

“All joy o’ the worm”
The Ironic Tragedy of
Antony and Cleopatra

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The modern critic seeking to investigate the nature of the tragic condition in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* inherits not only the problems handed down from previous generations nurtured on Bradley, Dowden, Granville-Barker and Dover Wilson, but also those which emerge from the play's effect upon a present-day audience. Some degree of compromise is undoubtedly needed if the traditional body of attitudes surrounding the lovers is to be reconciled with contemporary doubts concerning the values they claim to represent.

Cleopatra was familiar to Shakespeare's audiences as the legendary seductress of two great Romans--Julius Caesar in her "salad days" and of Mark Antony in her thirties! Both her important conquests were middle-aged and she herself was considered to be an outstanding example of *la femme fatale*, like Boccaccio's Criseida, *una villana* of Italian romance. Such masterful men could only be entrapped by such a strong-willed female, in her own right a Queen, capable of swaying emperors and captains--the supreme earthly manifestation of the vision of eros. Enobarbus's extravagant recollection of her physical person as "O'er-picturing that Venus where we see/The fancy outwork nature" (II,ii, 200-1) and invidious comparison of other women to her in the "infinite variety" of her erotic techniques (*ibid.*, 235-8) make of her a dream courtesan such as all men desire.

Agrippa responds with suitable remarks--"O, rare for Antony" and "Rare Egyptian!" (*ibid.*, 205, 219) but cannot resist bringing Cleopatra down to earth with a bump:

Royal wench!
She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed;
He plough'd her and she cropp'd
(*ibid.*, 227-9)

and in scene vi of the same act, even Enobarbus, prompted by Pompey, recalls, a little hesitantly, how Apollodorus carried "a certain queen to Caesar in a mattress" (1.70). Shakespeare never allows his audience to contemplate Cleopatra from afar, nor to regard her as an ideal to be admired as an out-of-reach goddess high up in the clouds--on the contrary, he constantly directs attention to her body and her physical actions. Her very first appearance is accompanied by "Eunuchs fanning her" and she is soon shown being embraced by Antony--throughout the play she is shown directly and by report as a creature of movement--E.A.J. Honigmann refers to her "dancing, hopping, running, painting, learning, falling, reclining, yawning, biting, pinching, fighting, and, above all, in her scenes with Antony, kissing, fondling, embracing"². One imagine her possibilities as a contortionist--Shakespeare pulls his audience back to a concentration on her sexual power again and again, from first Act to last.

Roman poets and historians, not surprisingly, condemned her. Dante set her in the Second Circle of Hell along with other carnal sinners of like sex--Dido, Helen and Francesca. Boccaccio blamed her as he did Criseida, though Chaucer's brief portrait in *The Legend of Good Women* marks her as a true lover according to courtly convention and praises her fidelity unto death. Poets and particularly playwrights were then beginning to present Cleopatra as a person to be pitied and the lovers as victims of circumstance who were not wholly guilty of infringing the moral law: at the same time traditional opprobrium could not be entirely cast aside because it was too well established to permit of a drastic shift of emphasis. Giraldo Cinthio's *Cleopatra* (ca. 1542), Robert Garnier's *Mark-Antoine* (1578) translated in 1590 by the Countess of Pembroke and Samuel Daniel's *The Tragedie of Cleopatra* (1594) all rely to a greater or lesser extent on an inherited portrait of Cleopatra as morally flawed though at the same time they sought the audience's sympathy for her plight. Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606/7) while owing something to its predecessors, substitutes a romantic for a moral definition. The lovers and their love is the first and only dramatic consideration in this play, and questions concerning the morality of what they did are immaterial. Like that in *Romeo and Juliet*, its conflict is a death-struggle between love and forces hostile to love. Individual "character" is not significant - Antony's "heroic" reputation is a functional stereotype; Cleopatra's "infinite variety" a dramatic convention to bring the classical vision of *eros* into Elizabethan focus.

Shakespeare did not seek to fashion tragic figures out of such well-trying clay. Enough that his audience should readily accept the pair in the form which inherited tradition had determined, namely, as ill-starred lovers, and then look afresh at what the play makes of them. In Act I Antony is soon established as a general with a good fighting record and holding one of the three most responsible positions in "the world" (i.e. the Roman political structure) but in his "dotage", namely, in a state of over-fondness which threatens his judgement.

The audience knew enough about ancient history to perceive Antony as a man who did have many laurels to rest upon--and, if his public were ignorant of historical fact, they had at least seen *Julius Caesar* performed. In addition, the account of his career as given in North's *Plutarch* (1579)⁴ reveals Antony's shortcomings as well as his sterling qualities, though it is his cold-blooded treatment of Octavia which is Antony's most ignoble recorded act during the period covered by the play. Cleopatra's reputation as an experienced courtesan able to play upon his emotions and almost (though not completely) numb his judgment confirms this initial impression and perhaps encourages a more benevolent view to be taken of first reports concerning the *affaire* than may really be justified in the light of information subsequently acquired.

This initial impression, together with the splendid setting of the Egyptian scenes, blocks the audience's communal judgement and tends to crowd out logical opinions of the expedient kind such as are voiced by the far less attractive "Roman" group, whose attitudes are governed or at least influenced first and foremost by political considerations. Dowden's Victorian analysis of the play perceived it as a love-tragedy wherein the love is so magnificent as to make the audience sympathise with the lovers because they are so remarkable but it is to be doubted if this can justly be said of the first four Acts. The spectacle of a middle-aged man in the grip of love for a highly emotional women, even when set against a background of significant historical events, is not to be adjudged remarkable in itself - it could well be sordid, or even silly, reflecting ill on the partners. In Elizabethan eyes, lovers were legitimate objects of derision to be equated with lunatics and poets in their madness⁵. Antony has simply been made "mad" by love--he is "inamorato", therefore capable of any kind of ridiculous behaviour.

As many critics have pointed out, the play from the start lays stress on timelessness and spaciousness, on love so great as to defy measurement and which cannot be adequately pictured in range and scope by any but the most extravagant conceits. Antony's "new heaven, new earth" (I, i.18) is, nevertheless, no more convincing than his statement:

Here is my space,
Kingdoms are clay: our dungy earth alike
Feeds beast as man; the nobleness of life
Is to do thus:

(*ibid.*, 36-9)

in which "thus" refers, according to the stage direction, to his embracing of Cleopatra, a demonstration of physical love and affection which the lady herself regards ironically as "Excellent falsehood", that is to say, as stock lovers' talk, not to be taken at more than its face-value as flattery though in this case the context gives the relationships depth and meaning. Because the audience knows

that it is Antony talking, the love may be presumed to be all-powerful. Later incidents give one cause to reconsider this conclusion.

Moreover, Philo's introductory account of Antony's conduct, referring to his excessive dotage⁶--which implies that a certain degree of "dotage" is acceptable but that this "O'erflows the measure"--is contradicted by his general's words and conduct in scene ii, when the word "dotage" is reiterated, this time by Antony himself:

These strong Egyptian fetters I must break
Or lose myself in dotage

(114-5)

He is not yet become a "strumpet's fool", in spite of what Philo tells Demetrius about him and can still stand outside himself and estimate the extent to which Cleopatra is affecting his reputation as political leader and loyal husband to Fulvia. His ejaculations, made in response to the wordiness of Enobarbus in the same scene, make this stage of detachment clear--he realises that he "must with haste from hence" and "must be gone"--observations in opposition to what Enobarbus is saying about Cleopatra, as usual, in superficial terms, or "light answers" as Antony calls them. The Egypt-inspired characters seem to talk in a kind of shorthand, even not to be communicating at all, nor even trying seriously to do so; Enobarbus helps the audience to interpret what is really being said and done underneath the verbiage of allusion and half-hint.

In contrast, the members of the Roman group follow a species of logic. Caesar deals throughout in facts, intelligence and politically-inspired opinions. Even Pompey, though a fatalist who hopes for the best, is essentially a man who connects ends and means. The same contrast exists between Cleopatra and Octavia, the former whose "passions are made of nothing but the finest part of pure love" (I,ii,144-5), the latter "of a holy, cold, and still conversation" (II, vi, 119-20). Antony cannot be expected to prefer her to his "Egyptian dish" simply because conventional demands of marital fidelity and political loyalty have been made upon him as though they were one entity -- which in Caesar's eyes, they were. He flouts convention and defies Rome, compelling Caesar to assert his authority. Octavia, as cold a fish as her half-brother, has little to say when she hears of her husband's reunion with Cleopatra -- a marked contrast, again, with Cleopatra's violent rage when she hears of Antony's re-marriage in II,v.

Placing Egypt and Rome in opposition with the ocean in between imparts a ready unity to the amorphous dramatic material and creates a single conflict. Shakespeare crudely but effectively reduced the symbolism to fundamentals of human civilization -- the ancient antitheses of East and West, wherein East signifies Man's will, perceived as insatiable, desiring always to satisfy its craving for action and dynamic living; this is the impulsive will in the service of desire, or pure selfishness. Antony, a product of Rome and her imperial obligations, is

brought up hard against the voluptuous forces of Egypt for whose primitive appetites Cleopatra is made to stand. The West is itself a focal point of controversy -- Antony as he is when Cleopatra ensnares him, the Protestant will encountering the Romantic spirit, and setting off a conflict between reason and desire. Octavius, slave of the intellect, speaks for logic, censorship, duty and the classical virtues (in which Antony has also been schooled but from which he is now being lured away even against his own better judgment). Enobarbus knows that his old friend will never leave Cleopatra and by the time the action has reached III, vi, the audience understands that Antony has finally repudiated Rome's authority and, after the reported battles, that he has lost his Roman skill in generalship.

According to this synoptic view, which has obvious origins in psychoanalytic theory, the lovers provide the means by which Rome secures the political domination of Egypt but they are at the same time the means of rendering Rome's victory innocuous; Antony chooses love before imperial claims and his surrender is not to military forces. No internal conflict baffles him -- even his defeat and flight fail to crush him - his rejection of this world does not come until he hears the false report of Cleopatra's death, brought him by Mardian in IV, xiv, 28f. To be reunited with her/he realises that he himself must also depart from life:

I will o'ertake thee, Cleopatra, and
Weep for my pardon. So it must be, for now
All length is torture: since the torch is out,
Lie down and stray no further

(IV, xiv, 44-7)

but his confession to Eros:

Since Cleopatra died,
I have liv'd in such dishonour that the gods
Detest my baseness

(*ibid.*, 55-7)

is ironic, firstly since she is not dead; since "dishonour" concerns both public opinion of him and his opinion of himself -- publicly he has not been directly dishonoured', yet here he is only at this latter stage confirming that he claims to agree with some general verdict. "Since Cleopatra died" is in the play only a matter of minutes. Moreover, in III, xi he himself was raving against her and threatening her death.

The witch shall die,
To the young Roman boy she hath sold me, and I fall
Under this plot; she dies for't.

(47-9)

Antony fails to kill himself Roman-fashion, by falling on his sword -- a further sign of his loss of former efficiency -- and only now does he learn that Cleopatra is not dead after all. He accepts the blow which Fate has dealt him and expires, recalling in self-flattery his old glories when he was

The greatest prince o' the world,
The noblest; and do now not basely die,
Not cowardly put off my helmet to
My countryman, a Roman, by a roman
Valiantly vanquished.

(IV, xv, 54-8)

a statement which betokens a final irony, since his earthly defeat is not suffered at his own hands. It is contrived through the vision of *eros* which destroys him in life but recreates him for Cleopatra, Phoenix-fashion, in death. She sees the vision in a dream and describes it to Dolabella:

I dreamt there was an Emperor Antony.
O such another sleep, that I might see
But such another man!

(V,ii,76-8)

launching into a description which grows more and more far-fetched until she concludes:

...realms and islands were
As plates dropp'd from his pocket.
(*ibid.*, 91-2)

though it is soon made apparent that she really and truly believes her dream to be less than the reality:

An Antony were nature's piece, 'gainst fancy,
Condemning shadows quite.
(*ibid.*, 99-100)

Both lovers have in their minds at least departed from the material world; both are beyond the restorative powers of fancy. *Antony and Cleopatra* is not *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, nor is it even *Twelfth Night*; Antony's condition is not of that Romeo, nor is his loss that of Othello, though some superficial similarities are not far to seek. Cleopatra is no Juliet, Cordelia or Lady Macbeth. She has no "character" that invites analysis -- in the first four Acts she is a self-indulgent, alluring courtesan, having breadth but not depth. Dramatically she requires no depth. She is what she is, neither guilt nor innocence belongs to her, and her "real" existence comes only when death is said to immortalise her.

Ironically, as will be noted again later, it is the earthbound Octavius who defines her new status, a status shared by Antony:

No grave upon the earth shall clip in it
A pair so famous: high events as these
Strike those that make them: and their story is
No less in pity than his glory which
Brought them to be lamented.

(V,ii,357-61)

and her dying words to Iras and Charmian are usually believed to show that her flight from this world to some higher sphere is about to take off:

Give me my robe, put on my crown, I have
Immortal longings in me...methinks I hear
Antony call. I see him rouse himself
To praise my noble act. I hear him mock
The luck of Caesar, which the gods give men
To excuse their after wrath. Husband I come:
Now to that name, my courage prove my title!
I am fire, and air; my other elements
I give to baser life.

(V,ii,279-89)

The higher elements of "Fire, and Air" -- as distinct from the baser ones of "earth and water" making cold clay--the void separating the rational from the emotional, is not to be easily conveyed in human terms without sliding into near-farce. The history of the lovers, even as reported by North⁸, consistently borders on the absurd. The second part of II, v, when the Queen, infuriated when she hears of Antony's re-marriage, runs from violence to misery in a matter of minutes, draws a very thin line between a serious portrait of an enraged woman who feels her position threatened by a rival and a laughable caricature of feminine jealousy. Dramatically it is very effective; but it does nothing to prepare the audience to accept her supposed ennoblement through passion in V,ii.

As for Antony's claims to the attainment of release, Enobarbus's final words in III,xiii serve to close the door on his master as owning potential for recovery:

A diminution in our captain's brain
Restores his heart ; when valour preys on reason,
It eats the sword it fights with

(*sc. cit.*, 198-200)

and the opening of Act IV confirms this mental collapse by discussing the challenge to individual combat which Antony sent to Caesar in III,xiii. Caesar's comment is "Poor Antony!" (IV,i,16) and in the scene following Antony is revealed as incapable of understanding why his adversary will not meet him

man-to man in single combat. Cleopatra, who also fails to grasp this point, observes to Charmian in scene iv:

He goes forth gallantly : that he and Caesar might
Determine this great war in single fight:

Then Antony - ; but now - ...

(*sc.cit.* 36-8)

so obviously she is no longer confident of a favourable outcome. Antony himself conducts his campaign heroically, treats the deserting Enobarbus with knightly generosity, commends the bravery of Scarus and returns to contemplate the hard facts only in Act IV, scene xii when he exclaims:

All is lost

The foul Egyptian hath betrayed me:

My fleet hath yielded to the foe...

(9-10)

though by the end of the same scene of 50 lines he has already become, in Cleopatra's words

...more mad

Then Telemon for his shield

(*ibid.* XIII, 1-2)

and she takes Charmian's advice -- to send him news of her death -- in order to protect herself from his threatened vengeance. He has, after all, sworn to kill her.

Her "ennoblement through passion" in the final scene has already been mentioned. This is a familiar testimonial to Cleopatra, given her by a great many critics, and it has justified her enshrinement in the pantheon of tragic heroines. Honigmann concludes that "ennoblement remains a possibility, though not one that we can fully believe in". This is where *Antony and Cleopatra* differs from the other major tragedies, which leave the audience in no doubt--even Antony makes a heroic exit, rounding off his departure in conventional terms:

Now my spirit is going,

I can no more

(IV,xv,58-9)

is his version of "the rest is silence" to which Cleopatra supplies a chorus:

Noblest of men, woo't die ?

Hast thou no care of me, shall I abide

In this dull world, which in thy absence is

No better than a sty ? O, see, my women :

The crown o' the earth doth melt

(*ibid.*, 59-63)

and a few moments later, she faints, so that Iras thinks she is already dead. The effect is less one of high drama than of a performance tossed off by a prima donna who has come to believe that her rôle-playing is real.

The Cleopatra of the final Act, minus Antony's physical presence, is a more complex creature than "the whore" (Caesar's epithet for her in III,vi, 67), "a trull" (Maecenas in *ibid.*, 95) and "yon ribaudred nag of Egypt" (Scarus in III,x,10). Caesar stops insulting her only when he learns in III,xiii that Cleopatra is prepared to yield to him, and henceforth grants her her title of "Queen"--it is from Antony that a phrase like "triple-turned whore" is heard and he goes on heaping abuse upon her in his distraction, accusing her of betrayal, until Mardian reports her death.

Much high-flown prose has been expended on the Cleopatra of the last Act. Fairly typical is Fluchère's:

The grandeur of this death lies not in the pride of its pomp, but in the certainty of the identity of love with immortality, in this amazing alliance of nobility and simplicity, of the queen and the woman, which in her final speech works like magic...The underlying significance of *Antony and Cleopatra*, therefore, is to my mind that Shakespeare has recovered his calm of spirit. The heavy covering of lead that weighed down the universe is lifted, the horror of death dispelled, the triumph of evil is no longer the only reward promised to human passion, revolt no longer the only possible attitude against indifferent or cruel gods. Shakespeare's tragic experience has gone full circle, and the first reconciliation takes place in a brilliant world, loud with the clash of arms, traversed by grandiose political ambitions but made poetic by an immortal love.¹⁰

This is worth quoting from at length because it sums up the comfortable view of generations of critics who looked to Shakespeare's later plays as conveying a reassuring vision, a "calm of mind, all passion spent" message of optimism and solace. Shakespearean tragedy is explained not only in such terms as an aperient but also as though the poet were offering his audiences a sound investment in human hope and potential. The well-adjusted Caesar, showing more sympathy than before, pays the dead lovers justifiable compliments and organizes a magnificent funeral for them, ending in a shared tomb. Thanks to him the historicity of their immortality is secure. Death has at last in his possession "a lass unparallel'd", as Charmian describes her mistress. She expires with a query on her lips which her loyal handmaiden completes:

Cleo. As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle.

O Antony!.....

What should I stay-----

(Dies)

Char. In this vile world

(V,ii,310-3)

The last unexpected shaft of Cleopatra's earthbound jealousy is aimed at faithful Iras whose unexpected death in advance of her own suggests to the Queen the fanciful notion that her attendant may gain Antony's favours in the next world before she herself arrives there -- a conceit showing that she is still afraid of not being complete mistress of her own destiny. Her comparisons of the death-dealing serpent's bite to the touch of nature and of life and her final question, cut short by death, may not be entirely rhetorical. It is Charmian who supplies the epithet "vile".

Cleopatra's reaction to Caesar's calculated disposal of her affairs, which she pretends to accept, is immediate and contemptuous:

He words me, girls, he words me, that I should not
Be noble to myself

(V, ii, 190-1)

She knows that he was trying to talk her out of suicide for reasons of his own, and whispers to Charmian -- but it is Iras who answers:

Finish, good lady, the bright day is done,
And we are for the dark

(*ibid.*, 192-3)

and it is now that the audience knows for certain that Cleopatra has for some time been preparing to take her own life through the agency of an "it" which "is provided", namely, the asp. Actually there seem to be at least three asps in the basket of figs -- perhaps one for each woman, though Iras's sudden death is not explained.

Cleopatra's self-dramatization flows outwards. Attired in robe and crown, she will ensure that no posthumous lampoonery will immortalize her "greatness/ I' the posture of a whore" (*ibid.* 219). No decriers will have the pleasure of insulting the lovers' memory¹¹. Her "immortal longings" are associated with a dignified survival, chiefly, it is hinted, for her own person rather than that of Antony. She convinces herself, and many generations of audiences, that she is taking a step towards certain immortality, as "fire and air", a state of elemental existence which is now the only one left to her own choice, attainable through suicide. Her imagined reunion with Antony beyond the grave, like her jealousy of the dead Iras, is just earthbound metaphor - she is "wording" herself now.

Iras, Charmian and the Clown who wishes Cleopatra "joy of the worm" (V, ii,259, 278) have no such illusions. For them death is just death -- freedom from

life. The Clown makes an ironical reference to a woman being “a dish for the gods, /if the devil dress her not” (V,ii,273-4). Death is darkness -- Clemen notes that “in no other play is this darkness-symbol of death so closely associated with the whole characterization of the persons as in *Antony and Cleopatra*”¹² and illustrates the point by means of examples of the extinguishing of light -- though these refer mainly to Antony rather than to Cleopatra.¹³

Caesar and his train bring the play to a close by holding a hasty inquest into the deaths of the three women. This final episode reads rather like the investigation in a *roman-policier*. Caesar speaks first to Dolabella, who had tipped off Cleopatra that the sole survivor of the triumvirate had been less than frank with her. He now shows himself to be a true courtier by confirming that Caesar’s predictions were completely accurate.

Dol. O sir, you are too sure an augurer;
That you did fear, is done.

Caes. Bravest at the last,
She levell’d at our purposes, and being royal
Took her own way:

(*ibid*, ii, 331-5)

and a “preliminary enquiry” is set going¹⁴. Caesar and Dolabella ask the questions and the intelligent First Guard helps them to reach an appropriate conclusion. How did these three women die? Not by any obvious means involving violence, since there is no sign of blood on any of the corpses. Does anyone know who was last seen in their company?

Here the Guard speaks up and recalls the “simple countryman” with his figs, delivered to Cleopatra. There is the basket -- Exhibit A, one might say. Caesar immediately jumps to a conclusion -- were they poisoned (by the figs, presumably) ? The Guard points out that Charmian had been alive after Cleopatra was clearly dead and had spoken to him. He gives an account of her death, how she trembled and then dropped down suddenly. The audience knows this and so does another guard who contributes nothing to this discussion. Moreover, both guards know that it was an asp which Charmian applied to her body, but they do not mention the snake at this point. Instead, they allow Caesar and Dolabella to go on play-acting “detectives”. Caesar suggests that it does not look like poison since no external swellings is visible on any of the bodies; Cleopatra, in fact, looks as though she were asleep, and still able to rouse a man’s desires.

Dolabella examines Cleopatra’s body and spots a puncture on her breast, with a mark of blood -- he is more observant than Caesar, apparently. He sees “something blown” -- variously explained as “swollen” or as a trail, such as a snail might leave. If the former, then Caesar is wrong again, since he fails to

detect any swellings. Dolabella finds a similar set of marks on her arm.

Now the guard leaps in self-importantly with his great "deduction".

This is an asp's trail, and these fig-leaves
Have slime upon them, such as the asp leaves
Upon the caves of Nile

(*ibid.*, 349-51)

he informs his hearers. His logic is a sham. He was actually present when Charmian applied the asp - this is made quite clear from the text and stage directions¹⁵.

First Guard. Caesar hath sent-----

Char. Too slow a messenger.

(V, ii, 319-20)

(applies an asp)

The Second Guard comes in time to witness Charmian's death, so may be presumed to have seen the asp wriggle away. The first Guard has concealed his knowledge of the asp's presence and has very skilfully taken advantage of the situation until the right moment. He even "blinds his hearers with science" -- all this matter about aspic trails on the caves of Nile is just stage patter, intended to impress. Sherlock Holmes in his latter days could not have done better.

Caesar wastes no more time in pronouncing his final verdict, which amounts to a presumption that was the result of the bite of an "asp or asps unknown", probably hidden amongst fig - leaves and according to a hearsay medical report (one cannot believe everything that Caesar says) Cleopatra had been investigating "easy ways to die"¹⁶. Death by asp-bite was supposed to be painless, and the symptoms mentioned in the text were well-known to Shakespeare's contemporaries¹⁷.

At any rate, in this way a most perfunctory investigation is brought to a close and a swiftly-decided verdict given. Death is death, but Caesar the politician is working out on his feet the best means of tidying up the whole sorry affair with least damage to himself. A grave, a legend, a lesson to others and a military funeral, after which he will return to Rome leaving behind the "pair so famous". Fame, the only evidence of immortality which man and woman can claim and which may not last -- this is the classical concept, the inspiration of "ubi sunt?". The lovers are indeed together, but only in the memories of men. In fact, Cleopatra's first words in V,ii, are :

My desolation does begin to make
A better life.....it is great
To do that thing that ends all other deeds

(1-2; 4-5)

implying that the ostensible purpose of her contemplated demise is to escape from Fortune, which rules this world. It is only gradually that she works herself up to the grand exit -- a one-sided suicide-pact with her deceased lover. For the greatest effect, they ought to have died together -- her later departure from the world has mixed motives. In ordering that they be entombed as a pair, it is Caesar himself who ensures that the legend of their inseparability shall be perpetuated. His last words are ambiguous -- they refer to his own reputation just as much as to the "high events". This concluding speech is calculated and shows him to be in absolute command of the lamentable situation of which the story is now, so far as he is concerned, complete. For Caesar, the political victor, it is now safe to invite pity for the lovers.

Many questions remain, therefore ? Are there winners and losers ? Is Antony saved because his earthly paramour later joins him in death, namely, in a jointly - tenanted grave ? Does Cleopatra "really" escape from Caesar ? Is her ennoblement an illusion constructed out of her own infinitely varied and variable personality which can make and remake worlds of her own specious design ? Is she really cheating herself and all who think they owe her allegiance ? It is important to note that she wanted an easy death - with no suffering - for the heroic death involved pain, not oblivion aided by an anaesthetic. Is Antony a hero or a partial idiot -- does even a hero wear an ass's head when he is in love ? Is the escapist language of the play -- quite unlike that of any other of Shakespeare's -- supposed to stifle a cynical response and uplift the audience, as critical tradition would have it ? Is *Antony and Cleopatra* a play which meant one thing to an Elizabethan or even a Victorian audience and must now mean something quite different to people disgusted by heroics and cynical about love.?

Perhaps the central figure is really the insignificant Clown in Act V, Scene ii, with his "pretty worm of Nilus" which offers an easy exit from a worthless existence. Are Cleopatra's gesture "to the false housewife Fortune" and Caesar's lot to be "but fortune's knave" so different in their effects ? Like all tragedies, this play is about death and not necessarily about a love which transcends it -- nothing transcends it -- a conclusion which is perfectly consistent with Shakespeare's mature tragic vision in *Macbeth*. Antony and Cleopatra are what Kierkegaard called "aesthetic" creations -- fire and air are the stuff of deception, no less than the "baser elements" of earth and water¹⁸.

NOTES

All quotations and textual references to *Antony and Cleopatra* relate to the Arden edition. M. R. Ridley (based on Case's 1906 edn.), London, 1976.

1. And possibly Pompey and Octavius Caesar as well (cf. III, xiii, 116-8). Cleopatra was 38 when she died, Mark Antony, 53, or 56, according to Plutarch. Their liaison is reported to have lasted 14 years and produced several children.
2. E.A.J. Honigmann, *Shakespeare : Seven Tragedies* (London, 1976), 156.
3. For complete information on Cleopatra's reputation among historians and poets see G. Bullough ed., *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (London and New York 8 vols), V,218ff.
4. Printed in Bullough, *ed. cit.*, 254-318.
5. cf. *MND*, V, i 8-9.
6. *Dotage* - *OED* (rev. edn. 1970) gives two general definitions of this word : 1) Involving the impairment of intellect and judgement especially through old age. 2) Involving foolish affection, excessive love or fondness. Antony is in his mid - 50's, (cf.n.l. *supra*), so that either of these interpretations is acceptable, though (2) is probably the one intended. (cf. *Two Gent. of Verona*, IV,iv,87).
7. "Honour" and its loss is a frequent topic in Shakespeare - *Troilus and Cressida* and *Hamlet* both dwell on the subject and in *Othello* it is central to the plot against the hero though in the latter play it refers specifically to opinion, that is, what other people think, or seem to think and on the grounds for such a view. *OED* gives *glory, renown, fame, credit, reputation, good name*, as synonyms for *honour*. Antony observes in III, iv, 7 that Caesar could not "but pay me terms of honour" in public; in IV, ii, 6 he refers to his "dying honour" (*sim.* in line 44 of the same scene he equates death on the battlefield with honour). Only at this point does he think of himself as having lived in "dishonour" though this sounds like Antony's typical exaggeration. He wishes Cleopatra's honour preserved, however (IV,xv,46). Cf. also n. 11 *infra*.

8. cf. Bullough, *ed. cit.*,
9. *op. cit.*, 169.
10. Henri Fluchère, *Shakespeare* (trans. Guy Hamilton): 5th impression : London 1967), 263.
11. In particular, Octavia, who “shall acquire no honour/Demuring upon me” (IV, xv, 28-9).
12. Wolfgang H. Clemen, *The Development of Shakespeare’s Imagery* (London 1953), 165.
13. *ibid.* 162ff.
14. Compare Plutarch with Shakespeare here -- each handles the hearsay evidence in a different manner but it is clear that the precise circumstances were not known at the time, or covered up in some way (cf. Bullough,*ed. cit.*, 316).
15. *First folio* (1623).
16. Plutarch mentions this (cf. Bullough, *ed. cit.*, 305)
17. Cleopatra’s “asp” is now thought to have been the Egyptian cobra, though this was surely rather a heavy reptile for the purpose and one must not expect too much herpetological expertise from Shakespeare, who followed Plutarch in this matter.(cf. Arden text, 218, n. 344, also Michael Grant, *Cleopatra* (London 1972) 226-8.
18. cf. this author’s two articles on Shakespearean tragedy in Vols 1 and 2 of this *Bulletin*, in which this argument is maintained in connection with *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*.