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Temporality and Beauty in *Antony and Cleopatra*

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Abstract. This essay shows how, in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, the relation between the protagonists can be seen as an insurmountable contrast between two different cultures – on the one hand, the “diurnal” and “rational” culture of Rome and, on the other hand, the “nocturnal” and “passionate” culture of Egypt –, but also as an opposition between two different ways of understanding the relation between illusion and reality, appearance and truth, and thus between theatre and life. More specifically, what emerges is the awareness that art, embodied in Cleopatra's beauty, constantly reminds us of the unredeemable finitude and transience of the human being, who is inevitably immersed in time. In this light, if art is able to become a manifestation of truth, the fact remains that such truth, as final sense, is something that art can “show”, but only to indicate its perpetually elusive character. It is indeed a truth which, like the indecipherable secret kept in the Mausoleum, cannot be “told” or “represented” once and for all.

Keywords. Antony and Cleopatra, Shakespeare, beauty, temporality, art-life, silence.

1. Through the reflections developed in this essay, I would like to show how Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, by representing the close connection of themes such as love, war, art and death, is a play that calls into question the existing order of society and, at the same time, offers an opportunity to think, more broadly, about the meaning of art. In this light, a central theoretical point is the need to look for a «new heaven» and a «new earth» which runs throughout the whole play, finding its final achievement in the image of the Mausoleum: the Mausoleum where Octavius Caesar orders that the two protagonists should lie by themselves. It is precisely in the Mausoleum that we find a condensed symbolic representation of «another» meaning than the one predominant in the world – a world where what prevails is possession, together with violence, rivalry and the will to power. Consequently, what the Mausoleum embodies is, on the one hand, the possibility to reach an absolute coinciding with meaning and, on the other hand, the awareness that achiev-

ing such meaning, considering that it coincides with the death of the two protagonists, rules out any chance of redeeming the human condition from its finitude and caducity. The essay highlights how, in Shakespeare's play, art itself testifies to the impossibility of saving the finite from its finiteness, as the character of Cleopatra demonstrates in an exemplary way. If, in the play, Cleopatra represents a symbol of art, it is also true that, as an «object of desire» which is always denied and, as a consequence, can never be fully possessed, Cleopatra ends up embodying an idea of art and, simultaneously, an idea of beauty which are indissolubly intertwined with time, i.e. with transience and contingency. What emerges is thus an idea of art which makes us part of the absolute, while testifying to its unreachability, as it is the expression of a mystery which is and remains indecipherable. It is, in other words, a mystery that, being unsayable, can only be «said» and «communicated» through silence.

2. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Rome, as the daytime world of history, and Egypt, as the nocturnal world of passion, achieve the universal dimensions of forces of nature. The ethno-political dimension is fundamental to the staging of the play, in which Shakespeare shows us the meeting and clash of two civilisations, or rather, of two cultures¹. It is in this setting that the erotic conflict between Antony and Cleopatra plays out, a conflict in which they each absorb the life of the other, and thus give each other meaning. It is as if life's need for meaning is answered by a bodily sense: thus the two lovers save each other, or save their love, in death. However, whereas for the Romans Antony «is not Antony» when he is in Egypt, for Cleopatra he will «be himself» only by staying in Egypt. Antony tends to identify with the environment in which he finds himself, always wavering between Egypt and Rome, with disastrous consequences. This is shown by the fact that he can leave the world

of history and action – the world of Rome where Octavius dominates – to fall into its opposite – the anti-historical and mythical world of passion, where Cleopatra dominates². It is indeed true that in the end Antony loses «the world» for love, but it is also true that, disappearing from that world, he makes another world appear. In this world he finds Cleopatra, and will finally defeat time, which, in its biological sense as ageing and death, is set up as the real enemy³.

There is clearly a political and symbolic link between this play and *Julius Caesar*. In the latter Antony takes advantage of the murder of a father by transferring an essential part of power to himself. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, on the other hand, the political game with the «brother» (Octavius-Caesar, who holds the name of the father, which Antony had previously exploited) is intertwined with the game of love, as Antony is totally dependent on the woman he loves⁴. This double ordeal – with the two terms «love» and «politics» paradoxically independent in and through their inter-dependence – results in Antony's «decomposition». To prove his autonomy, Antony exclaims at the beginning: «Let Rome in Tiber melt and the wide arch / Of the ranged empire fall! Here is my space» (I.i.35-36)⁵. The result is that he suddenly finds himself *outside of space*, or better finds himself in the «space» of Cleopatra, as demonstrated when he follows her decision to withdraw her boats at the battle of Actium. This results in the dissolution of his «aura» even in his own eyes. Shakespeare is always conscious of the importance of his characters' first lines: in Antony's first words he refers to his «space», whereas the first words of Cleopatra are, «If it be love indeed, tell me how much. / [...] I'll set a

² For an interpretation of the play as a staging of opposite perspectives and differing «points of view on the world», see the stimulating considerations in J. Hirsh (2005: 175-191).

³ See W. H. Auden (2006: esp. 314).

⁴ See Daniel Sibony (2003: 49-80).

⁵ All quotations are from William Shakespeare, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, ed. Michael Neill, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994.

¹ For an interesting re-reading of the play focussing on the conflict between rationality and feeling as opposed and irreconcilable values, cf. D. Fuller (2005: 111-135).

bourne how far to be beloved» (I.i.14-16). It is as if Cleopatra were saying: I want to search until I find a place where I can be loved, until I find the limits of my love. So, from the beginning, without being fully aware of it, both fix their destiny.

The «product» of Julius Caesar, Antony triumphed as long as he was held up by that name. He ends up falling in front of Caesar the son, meaning in front of the name of his «father» transmitted to others. He was thus destined to imprisonment in his father's shadow, from which only death could liberate him. It will instead be Cleopatra who triumphs over Octavius, both as a woman and as an Egyptian, denying him the possibility of taking her to Rome for his triumphal procession. As soon as Cleopatra understands Octavius's plan, she decides to kill herself in order to preserve her identity. The procession through the streets of Rome that had been planned for her is transformed into a march of immortality in the certainty of her indissoluble union with Antony. Hence the staging of death in love's union, a performance that is planned right to the final gesture. Her psychic force, her majesty and her power, which transcend politics, are so great that, even when dead, she spiritually defeats the despised Octavius. Evidenced in his words: «but she looks like sleep, / As she would catch another Antony / In her strong toil of grace» (V.ii.344-46). So Cleopatra sets up her own death in a regal, Egyptian and also political way, as in the past she set up her entry into the political orbit of Rome through her meeting with Antony on the River Cydnus.

3. The fact that Shakespeare felt the need to write a new «Roman» play six or seven years after *Julius Caesar* can perhaps be explained by the relationships the playwright had with the society in which he lived, which was marked by the thoughts and actions of the new King James. Succeeding Elizabeth I, the King was seen as a new Augustus, the initiator of a universal peace. However, in writing *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare's purpose wasn't really political: although the play touches political problems that stretched from Rome to the England of his time, all of this

is taken to a much deeper level than in *Julius Caesar*, which focused on observing behaviour and analysing rivalries and conflicts within the social dimension. The social level concerns the dimension of *pathos* and, as such, is not exhausted in the ambition for, and love of, liberty, which were manifested in the character of Brutus. Shakespeare was always extremely attentive to the nature of theatre, to its place in society and to its social value. It is referred to throughout his work, including by Hamlet, his character most aware of contemporary problems. Theatre mirrors society, he says, and in this mirror society can recognise its own vices and prejudices, learning to correct them by exposing the guilty to their crimes – as Hamlet's project of staging *The Mousetrap* shows.

Heir to the truth function of the medieval mystery plays, theatre transposes the search for truth from the divine to the human level. An increase in the number of Puritanical attacks on the theatre at the beginning of the 17th Century greatly affected Shakespeare, who was by then the greatest playwright of the time and theatre's most resolute defender. Theatre was seen as being the work of the devil, and was accused of destabilising the social order by giving excessive importance to women. Thus *Antony and Cleopatra* is a «political» play in a profound sense: the real intention of the play is to call society into question, and this is also what gives it its contemporary relevance. To do this, Shakespeare makes the Puritans' accusations against women his own, associating them with those made against the theatre. Indeed, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra seems to have all the weaknesses and defects that, according to Puritanical thought, characterise unmarried women. This despised feminine dimension is evoked in several scenes and some critics have characterised the Queen of Egypt in the play by simply enumerating these major defects, as if that was the way in which Shakespeare intended to portray her. It is true that he makes Antony, who loves her, express similar judgements about her. He shows him being slowly destroyed by her perverse nature to the extent that, looking for liberty in death, he ultimately tries to commit suicide – even if in his

last moments he thinks only of Cleopatra, whom he believes dead. It is she who caused his decadence and who, by staging her first «appearance» on the River Cydnus, substitutes illusion for reality, just as theatre does.

The «perverse» character of Cleopatra emerges even more clearly when it is compared to that of Octavia, Octavius's sister. Antony marries the latter after his return to Rome, in an attempt to force an alliance with his great rival, Octavius. Octavia is the opposite of Cleopatra: Shakespeare continually emphasises that she incarnates the qualities and ways of being that men love in women. Octavia, who reflects Octavius even in her name, is complete virtue, her first principles being obedience to her husband and unreserved devotion to him, even if he was chosen without her being consulted. Octavia would have been admired as much as Cleopatra was vilified. But in fact Octavia is nothing but a means of exchange. It seems that Shakespeare, with this neutralised woman, wanted to pose the problem of the subordination of women. As for Octavius, he is portrayed as existing in the dimension of a politics that thinks only of power, and his actions, so determined, so divorced from the other aspects of his person, preserve his intelligence but destroy his affective capacities. He uses Octavia without hesitation and desires Antony's death, despite his great esteem of him, since – as he makes clear when he hears of his suicide – there is no place for both of them at the top of the social hierarchy. And he also wouldn't have shown any remorse or compassion if Cleopatra had been chained to his triumphal chariot. What most clearly emerges is the «cultural» context that Shakespeare creates around the figure of Octavius: a society of having and not of being, and therefore a society of power that rests on nothing but rivalry between those in the top ranks and the violence they use to obtain their wishes.

It is from *Julius Caesar* that our interest in Antony the man arises, seeing him in all of his complexity rather than simply in his relationship with Octavius⁶. From the first Roman play, Antony

is more than a representative of being «Roman», he is a man in which no human dimension is absent, or at least that's how it seems. It is in the second «Roman» work that this complexity and humanity reveal themselves: in Antony one now discovers that which Octavius lacks, an interior wealth, a facility to contradict himself, a tendency to declarations rich in *pathos*, whereas in Octavius we see only reason and lucidity. Thus between the two men there is not simply a rivalry demonstrated in the visible action, but a difference in nature. It is on this that the action is founded, and it is this that will give the play its meaning. Octavius, the new Caesar, is reason, which is in fact violence. It is thus calculation that guides all of his thoughts, and not love or *pathos*. And Octavius also keeps a distance from practical tasks, in particular in battle, since he needs «distance» in order to dominate the field of the possible.

Antony, however, loves fighting with sword in hand, putting himself on the frontline. He even dreams, in the days in which he feels defeated, of fighting with Octavius in a hand-to-hand combat, a duel to the death that would resolve their respective aspirations. If Octavius had accepted – but he knows better than to do that – it is a fight in which Antony would without doubt have discovered his capacity for victory. Antony isn't a man of modern warfare but of ancient combat, he is not *logos* but *pathos*, and, above all, he is «body». And this body is linked to his sexual compulsion that, far from diminishing him – as in the Puritanism that characterises Octavius – is his other, if not his first, passion. This also reveals him to be an archaic character. And so it is also in this respect – which is very important in the play, seeing as Cleopatra, a desired woman, will be its protagonist – that the question of order or of disorder, Puritan or «Roman» can be understood. Cleopatra is the powerful presence that Shakespeare discovers in his research on Rome. He wants to understand if the allure that linked the Queen of Egypt and Antony was simply a carnal reality, which would conform to the idea of women held by his Elizabethan enemies, or if there was something more in their relationship, even if difficult to grasp.

⁶ See Andrew Cecil Bradley (1963: 279-308) and also Giorgio Melchiori (1994: 519-34).

The former hypothesis isn't out of the question, and it is clear that Shakespeare didn't want to completely take it out of the picture. Indeed he considers numerous testimonies against Cleopatra, including those of Antony, who repeatedly insults her, claiming to have been betrayed by her. The Queen of Egypt also often behaves, both with those around her and with Antony, in a capricious and irrational way. However the fact remains that Cleopatra transforms during the play. And this evolution, which is revealed as a true and proper spiritual development, constitutes the spring of action, giving Shakespeare the possibility of proving that what Romans or Puritans consider to be the only valid society does not exhaust the context of human possibilities. It is in this way that Shakespeare demonstrates one of the major functions of the truth of the theatre. Cleopatra *becomes*, and this change is brought about when she finally searches in herself for her oft forgotten «nobility». Cleopatra *becomes*: time also passes for the Queen of Egypt and she, who was beauty herself and reigned through this beauty, grows older, and is sufficiently aware of this to mention the worsening of her complexion and the appearance of her first wrinkles.

Antony also ages, and doesn't simply say it, but repeats it, obsessed by his grey hairs and the fact that his arm is losing strength by the day, as well by the youth of Octavius, of which he is clearly jealous. Antony and Cleopatra are inside time, and they know it, and this is the cause of the ardour in their love and the anxiety that festers under it. But they don't live this anxiety in the same way. For Antony, a warrior of past times that made the idea of the Romans his own, it is power that counts and above all it is ambition that makes law, as his obsession with Octavius demonstrates. And, in the war that must always be fought, he sees the passage of time as an opportunity either to be taken or missed, with the increasing risk of losing everything. This is shown in the way he passes from depressive moments to unhealthy excitement, which worries the people around him. The anguish related to the passing of time in the «Roman» environment leads to the decomposition

of his person, not allowing for the spiritual development that characterises Cleopatra. For her, the passing of time isn't lived in the same way, since her strong sense of it, although painful, is impregnated with nobility.

Her anxiety at the passing days is mitigated by a reflection that has nothing to fear from age. Time, which has reached her body, will help her to become conscious of herself and of her end. Cleopatra's anxiety about time motivates her to search for herself, and causes her to suffer when she is unable to explain to Antony what is at play in their love, since he is not sufficiently aware of it. So she looks beyond the moment of involuntary mutism for an opportunity for the *true word*: an exchange that would permit Antony to yield with her to the truth of life and would also help her, suddenly truly in love, in a quest that they could finally accomplish together. This quest for a «new heaven» and a «new earth» (I.i.17) is not easy, since Antony, as he explicitly says, has his eyes still fixed on Rome and his mind still confused by sexist prejudices. To understand *Antony and Cleopatra* one needs to examine this quest and to follow it, with the relationship between the two lovers showing the way, not through the spoken word, but in the acts that they carry out in the absence of a more direct possibility of communication and a more explicit logical principle.

4. As Agostino Lombardo argues⁷, in *Antony and Cleopatra* an explicit memory of the past becomes an integral part of representation: the present is fed by the past. And it is *Julius Caesar*, written around eight years earlier, that constitutes the theatrical and historical past of *Antony and Cleopatra*. This is particularly true of the character of Antony, who in the first work is at the beginning of his great adventure and in the second is caught in the parabola of decadence and death. The beginning of the play, in which Philo and Demetrius comment on the situation of Antony, is indicative of this confrontation, and also of the presence of a theatrical memory: «you shall see in

⁷ See Agostino Lombardo (1995).

him / The triple pillar of the world transformed / Into a strumpet's fool» (I.i.11-13). Antony's memory of the past is also an integral part of the conscience of his antagonist, Octavius, who, at the announcement of the death of Antony, pronounces the final words: «No grave upon the earth shall clip in it / A pair so famous» (V.ii.357-58).

Antony's memory is constantly active: although immersed in the present, in his passion for Cleopatra, he always retains a memory of his past. Whereas at times he seems to radically refuse the past – such as when he says that Rome can melt into the Tiber since his space is in Egypt – his «Roman thought», as Cleopatra defines it, often returns, manifesting itself not only as a sense of duty, but also, and above all, as a secret aspiration to rediscover his lost self. From this point on the external conflict is between him and Octavius, but the internal conflict is between the declining Antony of the present and the heroic Antony of the past. And so Antony's tragedy can be defined as a tragedy of memory, and it will be through the thought of death that he will pursue the memory of himself. His noble death is his attempt to reconquer that greatness that he was unable to revive, asking Eros to kill him (IV.xv.55-62). However, even this is difficult: Eros kills himself and Antony isn't able to complete the final act. But this process of recuperating the past is even stronger in Cleopatra, whose words at the death of the man she loves represent an attempt to recreate the Antony of the past (IV.xvi.61-69). And this is also evidenced in her conversation with Dolabella, when her memory of Antony is transfigured into an image that isn't simply heroic but divine: the present is annulled and words give space to that absolute which Antony was unable to attain while alive. This is what Cleopatra says, her words connecting the theme of memory with that of art: «Nature wants stuff / To vie strange forms with Fancy, yet t' imagine / An Antony were nature's piece 'gainst Fancy / Condemning shadows quite» (V.ii.97-100).

It is at this point, when her memory has sharpened, that Cleopatra asks to be dressed as a queen in order to return to the Cydnus. Thus

she also constantly remembers the Cleopatra of the past, whose great beauty she sees is now in decline. If Antony hoped to return to the past to reconquer lost beauty, Cleopatra knows that the decline that the passing years bring is irremediable, such that her death is not, as with Antony, an instrument to recuperate the past, but to abolish time: by dying, she kills memory. With Cleopatra's death, there is no more past, nor present, nor future, since her death is liberation from every memory.

The theme of art is present throughout Shakespeare's *oeuvre*, since his search for the absolute is one and the same as his search for the artist. It is in *Antony and Cleopatra* that this theme seems to have most force and intensity, adding to the other themes of war, love and death. The theatrical dimension is present throughout the action and is often confused with the real dimension. This is particularly evident in the character of Cleopatra, who, even in her most serious and passionate moments, is always conscious of playing a role. In the final scene, the refusal of her destiny as a slave of the Roman victors is expressed by her assuming the part of the tragic heroine, true queen both in life and on the stage. Turning to her «women» she tells them to dress her as a queen because she has to meet Mark Antony again on the Cydnus (V.ii.227-29). And it is also as a queen that she awaits her end, after getting a snake to bite her. This theatrical dimension also characterises Antony who, unlike his character in *Julius Caesar*, is, like Othello, now declining in the «vale of years». But unlike Cleopatra he tries to reconstruct his lost greatness with words, substituting the word for reality, constructing himself as a person that he knows he no longer is; in short, substituting theatre for reality. But, as we have seen, also unlike Cleopatra, in Antony there is still a remainder between illusion and reality. However, the greatness that Antony acquires after death is given to him through the Cleopatra's words, as shown in her conversation with Dolabella. And, as Lombardo⁸ writes, through the words of Cleopatra, who is

⁸ See Lombardo (1995).

no longer only «performer» but also «artist», we enter into a world of artistic creation, a world of which Cleopatra is the symbol⁹.

Enobarbus, who defines Cleopatra as a «wonderful piece of work» (I.ii.152-53), describes the first meeting between Antony and the Queen of Egypt on the Cydnus. By giving her the status of a work of art (II.ii.198ff.) he affirms that she cannot be consumed by time: «Age cannot wither her» (II.ii.242). Although it is true that she is a work of art, this work is impossible to describe: it is a mystery that not even the artist can completely capture, as shown by the fact that Cleopatra's features are not identified and Enobarbus isn't able to describe her face¹⁰. Enobarbus is the artist, or rather the poet, that observes and reports what happens to Antony and Cleopatra, participating to such an extent that he loses his life with them and before them. Enobarbus plays an already established role in Shakespearean theatre, that of a witness and ironic commentator on events in which he is also deeply involved¹¹. His role is similar to that of the Fool in *King Lear*, but must not be confused with that of the clown. The latter role instead appears in the final scene of *Antony and Cleopatra* in the figure of the farmer who gives Cleopatra the snake and introduces comic language to the most tragic moment of the drama, not to relieve the tension, but to exacerbate it through a play of contrasts. This is a fine example of setting up an anti-climax in order to accentuate the intensity of the tragic moment.

This play is both a great love tragedy and a political tragedy. No Shakespearean work is univocal; they are always polyphonic. Art is one of the most important themes in the universe of *Antony and Cleopatra*, and the erotic dimension also

becomes artistic expression. But it is precisely the absolute of this expression that is impossible to reach, in particular for Antony, whose approach towards the continually denied possession of Cleopatra is one and the same as approaching death. The fact that he drags himself towards Cleopatra shortly before he dies demonstrates the impossibility of reaching in life the object of his desire: only when Cleopatra also dies can the two lovers find the absolute that they were searching for. That «new heaven» and «new earth», evoked by Antony in the first scene and searched for throughout the play, are to be found in the mausoleum in which Octavius orders that they are laid alone. Precisely because art aims at the absolute, its cypher is death, a testimony to the fact that art is related to human finiteness. And as art is witness to man immersed in time, so too beauty is never given as something absolute and eternal, but also always as immersed in time. Enobarbus, who knows how to glimpse the truth behind appearance, also uses art to save a reality that he, as an artist, knows is perishable. For him, the Cleopatra of his memory and also the Cleopatra he creates are both beauty and art, precisely in their being marked by time. As Freud writes in his essay, *On Transience*, the beauty of a flower is not lessened because it is consumed by time, since that beauty can exist only *in* time. Furthermore we will never know Cleopatra's face: only Antony will see it in its eternity, in the mausoleum, in a space that is closed off from all others. Shakespeare tells us that the final vision of the artist cannot be said or depicted: the ultimate truth remains secret, entrusted to the mausoleum¹². If every work remains incomplete it is because it contains an indecipherable white space.

5. There is no point in searching Shakespeare's works for a logical causality that isn't there. Not only do actions rarely follow each other in a linear fashion, but his characters often behave in

⁹ On the «art-reality» nexus in *Antony and Cleopatra*, with an emphasis on Shakespeare's ability to stage reality by highlighting its ambiguity, contrast and complexity, see the insightful observations of R. A. Logan (2005: 153-174).

¹⁰ On the identification of the figure of Cleopatra with a work of art see M. A. Tassi (2005: 291-307).

¹¹ On the character of Enobarbus see Agostino Lombardo (1971: 11-41).

¹² On the «Monument» scene and its ability to shed light on the tragic meaning of the play see D. Bevington (2005: 95-110).

contradictory ways. This can be seen in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Othello*, in which the characters' decisions never seem to respond to a logical principle. The meaning that the battle of Actium assumes in *Antony and Cleopatra* is a good example of this¹³. While the battle between Octavius and Antony is being prepared along the Greek coast, Cleopatra wants to rediscover her «nobility», and decides to take command of her ships. But she soon sees that this was the wrong decision, for it is based on values that she couldn't really want either for herself or for Antony. And so suddenly and in full combat, when the result of the battle is still uncertain, she turns her great ship *Antoniad* around and returns to Egypt with all sixty of her fleet. Only if we understand what is at play for Cleopatra at Actium can we see that this departure – apparently devoid of reason – is based on her real fear of losing what gives value to her life, and, as a consequence, the reawakening of a strong, desperate hope. For Antony to comprehend the meaning of this decision she has to trust in his «feeling» and not in his «understanding», because if the latter prevailed he could do nothing but hate her. We can see this in the dialogue that follows the battle of Actium:

ANTONY

*O, whither hast thou led me, Egypt? See
How I convey my shame out of thine eyes,
By looking back what I have left behind
'Stroyed in dishonour.*

CLEOPATRA

*O my lord, my lord,
Forgive my fearful sails! I little thought
You would have followed.*

ANTONY

*Egypt, thou knew'st too well
My heart was to thy rudder tied by the strings,
And thou shouldst tow me after. O'er my spirit
Thy full supremacy thou knew'st, and that
Thy beck might from the bidding of the gods
Command me.*

[...]

You did know

*How much you were my conqueror, and that
My sword, made weak by my affection, would
Obey it on all cause.*

CLEOPATRA

Pardon, pardon!

ANTONY

*Fall not a tear, I say: one of them rates
All that is won and lost. Give me a kiss –
(He kisses Cleopatra)*

Even this repays me. (III.xi.50-70)

It seems that Antony did understand and that feeling, *pathos*, prevailed over *logos*. At this point a new plan of action is seen opening up, a future in which the two protagonists could become closer to one another. So again the action doesn't seem to be dominated by logic. As in all of his plays, in *Antony and Cleopatra* Shakespeare wants to observe society as it is, without constructing utopias. This means that in the play the romantic relationship between Antony and Cleopatra faces further upheaval. Antony continues to take part in external events, suggesting that after Actium his conscience is more agitated than changed. Without pausing for thought he desperately throws himself into pursuing Cleopatra. He has a revelation in which he suddenly understands the capacity that a romantic relationship has to reveal the futility of what had previously seemed important in life, and in particular in the life of a ruler. But soon he finds himself again caught up in his habitual contradictions: his feelings of «honour» and of «glory» are reaffirmed, and all the more violently when his desertion of the battle is condemned by military men and politicians. It is this feeling of lost honour that makes him forget what he seemed to have previously understood. This means he interprets Cleopatra's «call» at Actium not for what it was – an act of loyalty based on what she expected from their love – but as a betrayal based both on cynical heroism seeking profit from Octavius, who is a new Caesar to seduce, and on the irresponsible nature of women. Antony constantly wavers between his uncontrollable passion for Cleopatra and these negative feelings that make him hate her.

Cleopatra's behaviour, on the other hand,

¹³ For more on this see Yves Bonnefoy (2014: 264-310).

reveals that she is becoming aware of the new situation. And even if the woman that she was still survives – she who admires Mars, the God of War, in Antony, who, although aging, still plays with his armour as he once did with his sword – she understands that the time has come to prepare herself for the supreme moment of revealing the truth to Antony. By discovering their true values, he can become conscious of what life – «true life» – is, purifying his love of its disastrous prejudices, and allowing it to live fully, even if only for an hour, and die saved. But to do this Cleopatra must learn to dominate her capricious nature and that behaviour which men expect of women. As she says to Octavius: «I [...] do confess I have / Been laden with like frailties which before / Have often shamed our sex» (V.ii.121-24). Doing away with these frailties is simply another way of confronting death, searching in the absolute for a way to break all those heavy chains that until that moment had impeded even the Queen of Egypt in her journey both towards herself and towards the other. Hers is an accepted death, a suicide the Egyptian way, since in *Antony and Cleopatra* another way to die is also posited several times.

A «Roman style» suicide happens inside a society whose principles and values are not called into question by the act: Brutus, in *Julius Caesar*, is ready to die voluntarily not because the context around him lacks meaning, but to give truth to the laws of the Republic. Cleopatra's Egyptian suicide, on the other hand, refuses the existing social structures to enter a wider reality. And so if a Roman suicide is death's victory, the Egyptian suicide is life's witness. After Actium Cleopatra tries to rediscover and be at one with her «nobility» by accepting that death which until then she was frightened of. She accepts death, therefore, in order to enter supreme liberty. However, her spiritual development, which could lift the veil from Antony's eyes if only he knew how to recognise it in her, is not easy to achieve in a world full of prejudices. Thus Shakespeare shows that the misunderstandings persist and become increasingly painful.

After Actium, Antony, although wavering, continues to interpret Cleopatra's abandonment of

the battle as the loss of his honour and glory. And when Octavius sends a messenger to Cleopatra to enjoin her to chase Antony out of Egypt or kill him – to which the queen pretends to listen with reverence, allowing him to kiss her hand – Antony immediately interprets the situation in the most offensive way: «I found you as a morsel, cold upon / Dead Caesar's trencher – nay, you were a fragment / Of Gneius Pompey's» (III.xiii.117-19). And when in a second naval battle Cleopatra's ships retreat again, Antony, without trying to understand her reasoning, exclaims:

*All is lost!
This foul Egyptian hath betrayed me.
My fleet hath yielded to the foe, and yonder
They cast their caps up, and carouse together
Like friends long lost. Triple-turned whore! 'Tis thou
Hast sold me to this novice, and my heart
Makes only wars on thee. Bid them all fly –
For when I am revenged upon my charm,
I have done all. (IV.xiii.9-17)*

And: «The witch shall die! / To the young Roman boy she hath sold me, and I fall / Under this plot – she dies for't. – Eros, ho!» (IV.xiii.47-49).

This is without doubt the most dramatic moment in their long relationship, but it is also the moment in which she dreams up the ploy that will permit her to make an opening towards what is really valuable for Antony, using the love that he has always had for her as leverage. And so, when Charmian puts forward the idea that, due to the danger that the queen could be assassinated, it would be good if she shut herself in the «monument» – the mausoleum – and told her lover that she was dead, Cleopatra immediately takes it up, but completes it with a particular that will completely change its meaning, and which will be decisive. She makes Mardian, the eunuch sent to Antony, say that the queen is dead and that «The last she spake / Was 'Antony, most noble Antony!» (IV.xv.29-30), which she repeated as she died. All of this is based on Cleopatra's fear that the great exchange, dreamt up by her under the absolute sign of death, could vanish if Antony

found her while in a fit of rage. She must trigger a supreme realisation in him, representing from afar the act which, in the depths of her being, he knows she will have to accomplish. She hopes that Antony, hearing of her death, will feel so much pain that he will also want to die, making absolute that moment of recognising the other, and giving it an epiphanic character: he will die saved, and perhaps Cleopatra will have time to share his final moments with him. Only in this way can there be liberation from contingency and chance, and can the tragedy reach its end. At the news of Cleopatra's death, Antony exclaims:

*Dead, then?
[...]
Unarm, Eros [...].
[...]
I will oërtake thee, Cleopatra, and
Weep for my pardon. [...]
Eros! – I come, my queen. – Eros! – Stay for me.
Where souls do couch on flowers, we'll hand in hand,
And with our sprightly port make the ghosts gaze.
Dido and her Aeneas shall want troops,
And all the haunt be ours. (IV.xiv.34-54)*

He demands Cleopatra's pardon for his deceptions and lies, and claims that he no longer wants to live in the 'nocturnal' dimension. However his words also demonstrate the hope that there will be another day and another place which will offer a life truly shared with the woman who, up until then, he only loved in ambivalence and fear. He discovers what life could be in the moment that his time on earth is over, which is precisely the transformation that Cleopatra desired in him. He pays tribute to her with words which she had been longing to hear: he evokes her courage, lauds the nobility of her spirit and then imagines her saying to Octavius: «I am conqueror of myself» (IV.xv.62). Thus he sees that she knows how to liberate herself from the psychic slavery to which Octavius's world reduces women. Antony also confides in Eros, saying that after the death of Cleopatra life for him could be nothing but «dishonour» since nothing has any sense when faced with this great example of a true life (see

IV.xv.55-62). Antony is now another man, a new man, at the point of being persuaded that, to commit suicide now, with these new thoughts in his mind, he could also escape the power of Octavius, and escape in a way that he couldn't previously: in body, but above all in spirit.

However, in a sort of heterogony of ends, Antony's suicide, even if it has to be tragic – because in stopping time it realises the absolute – becomes grotesque. This emerges from the request that Antony makes of Eros:

*Thou art sworn, Eros,
That when the exigent should come – which now
Is come indeed – when I should see behind me
Th'inevitable prosecution of
Disgrace and horror, that on my command,
Thou then wouldst kill me. Do't – the time is come.
Thou strik'st not me; 'tis Caesar thou defeat'st.
Put colour in thy cheek. (IV.xv.62-69)*

*But, straight after Eros commits suicide rather than
kill Antony, Antony says:*

*Thrice nobler than myself,
Thou teachest me, O valiant Eros, what
I should and thou couldst not. My queen and Eros
Have by their brave instruction got upon me
A nobleness in record. But I will be
A bridegroom in my death, and run into't
As to a lover's bed. Come then – and Eros,
Thy master dies thy scholar: to do thus
I learned of thee. (IV.xv.95-103)*

Antony throws himself on his sword but doesn't die, and shouts: «How, not dead? Not dead? / The guard, ho! O, dispatch me!» (IV. xv.103-04). But no-one wants to kill him, and so he drags his wounded body around until the arrival of Diomedes, sent by Cleopatra, who tells him that the queen is not dead but

*Locked in her monument. She had a prophesying fear
Of what hath come to pass; for when she saw –
Which never shall be found – you did suspect
She had disposed with Caesar, and that your rage
Would not be purged, she sent you word she was
dead.*

*But, fearing since how it might work, hath sent
Me to proclaim the truth; and I am come,
I dread, too late. (IV.xv.121-28)*

At this point Antony calls his guards, who hadn't wanted to put an end to his misery, and tells them to carry him to Cleopatra's mausoleum. Once there he is carried to the area where Cleopatra had sought refuge. We must not expect Antony, while he takes his last breaths, to use words that explicitly express the intimacy of their final hour together, or give us a clearer view of the meaning of life. Shakespeare is too much of a poet not to know that real meaning can only be given in an elusive and paradoxical way. It is more moving to show that Antony worries about what could happen to Cleopatra, indicating to her those people he thought she could trust. The true exchange happens in silence, and is more profound: both in their kiss, a pathetic refrain of that which Antony desired after Actium; and in Cleopatra's fainting after his death, from which she awakens transformed. She is the «Queen of Egypt» and Iras bows down to her using this name. But, recovered, Cleopatra responds: «No more but e'en a woman, and commanded / By such poor passion as the maid that milks / And does the meanest chares» (IV.xvi.74-76). And she still feels responsible for the effect the announcement of her suicide had on Antony. Now we will analyse the meeting between Antony and Cleopatra in the mausoleum, this place that, separated from the rest of the world, assumes a character of absoluteness:

CLEOPATRA
O sun,
Burn the great sphere thou movest in; darkling stand
The varying shore o'th'world! O Antony,
Antony, Antony! Help, Charmian!
Help, Iras, help! Help, friends below!
Let's draw him hither.

ANTONY
Peace!
Not Caesar's valour hath oerthrown Antony,
But Antony's hath triumphed on itself.

CLEOPATRA
So it should be, that none but Antony

Should conquer Antony, but woe 'tis so.

ANTONY
I am dying, Egypt, dying – only
I here importune death awhile, until
Of many thousand kisses the poor last
I lay up thy lips.

CLEOPATRA
I dare not, dear, –
Dear my lord, pardon – I dare not,
Lest I be taken. Not th'imperious show
Of the full-fortuned Caesar ever shall
Be brooch'd with me, if knife, drugs, serpents, have
Edge, sting, or operation. I am safe.
Your wife, Octavia, with her modest eyes,
And still conclusion, shall acquire no honour
Demuring upon me. But come, come, Antony –
Help me, my women – we must draw thee up.
Assist, good friends.

Antony
O, quick, or I am gone!

CLEOPATRA
Here's sport indeed! How heavy weighs my lord!
Our strength is all gone into heaviness –
That makes the weight. Had I great Juno's power,
The strong-wing'd Mercury should fetch thee up
And set thee by Jove's side. Yet come a little –
Wishers were ever fools – O, come, come, come.
They heave Antony aloft to Cleopatra
And welcome, welcome! Die when thou hast lived!
Quicken with kissing! Had my lips that power,
Thus would I wear them out.

[...]

ANTONY
One word, sweet queen:
Of Caesar seek your honour with your safety – O!

CLEOPATRA
They do not go together.

ANTONY
Gentle, hear me:
None about Caesar trust but Proculeius.

CLEOPATRA
My resolution and my hands I'll trust –
None about Caesar.

ANTONY
The miserable change now at my end
Lament nor sorrow at, but please your thoughts
In feeding them with those my former fortunes,
Wherein I lived, the greatest prince o'th'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. Now my spirit is going,
I can no more.*

CLEOPATRA

*Noblest of men, woot dye?
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'thearth doth melt.*

Antony dies

My lord?

*O, withered is the garland of the war,
The soldiers' pole is fall'n – young boys and girls
Are level now with men, the odds is gone,
And there is nothing left remarkable
Beneath the visiting moon. (IV.xvi.10-69)*

The fifth act offers Shakespeare the chance to prove both Cleopatra's determination and the strength of her «nobility». Octavius, in order to triumph, wants Cleopatra alive and so tries to stop her from killing herself by giving assurances for her son Caesarion. In a bitterly ironic move, Cleopatra tricks Octavius into believing that she is too much of a woman – or at least too much of a woman as Octavius understands women – to seriously think of death. Pretending to be attached to jewels – «lady trifles» – she says, «I [...] do confess I have / Been laden with like frailties which before / Have often shamed our sex» (V-.ii.121-24). She puts on an act for him, appearing to get caught up in a flagrant show of deception, and reacts childishly to the servant who accuses her. Thus Octavius retreats feeling reassured: «Feed and sleep: / Our care and pity is so much upon you / That we remain your friend; and so adieu» (V.ii.187-89). Cleopatra now knows she has time to receive the basket of figs which, unbeknownst to her enemies, contains a fatal weapon.

The death of Cleopatra is one of the greatest moments in Shakespeare's work: it isn't the playwright who is the poet in this final scene, but Cleopatra herself, whom he recognised as a woman, but as a woman capable of existing beyond those prejudices that too often have plagued the

female gender. Cleopatra now says confidently, her words heavy with emotion: «Show me, my women, like a queen. Go fetch / My best attires. I am again for Cydnus / To meet Mark Antony» (V.ii.227-29). This relates to the first meeting on the Cydnus when Cleopatra wanted to present only an artificial impression of herself, using artfulness to seduce Antony. In order to conquer a man that she didn't love anymore and perhaps thought she would never love, the queen hides the true person that perhaps she already was or would have been one day. So she plays with the role that was attributed to women in the Elizabethan theatre, and succeeds in making Antony fall completely in love with her. Enobarbus is testimony to this, and, when describing that meeting, presents Cleopatra as a true work of art, thus able to challenge time. And if previously he said to Antony, after he curses the day in which he saw her, «O sir, you had then left unseen a wonderful piece of work, which not to have been blest withal, would have discredited your travel» (I.ii.152-54), afterwards he describes the meeting on the Cydnus as one might describe a mythological scene, where the human transforms into the divine and reality acquires an imaginary dimension, reaching the conclusion that: «other women cloy / The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry / Where most she satisfies; for vilest things / Become themselves in her, that the holy priests / Bless her when she is riggish» (II.ii.243-47).

But time has passed and love has grown between these two great characters who previously had only plans and ambitions. When Cleopatra, in this new stage of her life, remembers that first meeting, she recognises the original sin of their relationship in the silk, the perfumes and the music that hid that reality that now, at the end, is the only true reality even for Antony. As Cleopatra recognises, she is now «wrinkled deep in time» (I.v.29). There is therefore a return to the Cydnus which Cleopatra, now older, considers a restoration of the illusions and the superficial and false relations that were there at the origin of their relationship, and that must now constitute the basis of an authentic relationship between her and Antony.

This is a return in which she again appears in all her beauty and in her jewellery – the «weakness» which she had mentioned to Octavius – because now she understands its meaning: jewellery is not an instrument of illusion and attraction, but a sign that shows how she, still beautiful, intends to be sovereign of her being and of her destiny. This is why she makes Iras and Charmian carry the crown, a metaphor for that regality which is the only non-illusory dimension.

And it is not only for Antony that Cleopatra wears the cape and crown that give solemnity to her self-conquest. In front of the entire society of which Octavius is the representative, she wants to affirm that meaning which is nothing other than the freedom she lacked when she was queen in a world in which only the desire for power dominated. Thus the meaning which she had searched for in vain all her life is finally manifested in the monument. To this one must add Cleopatra's fear – expressed when she is almost ready to go – of being taken to Rome as Octavius's «prize», where she would have been presented to the crowd, and singers and comedians would have caricatured what Antony and her were to each other. If she understandably fears this prospect, it is not simply because she would have been violated, but because the condition of women would be being sneered at. With her absence from Octavius's triumphal procession, Cleopatra has reason to feel victorious, even if this means sacrificing her life.

And her emotions are again rekindled when, after she is given the basket of figs with the snake that would later kill her, we hear her exclaim:

*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.282-89)*

In these verses there is the expression of a thought that, in showing the essential finitude of the human being, reopens the world to the gaze of

poetry. For it is poetry alone that allows us to hear the unsayable in the sayable, allowing us to share in that absolute which only silence can communicate.

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