopos-based rationale specifies why and how such reconfiguration is legitimate for stage translation. In Vermeer's functionalism (Reiss & Vermeer, 2010; Vermeer & Chesterman 2021) and subsequent applications (Nord, 2014; House, 2014), the translator's choices are evaluated against the target purpose: here, speakability/singability, actor deliverability, and audience processing in

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real time. Building on drama-translation scholarship, we treat "performability" not as a vague impression but as a cluster of operational constraints, breath groups, cue pick-ups, timing, and intelligibility (Bassnett, 2013; Pavis, 1989; Aaltonen, 2000). Within this functional frame, metrical fidelity is instrumental rather than absolute: form is preserved insofar as it sustains performative effect. Descriptive Translation Studies further locates these choices within target-culture norms. Toury's (2012) concept of translation norms and Even-Zohar's (1990) polysystem model suggest that translated verse drama occupies a negotiated position vis-à-vis prevailing Anglophone stage conventions (e.g., the prestige of blank verse, tolerance for rhyme). Consequently, strategies such as rhyme thinning, hybridization of blank verse and free verse, or selective retention of monorhyme are predicted responses to the target system's expectations. Our framework therefore combines functional aims (Skopos) with empirical constraints imposed by the target theatre system (DTS/polysystem), anticipating patterned, explainable shifts in prosody.

  A prosodic/phonological layer specifies what, concretely, can be preserved. We model meter as an abstract template and rhythm as realized timing and prominence in speech, drawing on contemporary metrics and phonology (Attridge, 1995; Fabb & Halle, 2008). Because English audiences perceive prominence patterns and grouping more reliably than abstract foot counts, we prioritize felt periodicity (cadence, caesura, end-stopping) and use prosodic compensation, alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme, parallelism, when quantitative values are unmatchable. Performance practice informs these translational decisions: actor-focused texts emphasize alignment of lineation with breath and thought units to maintain clarity and momentum (Berry, 1987; Hall, 2012).

  Finally, the ethical-strategic dimension draws on Venuti's (2017) domestication/foreignization and translator visibility to govern how prosodic culture travels. Arabic traditions such as monorhyme (qāfiyah) or high rhyme density may be retained (foreignization), moderated via echo/slant rhyme (neutralization), or replaced with functionally equivalent English cues (domestication), depending on scene function and audience processing. We undertake these principles with a five-step retention process: rhythm, lineation and syntax, semantic salience, figurative force, and cultural prosody. These steps help to structure theater choices within what can be done, starting from the outermost level to preserve the poetic elements while considering staging reality for a language-speaking audience.

2.4. Operational Definitions and Coding Manual

  Periodicity (PI): recurrence of stress groups/parallel onsets; PI = lines with recurrence / total.

  Closure (CR): end-stopping + pause ≥150 ms (dialogue) or ≥250 ms (lyric) or end echo; CR = % closed lines.

  Lift (LS): terminal prominence and/or anaphora/echo; LS = lifted lines / total.

Poetry Signal (PSI): 0–1 composite = .35CR + .25PI + .25LS + .15Rhyme Density Index.

Speakability: WPM (z within actor), Stumble Rate (per 100 words; restart ≥1 syllable or mid-word pause ≥300 ms), log Cue Latency (ms), Breathability (1–7).

Rhyme categories: full, slant/echo, internal only, none.

Semantic Cadence Placement (SCP): % lines with top-salience lexeme at final strong position or pre-caesura.

Reliability targets: κ ≥ .80 (categorical); ICC(2,1) ≥ .80 (continuous); adjudication rules favor performed phrasing over abstract feet for ambiguous tafʿīla.

3. Methodology

3.1. Scope

For the purposes of this study, a thoughtfully constructed, specially designed corpus is employed, in the form of two Arabic verse plays with their English translations. These texts were chosen for their ability to bring forth, by contrast, their use of meter, as well as their rhyme schemes, while maintaining their connection with modern Arabic theatre traditions.

1. Ṣalāḥ ʿAbd al-Ṣabūr, *Masāʾat al-Hallāj* (1966): A modern verse drama that combines lyrical set pieces with dialogue, deploying quantitative meters and tafʿīla-based flexibility to negotiate poetic density with ease of speech.

2. Aḥmad Shawqī, *Masraʿ Cleopatra* (The Death of Cleopatra): It is a neoclassical verse play characterized by regular quantitative meters and end-rhyme/monorhyme tendencies, offering a high-regularity baseline for cross-lingual prosodic transfer.

For each play, the corpus contains: (a) an authoritative Arabic text (stage edition where available), (b) one or more English translations (published or performance-commissioned) suitable for line-by-line alignment, and (c) performance evidence anchoring analysis in speakability (archival audio/video where accessible, supplemented by controlled actor table-reads when archival materials are lacking). Selection reflects established histories of modern Arabic drama (Badawi, 1987; Jayyusi & Allen, 1995) and the prominence of both authors in discussions of Arabic verse for the stage.

3.2. Prototype Generation Protocol

Each passage was rendered into three strategy conditions by the same editor using a preregistered rubric: S1 meter-for-meter analogue; S2 functional-rhythm (breath-keyed free verse with prosodic compensation); S3 hybrid (blank verse carry + selective echoes). Lexis was held constant (≥95% token identity) unless minimal edits were needed to satisfy the condition. A second editor produced S2 on 25% of passages for independence; divergences were adjudicated.

3.3. Unit of Analysis

The primary unit is the scene. Within each scene we draw a stratified subsample of passages: (i) lyric set-pieces (e.g., laments, choral/ode-like

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sequences) where meter and rhyme are foregrounded, and (ii) dialogic stretches where verse must remain conversationally deliverable. From each selected scene we extract 150–250 consecutive Arabic lines (or the full scene if shorter) and the aligned English lines. Every passage is annotated for: (1) meter (ʿarūḍ pattern or tafʿīla configuration), (2) rhyme map (end-rhyme scheme, monorhyme, internal echoes), (3) caesura placement/lineation, and (4) prosodic compensation in English (alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme, parallelism). Ambiguities in scansion are double-coded; disagreements are resolved by consensus and logged.

Where recordings exist, we time-stamp delivery per line, pause lengths, and cue pick-ups. Otherwise, we run controlled table-reads with trained actors using the English translations, capturing words-per-minute, stumble rate (hesitations per 100 words), and cue latency at exchanges. These traces link back to lineation and metrical annotations to evaluate speakability, the skopos-critical outcome variable (Aaltonen, 2000; Bassnett, 2013).

3.4. Annotation

All selected passages are annotated at line level with parallel tiers for source Arabic and target English. For Arabic, we mark the ʿarūḍ pattern (buḥūr and tafʿīla sequence), note zīḥāf/ʿilla (permissible metrical substitutions), identify caesura (hemistich break), and map rhyme architecture by specifying rawī and qāfiya components (ḥaraka/sukūn, ridf, wasl). Each Arabic line is syllabified with quantity labels (CV/CVV/CVC) to derive syllable weight and periodicity. For English, we assign a meter label (e.g., blank verse, accentual 3-beat, free verse with periodicity), scan stress patterns (marking inversions and feminine endings), and code lineation cues (end-stopping, enjambment, midline pauses) alongside prosodic compensation devices (alliteration, assonance, internal/slant rhyme, anaphora, parallelism).

Both sides include a semantic-salience tier highlighting focal lexemes and rhetorical peaks, plus a speakability tier aligned to performance traces (estimated breath groups, cue pick-ups, and, where recordings or table-reads exist, words-per-minute, pause durations, stumble events, and cue latency time-stamps). Quantitative features computed per passage include mean line length (syllables/words), polysyllable density, consonant-cluster ratio, rhyme density (end/internal), and closure rate (% of lines with perceptible cadence). To ensure reliability, ~20% of the corpus is double-coded by an additional annotator; agreement is assessed with Cohen's κ (target ≥ .80) for categorical tiers and ICC (2,1) for continuous timing measures, with disagreements adjudicated and a log of resolution principles maintained. Annotations are stored in a structured schema (line IDs keyed to play/act/scene; UTF-8 Arabic orthography normalization documented) to permit aggregation and replication.

3.5. Performance Tests

To link page-level prosody to stage deliverability, we conducted controlled table-reads of the English translations with trained actors and captured timing

and fluency metrics aligned to our annotations. Each selected passage (150–250 lines) was read by two actors (alternating roles), yielding a within-subjects design: the same actor performs contrasting prosodic solutions (e.g., meter-for-meter vs. functional-rhythm renderings) so differences can be attributed to translational strategy rather than performer idiolect. Sessions began with a standardized vocal warm-up and scansion briefing focused on thought-flow rather than foot-counting, consistent with performance pedagogy that prioritizes breath groups, cue pick-ups, and rhetorical emphasis (Berry, 1987; Hall, 2012). Actors received clean scripts (no scansion marks), a brief scene synopsis, and target reading objectives (clarity, pace, and responsiveness).

Recordings took place in a quiet studio using a head-mounted condenser microphone at 44.1 kHz. We logged (a) words-per-minute (WPM) as a proxy for pacing, (b) stumble rate (hesitations/restarts per 100 words) as a proxy for speakability, (c) cue latency (ms between final syllable of a cue line and the first syllable of the response) as a proxy for turn-taking friction, and (d) pause durations at line ends and caesurae as indicators of perceived closure and grouping. Timings were extracted by forced alignment and verified manually; acoustic segmentation was performed in Praat with inter-annotator reliability checks on 20% of files (target ICC $(2,1) \geq .80$ for continuous measures; Cohen's $\kappa \geq .80$ for categorical stumble events) (Boersma & Weenink, 2023).

Each passage was performed twice: a first "cold" read (captures immediate deliverability) and a second "settled" read after a three-minute rehearsal (captures learnability/memorability). Order of passages and strategy versions was counterbalanced across actors to control for fatigue and practice effects. After each read, actors completed a 5-item speakability questionnaire (7-point Likert) rating: line breathability, naturalness of phrasing, ease of cueing, muscular effort (articulation load), and perceived rhythmic lift. Open-ended comments were coded for references to prosodic compensation (e.g., "the internal echoes helped," "end-rhyme felt comic here"), enabling triangulation with our annotation tiers (Aaltonen, 2000; Bassnett, 2013).

Analytically, we model performance outcomes with mixed-effects regression, predicting WPM, stumble rate, and cue latency from strategy (meter-for-meter vs. functional rhythm vs. hybrid), rhyme density, mean line length, and polysyllable density, with random intercepts for actor and passage. We treat closure rate (percent of lines realized with perceptible cadence) and pause distribution as dependent variables in complementary models. This design operationalizes Skopos-driven performability, speakability and real-time processing, as the criterion for "preserving form," while respecting target-system norms identified by drama translation scholarship (House, 2014; Venuti, 2017; Toury, 2012). Ethical procedures included informed consent, anonymization of audio, and the option to withdraw; no personally identifying information is reported.

4. Case Studies

4.1. Ṣalāḥ ʿAbd al-Ṣabūr, Masāʾat al-Hallāj

The selected scenes (a lament and a debate passage) exhibit *tafʿīla*-based verse with discernible periodicity, frequent mid-line caesurae, and intermittent rhyme clustering rather than strict monorhyme. Scansion shows recurrent quantitative templates that loosen at dialogic turns—what we annotate as "lyric islands in conversational current." The lament concentrates closure through line-final assonance and occasional full rhyme; the debate thins rhyme but maintains rhythmic lift via parallelism and anaphora. Functionally, ʿAbd al-Ṣabūr's lineation aligns with breath groups and rhetorical units, allowing actors to ride the cadence without counting feet—a hallmark of modern Arabic stage verse (Badawi, 1987; Jayyusi & Allen, 1995). We examined two existing English renderings for alignment and prepared a third prototype to isolate strategy effects:

(1) Meter-for-meter analogue (accentual-syllabic five-beat lines approximating Arabic periodicity, light end-rhyme in lyric passages);

(2) Functional-rhythm strategy (free-verse lineation keyed to breath groups, echo rhyme and internal assonance rather than full rhyme);

(3) Hybrid strategy (blank verse for sustained argument; tightened 3–4-beat lines with internal rhyme for lyric peaks).

All three kept the source caesura logic and preserved parallelism and anaphora as prosodic compensation when rhyme density could not be matched (Dickins et al., 2016; Attridge, 1995).

Across table-reads, the functional-rhythm and hybrid versions yielded smoother initial delivery than the meter-for-meter analogue in the debate passage: fewer stumble events at consonant clusters and lower cue latency at rapid exchanges. Actors attributed ease to "lines landing where the thought lands," i.e., line breaks coinciding with syntactic and rhetorical closure. In the lament, however, the hybrid solution outperformed pure functional rhythm on perceived lift: light end-echoes (slant rhyme/assonance) plus midline anaphora produced a felt cadence comparable to the Arabic's closure, without tipping into comic over-rhyme, an audience-processing risk in Anglophone prose-like scenes (Venuti, 2017; House, 2014). These patterns align with the framework's prediction that periodicity and closure can be preserved by calibrated rhyme and lineation rather than foot-for-foot replication.

Where the source concentrates semantic weight on quantity-prominent syllables near line ends, the meter-for-meter analogue occasionally forced lexical padding to maintain beats, diluting focus. By contrast, the functional-rhythm approach preserved semantic salience at strong positions by trimming low-information material and placing key lexemes before cadential pauses. The losses in overt rhyme density were compensated by the use of alliteration, echoing, and parallel beginning of clauses. Actors dubbed these methods "audible handrails" since they aided memory and cueing without appearing so (Berry, 1987; Fabb & Halle, 2008). The only constant loss was in the "poetry

signal" in some of the dialogue sections. The strategy to adopt a combination of the poetic and blank verse in argumentative sections and a more poetic mode in the moments of song would be in accordance with stage tradition for English plays (Wright, 1988; Tarlinskaja, 2016).

For *Masāʾat al-Hallāj*, results support the study's central claim: preserving form for performance is best achieved by protecting felt rhythm (periodicity, caesura, closure) and rhetorical patterning, with selective, scene-sensitive rhyme management. The heterogeneous strategy is thus best balanced, with speech remaining distinct in an argumentation, with cadence remaining discernible in laments, with a mitigation of functional-rhythm delivery friction yet with the attendant weakening of the poetic marker for the more lyrical sections. Strict meter-for-meter analogues risked stiffness and semantic defocus unless heavily revised. In short, ʿAbd al-Ṣabūr's modern prosody, already oriented toward stage speakability, transfers most effectively when the translator prioritizes breath-aligned lineation and prosodic compensation over rigid metrical mimicry (Badawi, 1987; Jayyusi & Allen, 1995; Attridge, 1995; Dickins et al., 2016).

4.2. Aḥmad Shawqī, Masraʿ Cleopatra (The Death of Cleopatra)

The sampled scenes (a courtly declaration and a confrontation sequence) exemplify high-regularity quantitative meters with consistent end-rhyme—at points approaching monorhyme—and clearly marked hemistich caesurae. Shawqī's neoclassical verse foregrounds closure signals at line ends (full rhyme, fixed cadence) and leans on formulaic parallelism to sustain elevation and ceremonial pace. While this architecture projects grandeur and mnemonic strength, it also imposes tight lexical economy: semantic nuclei frequently occupy rhyme slots, and rhetorical emphasis is coordinated with the hemistich cadence—features that can strain direct transfer into stress-timed English dialogue (Badawi, 1987; Jayyusi & Allen, 1995). We contrasted two published English renderings with a crafted prototype to isolate strategy effects:

(1) Blank-verse transposition: unrhymed iambic pentameter throughout, preserving argument flow and caesura logic while dropping end-rhyme;

(2) Couplet strategy: heroic couplets in ceremonial passages, easing to blank verse in exchanges;

(3) Echo-rhyme hybrid: predominantly blank verse with slant/echo rhyme on climactic lines and internal assonance across the hemistich.

All versions retained parallelisms and anaphora as functional proxies for lost rhyme density (Attridge, 1995; Fabb & Halle, 2008; Dickins et al., 2016).

In table-reads, the biggest poetic clue was found to be the couplets' rhythmic repetition, which also led to the highest number of stumbles during quick repartees, where the actors tended to telegraph the completion of a couplet and thus truncate others' cues. Pure blank verse minimized cue latency and improved WPM in confrontation lines, yet testers reported a weaker sense of ceremonial lift in set speeches. The echo-rhyme hybrid balanced these pressures: it matched blank verse on delivery friction in dialogue while restoring perceived

cadence/closure at rhetorical peaks via selective end echoes and internal rhyme. Actors described those echoes as "landing pads" that helped placement without pulling the scene into singsong (Berry, 1987; Hall, 2012).

Where Shawqī binds meaningful lexemes to rhyme positions, couplet translation preserved semantic salience but sometimes forced lexical padding or archaism to sustain rhyme. Blank verse avoided padding but risked semantic defocus at line ends, since prominent positions no longer coincided with closure. The hybrid redistributed emphasis by aligning key lexemes with cadential positions (end or midline pause) and backing them with anaphora, isocolon, and consonant echo, devices that audiences process as patterned recurrence without the comedic overtones that dense rhyme can trigger in contemporary English drama (Venuti, 2017; House, 2014). Rhyme thinning (full → slant → internal) proved crucial for maintaining dignity while keeping speech natural.

For *Masraʿ Cleopatra*, the data indicate that scene-sensitive hybridity, blank verse as the carrying medium, selectively rhymed/echoed cadences for orations, best preserves Shawqī's formal gravitas and performable rhythm in English. Continuous couplets over-specified closure and slowed repartee; unadorned blank verse under-signaled ritual elevation. The successful compromise respected hemistich logic, protected periodicity and closure at moments of state or fate, and let confrontations breathe in idiomatic speech. In short, the transfer of a high-regularity, rhyme-forward Arabic prosody benefits from target-system congruent scaffolding (blank verse) plus calibrated prosodic compensation, confirming our broader claim that preserving "form" for the stage hinges on felt cadence and cue-able rhythm rather than foot-for-foot metrical replication (Badawi, 1987; Jayyusi & Allen, 1995; Attridge, 1995; Fabb & Halle, 2008; Dickins et al., 2016).

4.3. Findings

4.3.1. Annotation Results

Across both plays, Arabic metrical organization was recoverable at the level of periodicity and caesural logic, but not foot-for-foot in English. In *Masāʾat al-Hallāj* (Case A), *tafʿīla*-based sequences yielded elastic lines with stable mid-line caesurae; the most successful English renderings preserved this by mirroring breath groups and retaining midline pauses rather than enforcing a fixed beat count. In *Masraʿ Cleopatra* (Case B), Shawqī's high-regularity meters and bipartite hemistichs transferred best when English lineation respected the hemistich break and used blank verse as a carrying scaffold. Where translators forced strict five-beat regularity in Case A, we annotated increased line-end semantic drift (key lexemes displaced from cadential positions). Where translators prosaized Case B (collapsing lineation), the closure signal of the Arabic line was lost on the page (and later on stage).

Arabic end-rhyme density diverged sharply between the cases: intermittent clustering in Case A versus sustained end-rhyme (approaching monorhyme) in Case B. English solutions that attempted full rhyme persistence across long

stretches (especially in Case B) produced visible lexical padding and local archaisms on the page. By contrast, a tiered approach, rhyme thinning from full → slant/echo rhyme → internal assonance/consonance, preserved line-final closure without over-signaling "versified couplets" in dialogue. In Case A's laments, light echo rhyme at structural peaks (refrains, final lines) maintained a recognizably poetic cadence, while in debate passages echoes were confined to paragraph-initial/-final lines to avoid singsong effects.

Where quantity-based effects could not be mapped directly, translators who maintained prosodic compensation on the page, alliteration, anaphora, isocolon, parallel clause onsets, achieved the clearest functional substitution for lost quantity. Annotation showed these devices co-locating with the Arabic poem's prominence sites (pre-caesura, line end). Case A favored anaphora + internal echo to create lift over variable line lengths; Case B favored balanced parallelism and periodic alliteration to replace lost monorhyme pressure. Pages lacking these compensations read fluently as prose but under-signaled poeticity, a deficit later mirrored in performance tests.

We marked focal lexemes and checked their placement against cadential positions (end-stopped lines, pre-caesura slots). Preserving poetic form correlated with keeping high-salience words in cadential zones. In Case A, breath-aligned lineation enabled salient items to land before pauses without padding; in Case B, blank-verse scaffolding plus selective end echoes kept semantic nuclei at line ends where Arabic rhyme had originally concentrated them. Where English lines chased meter or rhyme indiscriminately, we annotated semantic dilution (function words or light adjectives occupying cadences), weakening the page-level signal of closure.

Double-coding agreed that preservation is scene sensitive. Lyric set-pieces (laments/odes) tolerated denser patterning (echo rhyme, parallelism) without comic drift; rapid dialogue favored looser periodicity with compensation shifted to syntactic parallelism rather than rhyme. Inter-annotator agreement was highest for caesura placement and closure classification, lower for meter labels in *tafʿīla* passages, consistent with the view that felt rhythm and closure are the most stable cross-lingual invariants at page level. Overall, the annotations support the study's thesis: on the page, periodicity + caesura + calibrated rhyme/echo + rhetorical parallelism are the transferable backbone of Arabic poetic form into English, while strict metrical isomorphism is neither necessary nor sufficient.

4.3.2. Table-Read Metrics

Across both plays, versions that prioritized breath-aligned lineation (functional-rhythm or hybrid strategies) delivered higher words-per-minute and lower stumble rates than strict meter-for-meter renderings. In *Masāʾat al-Hallāj* (Case A), the gain was most visible in debate passages with quick turn-taking; in *Masraʿ Cleopatra* (Case B), the gain appeared when confrontations shifted from set speech to repartee. Continuous heroic couplets depressed WPM and

increased hesitations in fast exchanges, suggesting over-specified closure was competing with conversational flow (cf. Berry, 1987; Hall, 2012).

Average cue latency (gap between cue line end and next line onset) was shortest in blank-verse or breath-keyed free verse and longest in fully rhymed couplets. Selective echo rhyme in the hybrid strategy did not lengthen cue latency when confined to climactic lines; instead, it provided audible "landing pads" that stabilized entrances without dragging the pace, especially in Case B's ceremonial moments.

Pause analysis at line ends and caesurae revealed that a consistent adherence to caesural logic inherited from Arabic poetry, so that a caesura creates a two-part feel, ensured a sense of closure without depending on end rhyming, let alone end rhymes that were thickly packed. The hybrids developed a two-peak system for pause distribution: short, speaking pauses marking ends of lines in dialogue, while longer pauses occurred for rhetorical peaks, often marked by slant rhymes, also known as echoes. When you plotted meter against meter, there were longer pauses at ends of lines, foreshadowing "verse" even in arguing lines, while losing the momentum in the process.

Actors preferred functional rhyme and hybrids over meter-for-meter or couplets on these 7-point likert scales for breathability, natural phrasing, and ease of cueing. Open-ended comments tended to mention echo, anaphora, and parallelism as useful guides, with a reminder that full rhyme in dialogue might sound comic or ornamental over a sustained stretch. This reflects performance technique that emphasizes easy flow of thought over foot measurement (Berry,1987; Hall,2012).

In this way, in the second, more established reading, disparities among strategies decreased: stumble rates dropped for each variant, though hybrids retained an advantage in rhythmic lift for Case A: Laments/Odes and Case B: Orations. The functional-rhythm variants remained most simple in execution out-of-cue; hybrids were best combined for ease of execution and poetry indicator in minimal rehearsal, furthering theories regarding periodicity and strategic use of echoes in facilitating memory without clouding execution.

Directional effects were robust across actors and passages. When line length and polysyllable density were high, stumble rates increased, irrespective of strategy, though less when line breaks were tied to syntactic boundaries and caesuras (annotation-led lineation). High rhyme density was a predictor of pause duration and cue latency, though only when rhyme density was reduced (full → slant/internal) and spatially constrained to peak positions. These data are consistent with our Skopos-led criterion: only the strategy promoting maximal speakability (rate, friction, cue-cadence) can, through these very means, "preserve form" for performance.

5. Discussion

The results all suggest the same thing: that the preservation of poetic form in Arabic-English drama translation is less about copying meters and more about

maintaining a deliverable rhythmicity, these patterned occurrences (periodicity, pauses, controlled closure), which are perceived by listeners and actors alike in the moment. It relocates a traditional equivalence issue (equivalence problems; Jakobson, 2021; Catford, 1965; Lefevere, 1975), to a decidedly performative one. Under the conditions of English being a stress-timed language with the Anglophone stage tradition preferring accentual--syllabic support scaffolds, the Arabic meters premised on quantity require a functional equivalence: end effects remain to 'land', rhetorical height remains to 'crest', breath-groups remain to be mapped on to lineation, albeit without a preservation of foot. Our page--level textual encoding and table--read metrics are of a piece on this front. Wherever lineation indexed breath--and--thought-unit segmentation and prosodic compensation (anaphora, echo, parallelisms) occurred, actors increased speed of delivery, reduced delivery effort, and increased perceptions of rhythmicity just so—conditionally upon which poeticities are experienced rather than simply represented (Attridge, 1995; Fabb & Halle, 2008; Berry, 1987).

The case comparisons sharpen this principle. ʿAbd al-Ṣabūr's *Masāʾat al-Hallāj*, already a modern, stage-sensitive prosody, transferred most effectively through functional rhythm and hybrid strategies that preserved midline caesurae and supplied light end echoes at lyric peaks. The stiffest results arose when translators chased five-beat regularity at the expense of semantic salience near cadences. By contrast, Shawqī's rhyme-forward neoclassicism required a different compromise: blank verse for the carrying medium, with selective echo/slant rhyme to restore ceremonial closure in orations. Continuous couplets over-specified closure and slowed repartee; unadorned blank verse under-signaled ritual elevation. Read together, the cases show that scene sensitivity is not optional but constitutive: laments/odes tolerate denser patterning, while rapid dialogue needs loosened periodicity with compensation shifted from rhyme to syntactic parallelism. This scene-type dependency validates our five-stage retention model, rhythm → lineation → semantic salience → figurative force → cultural prosody, as a decision sequence rather than a checklist.

Situated within Skopos theory, these choices are not evasions but goal-consistent adaptations. If the skopos is a script actors can deliver and audiences can process without losing the poetry signal, then form preservation is properly evaluated against speakability, cue-ability, and cadential intelligibility (Reiss & Vermeer, 2010; Nord, 2014; House, 2014). Descriptive Translation Studies and polysystem thinking explain the patterned nature of our solutions: given the prestige of blank verse and the limited tolerance for dense rhyme in contemporary Anglophone drama, we should expect rhyme thinning, hybridity, and breath-aligned free verse to emerge as norm-congruent strategies (Toury, 2012; Even-Zohar, 1990). In other words, the "optimal" prosodic transfer is constrained by the target theatre system as much as by the source: translators who ignore those norms risk either comic drift (over-rhyme) or the erasure of poeticity (full prose-ization).

Moreover, these results also complicate the ethics and politics of domestication/foreignization in general (Venuti, 2017), particularly where "foreignness" in question is not merely lexicographical but prosodic and concerned with prosodic culture in general. Perfect domestication (superimposition with no rhyme structure and line breaks) realizes readability with a sacrifice of poetry content; perfect foreignization (fixed monorhyming/couples) retains textual appearance with a price on delivery. The successful hybrids that we developed constitute a measured degree of foreignization in which salient features of grammatical structure (cues), hemistich logic, periodic closeness may continue with a controlled modification of explicit rhyme to echo and internal reverberation acceptable to an Anglophone listener as elevated poetry. This is translator visibility with respect to prosodic features—the hand is manifest in results rather than in workings.

From an education perspective, there is clearly a profound shift here regarding how verse drama translation should go. First, there needs to be skimming for where caesural logics and closure fall to translation metric labels. Second, there needs to be translation first for two or three possible lineations for English, free verse keyed to breath rhythm, free verse keyed to breath rhythm with very slight rhymes to suggest dramas or comedies, then reading them back early. The objective here should involve straightforward metrics with respect to reading rate Word Per Minute, stumble rate, and cue delay. Later translation justification should have no place here. Third, there needs to be rhyme management per scene. To create echoes, there should be placement for rhetorical peaks where high peaks happen or refrains develop. For dialog, there should be compact dialog with inner echoes or parallel syntax. Lastly, direct cores for meaning need to be placed at places for rhythm turns. Notably, there is little to no work here for instructors to do regarding studio translation courses regarding where workshops with actors might go regarding making line choices or sound choices for performance effects when teaching translation courses with scansion labs or acting workshops approaches as argued by (Bassnett, 2013; Dickins et al., 2016).

In terms of methodology, the alignment of annotation levels (meter/rhyme/lineation/compensation) with traces of performance proved crucial. The mixed-effect models verified what actors have said in qualitative assessments: breath-aligned lineation and adjusted echoes are predictive of reduced friction costs without payload cost reduction. Future research can succinctly enhance this methodically, using computational tools for English syllabification and stress marking, for Arabic quantity marking and hemistich recognition; acoustic marker alignment for computing distributions of pauses and moving in this way beyond qualitative statements about "speakability" from impressionist literature (Fabb & Halle, 2008; Berry, 1987). It is relevant that reliability measurements for this study's experiment (Cohen's κ; ICC) imply that closure and caesura are most stable cross-coder invariables, referring to these

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equivalencies being used for criteria of verse translations for performative assessment

6. Conclusion

The current study reframes the task of preserving poetic form in Arabic-to-English drama as preserving the performance-ready rhythm—its pacing, pauses, and deliberate closures—rather than insisting on line-for-line meter. When page notes and table-read metrics line up, translations that align line breaks with breath and thought units and which employ prosodic adjustments such as echoes/slant rhymes, alliteration, anaphora, and parallelism tend to deliver faster, cleaner, more poetry-signal-rich performances than strict meter-for-meter translations. The best effects, however, come from scene-aware hybridity. In *Masāʾat al-Hallāj*, a rhythm that serves the function with light final echoes keeps the lyric lift without stiffness; in *Masraʿ Cleopatra*, blank verse acts as the backbone, with selective echoes in orations, preserving ceremonial gravity while letting repartee stay agile. In practice, the approach recommends a stage-aware workflow: search out caesural logic and natural closure points; prototype blank verse or lightly rhymed variants; run early table-reads using words-per-minute, stumble rate, and cue latency to iteratively shape the design; maintain core semantic units positioned toward cadences; and link rhyme management with the requirements of each scene, by which echoes signal peaks and internal resonance guides dialogue. For teaching and rehearsal, the implication is clear: train translators and directors to hear cadence as a functional framework for performance, not just a decorative layer.

The limitations of this study include its narrow corpus (two plays), partial reliance on archival availability, and inherently interpretive nature of the metrical/phonological annotation-which, despite reliability checks, tends to under-specify gray zones in the *tafʿīla* scansion and actor idiolect. Generalizability across genre, dialect, and production style remains to be tested. Future research should undertake, in turn: (i) scaling to larger, multi-author corpora and incorporating audience perception experiments on cadence, closure, and comic drift; (ii) extension to other language pairs bridging quantity and stress-timed systems; (iii) computational tooling for Arabic quantity detection, hemistich finding, and English stress tagging with automatic pause profiling; (iv) modeling music-text interfaces-sung/chant passages-and the influence of dialectal phonology on deliverability; and (v) tracking rehearsal-driven revision cycles longitudinally to assess which prosodic choices survive into opening night. Together, these steps would consolidate a replicable performance-validated approach to verse drama translation centered on audible design as the core of formal fidelity.

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