

**Ali Alemarah's *Shakespeare and I*: a Critical Exploration of
the Qasurahs of *Hamlet* and *Antony and Cleopatra***

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Abstract:

Qasurah / Pomage is a term coined by Ali Alemarah, an Iraqi poet, to refer to a poem that combines both visual and verbal elements. In his *Shakespeare and I (Pomage)*, published in 2016, the Iraqi poet holds a dialogue with the Shakespearean text. Ali Alemarah approaches key Shakespearean scenes captured in paintings, photographs and sketches that spark off a verbal element. As such, the Qasurah invests in the dynamic duality of the image and word as equal partners to achieve the effect intended. The present study examines the Qasurah, concentrating on the sections devoted to scenes from *Hamlet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. It also explores and evaluates the ways in which the poet endeavours to blaze a trail of his own as a practitioner of the picture-poem not only in Iraq, but the Arab world as well.

Key Words: Shakespeare, image, poem, Ali Alemarah, Hamlet, Anthony and Cleopatra, Qasurah

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"شكسبير وأنا" لعلي الإمارة : دراسة نقدية لقصورات "هاملت" و"أنطوني وكليوباترا"

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"القصور / البوماج" مصطلح صاغه الشاعر العراقي علي الإمارة للإشارة إلى قصيدة تجمع بين العنصرين البصري واللفظي. ففي عمله "شكسبير وأنا (بوماج)" الصادر عام ٢٠١٦، يقيم الشاعر العراقي حواراً مع النص الشكسبييري. ويقترب علي الإمارة من مشاهد شكسبيرية محورية تجسدت في لوحات فنية وصور فوتوغرافية ورسوم تخطيطية تستثير بدورها عنصراً لفظياً موازياً. ومن ثم، تستثمر القصور في الثنائية الديناميكية للصورة والكلمة بوصفهما شريكين متكافئين في تحقيق الأثر الفني المقصود.

تتناول هذه الدراسة فنّ القصور، مع التركيز على الأقسام المخصصة لمشاهد من مسرحيتي "هاملت" و"أنطوني وكليوباترا"، كما تستكشف وتقيم السبل التي سعى من خلالها الشاعر إلى شقّ طريقه الخاص بوصفه ممارساً لقصيدة الصورة، ليس في العراق فحسب، بل في العالم العربي أيضاً.

الكلمات المفتاحية: شكسبير وصورة وقصيدة وعلي الإمارة وهاملت وأنطوني وكليوباترا وقصور.

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Introduction

Inspired by the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death in 2015, Ali Alemarah contributed his *Shakespeare and I (Pomage)*, a collection that comprises his poetic readings of selected images from nine Shakespearean plays. In these poems, the Iraqi poet endeavours to translate into verse pictures from *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Mid-Summer's Night Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Macbeth*. In so doing, he has landed on what he calls "Qasurah" in Arabic combining the words "Qasidah" which means a poem and "Surah" which is a picture or image. Translated literally into Pomage, the Qasurah is not a mere caption of a picture, but a philosophical commentary on images, depicting pivotal scenes that have impacted the poet as a viewer first and foremost. Alemarah's poetical renditions are illustrative, but also contain wider narratives that have to do with the poet's personal vision and private interpretation of Shakespeare's characters and themes. Alemarah's poetical texts converses with Shakespearean texts in a rather convoluted way via pictures and images. Therefore, Alemarah's language escapes the influence of Shakespeare's powerful language. However, a triple compact is forged as a result in which the picture/image lies in between two verbal coordinates, bridging the temporal, linguistic and cultural gaps.

In the Qasurah, the image enters an active and equal partnership with language. The verbal message or "the linguistic skeleton", as Bohn (*Reading Visual Poetry* 14) puts it, "acquires a palpable presence that exerts an immediate effect on the viewer... this effect is direct, instantaneous, and unmediated." If the Qasurah is to be treated as a visual poem, such treatment, nevertheless, seems to invest in Bohn's argument that "visual poetry lends itself to a number of different projects. Since it follows no prescribed method, it encompasses an endless series of variations on an aesthetic theme. Spanning the gap between abstract works, on the one hand and pictorial exercises on the other, the genre is amazingly versatile" (*Reading* 32). Ali Alemarah's Qasurah has more in common with William Blake's illustrative engravings than the traditional visual poem which relies on topographical innovations. While Blake is both the artist and the poet, Alemarah's artistic framework is borrowed. Notwithstanding that, it duplicates his visionary ideals, recharges his creative energy and inspires his experimental poetics. On another note, Alemarah's Qasurah has more affinities with "the poster poem" at which poets like "Raoul Hausmann, Pierre Albert-Birot, Andree Breton, and Paul Eduard ... tried their hand" and "whose nomenclature betrays the genre's commercial origins" (22). In the current study, light is turned on the linguistic part of the Qasurah as our primary aim is to explore the ways in which the Iraqi poet holds dialogues with the Shakespearean scenes and characters from

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Hamlet and *Antony and Cleopatra*. The pictures that accompany the texts are referred to only in support of arguments.

Visual Poetry: an Overview

Visual, concrete, graphic or pattern poetry is a genre that liberates the poem from linguistic constraints and allows it to be bi-dimensional in that the verbal and the visual/pictorial join forces to relay the intended message. Because a visual poem, as Willard Bohn points out, is designed “to be seen” and as it combines “poetry and painting, the genre presupposes a viewer as well as a reader” and “it not only appeals to the reader’s intellect but arrests his or her gaze”. Maria Mencia argues that “we are faced with new ways of looking, reading and writing” (5). By rejecting the common “rectilinear grid and by their tendency to flout their plasticity”, the visual poems “are conceived not only as literary works but also as works of art.” Ultimately, “the visual elements” that make their way to the poem whether they are “rudimentary pattern[s] or ... highly sophisticated design[s], ... transform the poem into a picture”. The “iconic dimension” of the visual poem, “which is much more pronounced” sets it apart from a traditional poem (Bohn, *Modern* 15).

The term “picture” is rather loosely applied since the mainstream visual poem is basically graphic rather than photographic. In place of the strokes of the brush or camera’s snapshots, the visual poet shapes geometric sketches from words or, on a minimal or reductionist level, from the alphabets. The visual poem can take on different forms owing to the fact that “it inevitably possesses a pictorial as well as a verbal aspect” (Bohn, *Reading* 31). Therefore, it can be a pattern, a pictogram, an ideogram, a digital image and a computer design. In order to decode “the written message”, the reader relies on “both verbal and visual cues, which are structured in such a way that they complement each other” and the poem as “a linguistic construct...is influenced by spatial relations as well” (Bohn, *Modern* 15).

As “a hybrid genre”, visual poetry, Willard Bohn argues, “embraces a great many styles” (*Reading* 14). And since it “continues to reinvent itself year after year”, visual poetry is expected to go beyond the topographical creations of its first experiments or renown practitioners (*Modern* 13). Likewise, Richard Bradford talks about visual poetry that “can create a far more challenging and innovative interface between language and the visual arts” (1). Thus, a visual poem that departs from the observed patterns is equally legitimate as it is proposed in this paper. Ali Alemarah does not deploy patterns or digital images; rather, he chooses to have his Qasurah in the form of a poem which has a picture not as a background, but as a vigorous coequal. W.J.T Mitchell discusses how words and images relate to each other to reflect “within the realm of

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representation, signification, and communication, the relations we posit between symbols and the world, signs and their meanings" (as cited in Bohn, *Modern* 18). Hence, the Qasurah results from the perpetual and instantaneous dialogue which the verbal content of the poem holds with its pictorial counterpart.

Qasurah and Shakespeare: A Fan's Dialogue or Appropriation

If visual poetry is the by-product of cultural crises as Willard Bohn discusses in detail (*Modern; Reading*), the Qasurah with which Alemarah experiments is the corollary of an endeavour to grapple with, if not indeed resolve, that same crisis. Shakespeare and his texts emerge as a response to cultural and ideological challenges (Hennessey and Litvin 2). In a similar vein, Shakespeare, as Dionne and Kapadia emphasise, "is the site of contest for those peoples who seek to express their own identities, in complicated ways, with, next to, and against British literary traditions" (2). For some researchers like Francesca Coppa, Shakespeare's relevance is attributed to the constant interference with him, rejecting the view that the Bard "can support that level of interpretation and invention" (232). If Coppa's view is tenable, then any appropriation of Shakespeare would conjure up relevant, previous appropriations. Building on the Shakespearean image/theatre, Alemarah acknowledges the past as a shaping force and inspiration, and Shakespeare's theatre as a dateless and on-going catalyst of thought. Instead of a cultural dialectic, the Qasurah is expected to launch a cultural dialogue between Shakespearean visuals and the contemporary poet, which is by extension also atemporal. The Qasurah ignites debates regarding the epistemological position of contemporary literature inspired by Shakespeare's works in this ideologised age where the instantaneousness and promptness of the image are given priority, while the word seems to lag behind.

In his choice of Shakespearean visual themes, Ali Alemarah locates his experiment within the territory of cult fandom of Shakespeare whose works "are continually being adapted and generating new fans—of either Shakespeare or of that specific adaptation—in the process" (Pope 10). The deployment of Shakespeare whether "textual", "visual", theatrical or "televised", according to Meyer, and in consort with Shakespeare's "narrative sources, and pop cultural adaptations" (260), can often expose a determination to recruit the Bard to serve some ideological agendas of its adapters. However, in availing himself of mediated instead of original Shakespeare, Alemarah falls under the spell of what Litvin describes as "global kaleidoscope", which emphasises non-colonial, mediating influences that introduced Shakespeare into the outside world (2). The Qasurah in *Shakespeare and I* relies on the image as processed through the mediating consciousness of the poet with whom rests the selection of the themes and relevant images, considering the profusion of Shakespeare-inspired art. In this regard, Valerie Fazel and Louise Geddes argue that Shakespeare is "not a

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parent text to be appropriated/ adapted, but a boundless user-driven archive of material to be repurposed and refashioned", and to accommodate "the tastes of its users" in contemporary culture. Fan literature is "an ongoing reimagining of Shakespeare as a cohesive new work of its own" (2). Ultimately, the adapted works are not mere "derivations, excisions, or manipulations", but forge "forms of continuation and congruence" (4). Any literary work that invests in a Shakespearean theme begs the question of aesthetic value and worth and whether it is principally mimetic or innovative. The extent of the resourcefulness and ingenuity of the writer determines the categorization of the fan text as synthetic or authentic. In his attempt to draw a line between fandom and "creative criticism", Graham Holderness insists that "the fan seeks to imitate, emulate, and extend Shakespeare's own creative and fiction-making practice" (225). By using Shakespeare as a prototype, the writer-fan models his/her literature to comment on the world in light of the historical and literary contexts, which Shakespeare's works and their adaptations make available. Eventually, the fan work can possess what Pope terms as an "uncritical emulative novelty", which may be absent from "creative criticism" (17).

Marketing himself on an international level, Alemarah's seemingly safe choice of Shakespeare is in fact risky and challenging. Shakespeare is often appropriated in the Arab world for political purposes and as a form of resistance. Nonetheless, what this paper concerns itself with is the twenty-first century Iraqi poet's reaction and interaction with the sixteenth-century English poet. The illustrated Shakespeare, if one may say, is vocalized, hence the Shakespearean scenes/themes/characters are reinterpreted and in the long run the Shakespearean text is re-verbalised. The verbal halves of the Qasurah do not merely capture the scenes, but offer reconfigurations of or creative dialogues with Shakespearean texts.

***Hamlet* in the Qasurah**

Ali Alemarah's Qasurah revisits *Hamlet* via five poems to comment on pictures of five key scenes from the play. The Qasurahs are entitled as "The Father's Ghost", "Lunacy as Mask", "The Killer Prays", "To be or not To be" and "A Stab in the Curtain" respectively. In "The father's Ghost", the poet designs a soliloquy in which Hamlet argues with his father's ghost, complaining of the disturbing visions he is having. The picture that sparks the argument shows a sketch in black and white of Hamlet, sitting behind a desk with an open book between his hands; his fingers are apart in proof of the awe the sight of the ghost strikes in their owner. A sword and a helmet are lying on the ground next to each other on Hamlet's right. The ghost has snuck up on him from behind and Hamlet's face is half turned to confront it. The picture does not invest in a Hamlet theme though; rather it shows the ghost of Julius Caesar taunting "Brutus

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about his imminent defeat.” It is originally an engraving by Edward Scriven, based on a painting by Richard Westall. The wrong picture, nonetheless, meets the poet’s need for a visual that instantiates the panic and trepidation caused by the visit of the wrathful, aggressive ghost to the guilty Brutus and insinuates the forthcoming bloodshed.

Unlike Shakespeare’s, the ghost in the verbal part of the Qasurah is a mind’s manifestation, visible only to Hamlet who admits that “I alone see you/ And hear your voice/ Emerge from all the walls of your palace”. Shakespeare’s ghost has almost a physical quality to it since it is seen plainly by the guards of Elsinore as well as Horatio though it speaks to none other than Hamlet. The Hamlet in the Qasurah prepares the ground for the lunacy which the next Qasurah announces. Alemarah is keen on bringing to light Hamlet’s fear for he is “startled” by the vision, but also his credulity surfaces as he addresses the ghost in “Oh ghost father/ Give me a living moment of revelation/ So that I can retrace your steps”. Hamlet does not question his senses, yet he is all aware of the illusive nature of the sight. The father ghost that takes Hamlet by surprise is “too devious a vision” to be trusted. The poem is concluded by:

Here I now
Carry the secret of blood spilt by treachery
And in the maze
I am weighed down
By your blood-soaked throne.¹

The poem exposes a persona on the brink of mental collapse and wallowing in pathos as it is in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The thought of treason comes in line with Hamlet’s feeling of betrayal and injustice. Neither his uncle nor his mother makes any appearance in this poem and Hamlet seems to be consumed by his confrontation of the ghost more than the dreadful nature of the knowledge the ghost imparts to him.

Like Shakespeare’s, Hamlet in the Qasurah is caught in a tempo-spatial limbo as he tries to ease his mind and fulfil his filial duty. But he is also aware of the grave nature of the mission the ghost has assigned to him. Alemarah could have reshaped the argument in favour of doubt or even insanity, but he opts for a rendition that is faithful to the Shakespearean text. Hamlet contemplating his father’s message and praying to live long enough to avenge his murder does not depart from the typical Hamlet that readers are familiar with. The verbal half of

¹ Though in *Shakespeare and I*, Qasurahs appear in both Arabic and English, the texts cited in this paper are translated by the researchers themselves.

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the Qasurah is marked by brevity and condensation as its short, yet pithy lines span several of Hamlet's long-winded rationales. The ragged rhyme that prevails on seven of the fourteen lines proves Hamlet's confusion, bafflement and turbulence.

As to the picture itself, there are a few details that are worthy of noticing and exploring. The poet opts for a sketch in black and white, rather than in colour, a choice he is relying on in three of the five Qasurahs inspired by *Hamlet*. The pictures are not strictly monochromatic due to the varied shades of grey along with black and white, which make them in a way polychromatic. The greys are conventionally symbolic of uncertainty, fuzziness and bewilderment, with all of which Hamlet had to grapple. In "The Killer Prays" and "To Be or Not to Be", as well as "The Father's Ghost", the black-and-white visuals match Hamlet's state of mind of turmoil and indecision. It also encapsulates his ennui and melancholy which seem to bleach and blacken the world in the eyes of the dejected, bent-on-revenge prince. Muddled as he must be, Hamlet occupies the centre of the picture in "The Father's Ghost" as if he was colour-blind. From a different perspective, the picture itself is less detailed than the poem is. If we consult the picture, it misses many of the props that appear in the poem. For instance, the throne does not feature in the picture and neither does the blood, both mentioned in the poem. At best, it is a contemplation or commentary on a memory of which the picture represents only a fragment. The memory fractions and this visual representation happens to arrest only one piece, while many others are lost. In addition, being monochromatic, the image could be a snap from a reverie, a vision or a nightmare and hence is short in some details and forgoes accuracy.

The fact that the picture which aids the retrospection is not drawn by the poet may make the correspondence between the two fortuitous. This is perhaps one reason why the poet's search for a representative visual leads him to a sketch that depicts a scene from *Julius Caesar*, rather than *Hamlet*. Indeed, it is very difficult not to think in pictorial terms given the multitude of theatrical performances and cinematic as well as TV adaptations of Shakespeare's works and *Hamlet* in particular. Yet, Alemarah neither foregrounds the verbal text, nor backgrounds the picture. Both appear on an equal footing on the page where the poem is placed to the right of the image. The words do not gloss over or smudge the picture and the picture does not dilate, or change the shape of the letters in the poem. Rather, the two mediums appear as distinct, almost independent though thematically interlinked and flowing into each other. Each is autonomous and complete in its own right.

"Madness as a Masquerade" picks up where "The Father's Ghost" left off with "Drawn by the glow of your blood/ I will cross the river of madness towards you". The blood-stained throne in the previous poem is now calling and

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beckoning to the delirious Hamlet who is crossing Styx or Acheron aided by his frenzy. The poet builds on a verbal metaphor which he borrows this time from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. This metaphor evokes Hamlet's tragic fate known to all readers of Shakespeare. Blood has a glitter and like a moth to the light, Hamlet cannot help but be drawn to its lethal glow. The visual half of the Qasurah is *The Actors Before Hamlet*, an oil painting by Ladislav Von Czachrosky (1850-1911). In the poetical canon, many a poem was inspired by artefacts and paintings in particular. For instance, "Ozymandias" which Shelley published in 1818 draws on the image of the ruined statue of Ramesses II, the 13th century BCE Egyptian Pharaoh. Brueghel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1555) impacted W.H. Auden's composition of "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1940). Likewise, William Carlos Williams's *Pictures from Brueghel* includes "a number of poems which, as the title indicates, operate like pictures. But they do not, like many concrete poems, abandon sequential language in favour of enclosed self-reference, nor do they inscribe a fixed iconic image within the graphic record of their sound pattern" (Bradford 106). In the above examples, the readers have to conjure up the artefact of reference in order to activate the "interaesthetic influence" (Bradford 107). Alternatively, Ali Alemarah chooses to print the picture of inspiration and creates an immediate verbal-visual effect.

Von Czachrosky's *The Actors Before Hamlet* emulates a long scene in the play in which Hamlet speaks eloquently to a troupe of actors and his persuasive dialogue is mostly in prose. Hamlet, an amateur in the art of pretension, sounds like an acting expert, training and giving stage directions to professionals. The painting features Hamlet dressed in red and standing with outward stretched arms at the centre of a crowded stage where seven more people are visible. His red cloak is lying on the floor at his ankles. As fit of a visual that is based on motifs of bloodshed and madness, red in various shades overwhelms the painting. Hamlet is surrounded by seven people, pleading his case with one side of his face slightly in the shadow and signs of agitation are apparent. In the poem, on the other hand, Hamlet is not addressing the characters around him; rather he is again addressing his father, wondering whether he has truly lost his mind like Claudius's court claims because he "was maddened by love". Two more questions follow in which Hamlet outlines in total three reasons for his insanity: "Is it betrayal..?/ Or is it heartbreak/ Mourning for you?" While the pictorial half of the Qasurah is populated by actors, its verbal counterpart makes only fleeting, offhand references to their presence. *The Actors Before Hamlet* captures a scene from the play, whereas a quite a different scene is penned by the poet.

In "The murder will be re-enacted in a cursory scene/ And a throne of falsehood will collapse/ Between your two hands", the speaker insinuates the play-within-a play which he, in Von Czachrosky's piece, appears to train the

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players visiting Elsinore to perform in front of Claudius. Alone and in the absence of its visual half, the poem creates an image of a solitary, sceptic and scheming Hamlet, thinking loudly and voicing his doubts as well as planning or even rehearsing his future moves. As the verbal half of the poem is united with its visual one, a dual effect is achieved. The readers are divided between the verbal part in which Hamlet lays the foundation of his theory of madness and its pictorial part in which he tests that theory. As such, the poem and the picture are not identical, though narratively as well as thematically related. In the verbal segment of the Qasurah, Hamlet must have spoken to the actors first and then devised a soliloquy intended solely to the ears of his father's ghost.

Neither "The Killer Prays" nor "A Stab in the Curtain" departs from the Shakespearean text with pictures that literally translate the scenes in which Claudius prays, while Hamlet watches him secretly, and Hamlet is held back by his mother after he kills Polonius, consecutively. The Qasurahs are more or less faithful depictions of the original scenes and hence contribute very little as personal explorations on the part of the poet to the Shakespearean text. In a sketch in black and white, Hamlet observes in secrecy his uncle at prayer, duplicating an exact scene from the play. Hamlet relates inquisitively his doubts and confesses his inability to kill Claudius: "I wonder/ How I can tear down before God/ A shadow of sovereignty..?!" In answer to his opening question, Hamlet in the Qasurah weaves a rationale that leans on anger, sorrow and fear:

You are a throne of illusions
That sits on this land
And you are crowned by sin
You robbed this land of a pure heart
And a wise head
you have appropriated for yourself all histories
So how can I to heavens
Dispatch you..?!

"A Stab in the curtain" which concludes the section on *Hamlet* is visualized by a painting entitled *Hamlet and his Mother* (1849) by the French painter Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863). A soliloquy unfurls in the verbal part of the Qasurah which shows Hamlet divided between self-blame and regret:

What illusion, I wonder,
That makes me
Spar with this curtain

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What fury shall I alleviate
What revenge?
Oh, mother, Why have you exchanged
My father's water with ashes
And fire..?
How have you tainted this land
With disgrace?
Oh, Ophelia
Forgive me
If I have ripped daylight
Out of your eyes ...

However, "To Be or Not to Be" pleads its own case and rather than Shakespeare's Hamlet, one can hear as well Alemarah's Hamlet philosophising about existence. The visual effect that accompanies the poem shows a photograph in black and white in which the actor Edwin Booth poses as Hamlet, in a sitting position, reclining on his right arm with his hand supporting one side of his head. Edwin Booth wears a serious look to emulate Hamlet's cheerless countenance. Grief and distress are the defining features of Hamlet's character, which the solo pose is expected to encapsulate. However, the verbal half of the Qasurah is inspired by Hamlet's famous soliloquy more than the forlorn, pensive pose of the actor.

Alemarah, being so fond of rivers as motifs of continuity or peril, opens up his poem with the image of the river of time on which a first person speaker reflects and to which he listens, divided: "between the tug of/ Hope and quietude". Hamlet is in two minds, and his wavering is captured in short, terse lines that expose a dialectic of thoughts. The contemplating I continues to outline its existential dilemma: "Between a blink in the sunset of fantasy/ And a sunrise in the eyes". Hamlet, lost in thought, is searching the river of Time for that mythical moment:

Which sums up a lifetime
In words
And by stabs
And by the heart when doubts desert it
A moment.. in which you either be

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Or not be...!

Hamlet in the poem puts his faith in the ability of time to provide substantial evidence of not only his worth as a human being, but also the possibility of finding peace of mind and relief from heartache. The definition of being and nonbeing hangs on whether his heart is liberated from doubts and Hamlet trusts time with that task.

Antony and Cleopatra in the Qasurah

Alemarah introduces his *Antony and Cleopatra's* section with a Qasurah entitled "Love and War for Antony". The picture about which the poem is supposed to revolve is a photo showing Antony and Cleopatra standing next to each other. As if posing for a wedding picture, Antony was dressed in his military habit, sword, helmet and all. His left arm is askew while his right arm is held by Cleopatra who stands a few inches away from him dressed in her royal robes holding two stalks of wheat in her right hand. Unfortunately, the picture that shows models posing as the famous Shakespearean couple is posted on an online site that sells Halloween costumes. Further, the man standing next to Cleopatra is most likely Julius Caesar and not Mark Antony. The visual fiasco is confirmed by the verbal content of the Qasurah. The wedding album photo tells a little about the dialectic of war and love whose Arabic equivalents (harb and hub) differ orthographically by one single letter. Other than the military clothes in which the groom is dressed, the picture may even be seen as an embodiment of nuptial bliss. The lovers have finally won their war against whatever stands in the face of their union. The warrior's habit is probably seen by the poet as portent for the tragic fate, awaiting the two monarchs. Instead of domestic bliss, the couple would have to deal with political instability. On the other hand, the poet may be targeting the commercial marketing of love in this day and age. If romance is not yet dead, it is tainted with the banality and vulgarity of the materialistic world. While the poem talks about a knight whose swinging heart rises "Like a sun in the memory of the earth", the visual half mocks "this everlasting memory of the legendary couple". In the same vein, the closing statement of the poem hails and cements the love-versus-war concept in:

Nothing but love
Will cross this sea
Like a sail to history
Between love and war
Oneself is subjected to plunder...

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Notwithstanding the vapidness and mediocrity of the pictorial effect, the love-war duality is latent in the couple standing next to each other in that cold posture. Further, romance has its dark side as well when couples are divided by conflict, dispute and even antagonism, hence the war-love compact that marks conjugal life.

In his second Qasurah of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Alemarah chooses to sing the praises of the Egyptian queen in a poem entitled "Does Cleopatra Have a Rival?" In the verbal part of the Qasurah, the reader can hear the voice of the smitten lover who could be Antonio, but also any man, bewitched by Cleopatra and Egypt. The rhetorical question of the title suggests incredulity and scepticism. The poem talks about love that grows "like trees in between the ribs" and a lover who is chased by some magical illusion. The queen, Egypt and the legendary love seem to be within his reach, "And so are time and beauty/ And a throne in my palm sways". Then a pair of questions conclude the poem, both of which are addressed to the lovesick heart of the speaker:

Why do you, O heart, try to
Unfurl the wound over the horizon,
And lead the war towards your slain love?
Why do you try
To awaken the impossible...?

Themes of heartache, impossible love and defeat surface as the speaker argues with his heart, questioning and scolding it. The picture, on the other hand, shows Cleopatra wearing her fame fatale look, smiling seductively and standing in front of another young woman, then a row of three more young ladies is visible. They are all dressed in the costumes of ancient Egypt with matching hairdos and accessories of the same period. At first glance, the picture seems to be showing contestants in some beauty pageant with the winner, the first runner and the other finalists in view. The winner's beaming smile tells of her satisfaction with and pride of the achievement a few seconds before she wears her crown. But in fact, the visual effect is a picture taken from an Arabic period drama about Cleopatra that aired a few years ago. Solaf Fawakhirji, a Syrian TV actor, stars as the title character in the televised drama and in the picture, probably from one of the early episodes, shows Cleopatra with her ladies-in-waiting, crownless but with a sceptre-like thing in her hands. The Queen and her maids are going to prevail on the concluding poem of the *Antony and Cleopatra's* section.

If the poet has in mind the numerous adaptations of the Antony and Cleopatra's fairy tale love affair, then the picture of his choice is a case in point.

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People will never tire of telling and retelling the heartbreaking story and more televised as well as cinematic adaptations are yet expected to be made. Everlasting passion, eternal love and immortal romance are the catchphrases that go along with the mention of the ill-starred lovers. The picture, however, seems to provide the poet with the visual theme he needs as it shows Cleopatra standing apart from the rest of her female entourage and looking peerless and matchless like the verbal half of the Qasurah claims. Singular and unique as Cleopatra was, is and will always be, she dwarves all rivals and outshines all queens like a moon that illuminates the night and eclipses any neighbouring stars. The picture that shows a middle-eastern actor instead of, for instance, Elizabeth Taylor recognizes the Phoenician roots of the half-Egyptian, half-Greek Monarch and pays tribute to the ancient history of the region. Further, an actor from the Middle East is a more realistic choice for a more accurate representation of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Nonetheless, the poet illustrates his poem "Does a Woman's Beauty Change History?" by a picture from the famous Hollywood film showing Elizabeth Taylor facing Richard Burton who plays Mark Antony and both hold on tightly to what looks like a sceptre. The picture showing the profiles of the yet-to-be lovers insinuates that war is about to turn into love and the political dialectic is transforming into flirtation. Antony, in a military habit, looks serious, stern and yet to soften under the influence of Cleopatra who wears a beguiling and pleading look. Smiling furtively and satisfactorily, Cleopatra looks already sure of her victory. The verbal half of the poem focuses on the feminine powers of the queen who, the poem claims, possesses the keys to historical change.

The love story of the two regents continues to fuel more reflections on the nature of the two neighbouring cultures that happen to be ideologically far apart. The third poem of this section, "The East and West for Antony", carries the poet's point of view regarding the two different worlds. The accompanying picture is a sketch in colour by Jozef Szekeres, showing the couple in love standing beside a thick marble pillar. Cleopatra, dressed in her royal robes including the cobra headpiece and other accessories, leans on Antony whose right hand rests on her right shoulder. Cleopatra's right hand caresses his face as he nestles it against her neck. Antony in his Roman attires, young and muscular, points a two-forked mace to the horizon stretching before the two of them. Cleopatra, in his arms, points her sceptre in the same direction. The Pyramids, the Sphinx, the desert sand in golden waves and crimson-green palm leaves are in view; the entire vista looks sunny and serene. In the picture, Cleopatra and Antony rule together as clear in their sharing of the sceptres. As such, the Qasurah builds on the themes of love, partnership and conjugal bliss captured in a timeless scene.

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The verbal half of the poem sails in a different sea though. It revisits the East and West dialectic or rather the Orient and Occident dissidence and hails the romance between the Eastern queen and Western ruler as the one link that brought East and West together. The two polarities remain distant and irreconcilable:

The West is a question
In the horizon of the soul it soars
And the East is a sanctuary of the soul
And a vision and a barrier...

Indeed, Easterners wonder about the West, while Westerners romanticise the East. The West provides a space of freedom, while the East remains phantasmal and unapproachable.

Conclusion:

In his Qasurah, Ali Alemarah twins the verbal and visual modes to create a bimodal poem in an attempt to innovate and liberate his poetical medium from verbal restrictions as well as extend its scope and intensify its impact. Despite the poet's intention to treat the two modes as equal partners and in spite of the precedence of the visual, the verbal mode may stand on its own unaided by the picture which evokes it in the first place. That is, the verbal and visual modes are neither necessarily identical, nor are the arguments they spark exactly matching. Even though the particularities of the Shakespearean texts are occasionally absent, the poet, more often than not, remains faithful to the dramatic scene on which he bases his Qasurah. Further, the verbal mode does not strictly depend on the image, but may evoke the entire play. At intervals, the poet breaks new grounds and his bimodal poem transcends barriers whether temporal or cultural. Sporadically, the verbal mode departs from the visual theme and develops in total or partial autonomy from it. In all, the visual operates as a springboard, while the verbal mode seems to stand on its own, invoking its own argument apart from its visual counterpart.

In all, Alemarah's *Shakespeare and I* achieves its primary goal, which is to import Shakespearean insights and awareness into contemporary contexts. And by its liaison with visual modes from a diversity of sources, the Qasurah bows to the vitality, dynamism and impact of image in the age of multimedia. Eventually, the Qasurah places itself at the centre of a network of intersecting relations and shifting intertextualities invoking the Shakespearean theatre along with cinematic and televised adaptations, artistic as well as amateurish configurations of Shakespeare and even commercial renditions of his plays all at one go.

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