AL-ḤĀKĪM’S *YĀṬĀLIʾ AL-SHAJARA* 
AND FOLK ART

Much has been written on Tawfiq al-Ḥakim’s *Ya Ṭālīʾ al-Shajara* (1962) and numerous interpretations of the play have been offered.¹ In the present paper it is not my purpose to propose a new interpretation, but rather to set forth a few remarks on the relation of this play to what the author himself calls in his introduction “Folk Art” (p. 14, 15).

Some critics have considered al-Ḥakim’s introduction misleading, perhaps because they have not focused upon what al-Ḥakim meant by folk art, and have thus overlooked its importance in spite of the author’s strong insistence on that point. Since then, in *Qālibuna l-Masrahi*, al-Ḥakim has emphasized again the importance of folk art as a source, not only of content but also of form, issuing from native inspiration and sparing the Arab playwright the necessity of borrowing from the West.

Due to the author’s insistence on this point, we think that what he says deserves to be analyzed in order to throw some light upon the play *Ya Ṭālīʾ al-Shajara*, among others. Conversely, I am employing that play to help in the understanding of what he means in his theoretical manifestos, for it is admitted that his description of folk art remains vague and very general for the most part.

Two main texts will be analyzed here insofar as they are relevant to our purpose: the preface to *Ya Ṭālīʾ* and *Qālibuna l-Masrahi*.²

In the first text, the author includes in “folk art” verbal arts as well as pictorial arts, and in the second, more explicitly, folksongs, *takhfīb* (p. 9), the art of the *sāmir*, storytellers, *maddāhin* (p. 12), the epics and even classical literature with the names of al-Jāḥīz, Bāḍīʾ al-Zamān and al-Ḥarīrī.


² Cairo, no date.
Of course, all of these arts can be considered on many levels and used for various purposes. Al-Ḥakīm seems to have two major considerations in mind:

1. The occurrence in folk art of absurd and surrealistic elements which make it akin to modern art. His play opens with an apparently meaningless folksong which nevertheless means something (preface, p. 8).

2. The question of form which remains difficult to pinpoint. We feel that he has the form in mind when he uses such words as *ashkāl*, *qawālib*, and when he refers to the oral rendering of the storyteller, leaving to the reader to guess exactly what he means. In the context of the theatre, the word *qālib* takes on another meaning, namely, that of a genre which allows direct contact with the audience, a means of freeing the actor from the art of performing, showing the audience how theatre works (*Qālib*, 20). Apart from that, the author makes no further attempt to define form.

Now if we approach the question from the standpoint of the play itself, which by the very statement of the author is “an attempt to link some of our old epics with the latest aspects of contemporary art” (p. 10), we should understand that the author borrowed extensively from forms existing in folk art.

I would like to show how this play in its composition and spirit displays some basic features which are commonly found in folksongs and folktales. In the first part, I will concentrate on the description of some devices relative to composition, and in the second part, I will attempt to show how this play is governed by what I call the principle of transformation.

The play can be viewed as a lengthy song, with echoing scenes. This effect is achieved through the recurrence of motifs, sometimes arranged in what could be called refrains. This will be seen both on the level of the general structure of the play and on that of the scenes considered separately.

In order to show the structure just mentioned, a complete list of motifs contained in the play will be given below. By motif, I mean a recurring word or phrase within the play, recalling its earlier occurrence and all that surrounded it.

The establishment of a complete list of motifs is made possible by the very nature of this play; not only because most speeches hardly exceed a line or two, but also because of the way language is used by the author. The same word or set of words is used for a given motif