

Antony and Cleopatra in Performance

Introduction: Draft

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1. Two epitomes

Her Herculean is Roman dead. She's been surprised by Caesar's thugs in the monument she thought impregnable and backed against a wall where she can read the writing on it. So now what?

From the desolation facing her Cleopatra turns to fabulous distraction. She performs an act of memorial reconstruction:

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

Ignoring attempts at interruption ('If it might please ye'; 'Most sovereign creature'), and under the sign of the dream-god Morpheus who admits metamorphosis, Cleopatra makes her man more than a god, a proxy for the known universe:

His face was as the heav'ns, and therein stuck
A sun and moon, which kept their course and lighted
The little O, the earth.

She bodies forth this Antony in a monumental blazon: 'His legs bestrid the ocean; his reared arm /Crested the world. His voice... / ... his bounty/ ... His delights/ ... his livery...' Pausing to check the truth-content of her imagining,

Think you there was, or might be, such a man
As this I dreamt of?,

she rounds on Dolabella's 'Gentle madam, no' by denying the very incredulity she invited —

You lie, up to the hearing of the gods! —

then instantly capitulates to her own gain-saying, hedged in by hypotheticals:

But if there be, nor ever were one such
It's past the size of dreaming.

Was Antony real? Illusion? Imagination? Flesh and blood? Lie? Is she remembering? Or fantasising? Cleopatra defers to sententiousness:

Nature wants stuff
To vie strange forms with fancy.

That's true. A truth Cleopatra's own history has demonstrated, at Cydnus, on a barge that 'Burned on the water', where in her person she showed 'The fancy outwork nature'. But the moment it's offered, this truth is withdrawn, the superior creativity of the imagination contradicted in a conclusion that explodes the separate categories of 'nature' and 'fancy' simultaneously to unmake and make Antony mortal:

Yet t' imagine
An Antony were nature's piece 'gainst fancy,
Condemning shadows quite.

In short, the Antony Cleopatra makes is an oxymoron, the rhetorical trope linking opposites that says (from one angle or the other) 'You lie!', and I dwell on her exchange with Dolabella to offer it at the beginning of this book as an epitome of the whole play. From the outset, this is a play that traffics in oxymorons. Its regular business is to 'make defect perfection', to 'approve the common liar'.

But something else is going on in this exchange. It, too, epitomises the play. For Cleopatra's memorial turn operates as narrative cover-story for another kind of 'turn' that she is performing as she tells her dream. Turning Antony into a monument, Cleopatra is turning Dolabella into a traitor. Cleopatra is Rome's captive, but she takes this latest Roman captive (like how many before him?) to perform upon him a seduction. Dolabella is the officer of Caesar's right hand sent to assume command from Proculeius whose order was to take the queen alive, to tell her lies ('say / We purpose her no shame') to prevent the 'mortal stroke' that would 'defeat us' — Caesar — in the career-defining spectacle of humiliation he's giddily imagining: 'her life in Rome / Would be eternal in our triumph'. Dolabella enters 5.2 Caesar's man. He leaves it Cleopatra's servant, not just giving the game away ('He'll lead me then in triumph'; 'Madam, he will. I know 't') so that Cleopatra sees through Caesar's subsequent hypocrisies ('we intend so to dispose you as / Yourself shall give us counsel'; 'He words me, girls, he words me'); but returning to betray Caesar's secret marching orders:

I tell you this: Caesar through Syria
Intends his journey, and within three days
You with your children will he send before.

He's a man who's tangled in Cleopatra's 'toil', whose new 'religion' is obedience to her 'pleasure'. And he knows exactly what he's doing:

Make your best use of this.

From now on Dolabella will play at 'Roman thought[s]': 'I must attend on Caesar.' But he'll perform Egyptian business. His beguiled 'Sir' will never penetrate his deception. It's Dolabella, ironically, who will be assigned, in the last lines of the

play, the play's final memorial turn, to arrange the funerals of Antony and Cleopatra, ('Come, Dolabella, see / High order in this great solemnity'), a grave, Caesar thinks, but spectators know will be a site of infinite play, 'play til Doomsday'.

What, then, do these two epitomes give us? A play whose discursive business is to 'approve the common liar'. A play whose performative business is the same, to play scenes 'of excellent dissembling' that 'look / Like perfect honour' but dissemble nevertheless. To borrow from *Macbeth*, a play in speech and act that 'lies like truth'. A play that constantly wrong-foots itself.

It is this last quality, I think, that most challenges *Antony and Cleopatra* in performance. How do you play a play that stages epic history but subjects it (also) to a hard-boiled running revisionist commentary, that maps out a global structure but fills it with content that is frankly farcical? How do you play myths like Antony, Cleopatra, and Caesar, daunting enough if it were only their iconic celebrity to take on, but here selves constituted (also) of their opposites? As Cleopatra says of Antony, 'one way' he's 'painted ... like a Gorgon', 'The other way 's a Mars'. So, too, Cleopatra. One way she's 'rare', the other 'riggish'. And Caesar. 'Sole sir of the world' one way, the other, puny, priggish 'boy'.

The aim of this book is to see how performance has responded to the challenge Shakespeare sets it in *Antony and Cleopatra*, beginning with an opening chapter that attempts to locate the play in its original Jacobean moment.

In the chapters that follow, taking it for granted that Shakespeare's plays 'mean' in performance, indeed, *only* but never *finally* 'mean' in performance, and that his plays are material for continuous cultural self-fashioning, each generation seeing itself in Shakespeare so that his plays (as Hamlet puts it) really do show 'the very age and body of the time' its 'form and pressure', I will look at productions across four hundred years to see what meanings, what fashionings, have emerged as *Antony and Cleopatra* has been re-imagined by actors, directors, and designers, and staged for new audiences bringing new eyes to its performance.

It's a performance history that begins as if mimicking its characteristic trope. It begins, that is, with theatrical wrong-footing. For after its first Jacobean performances, the play appears to have dropped off the stage for a century and a half. There is no record (except for six disastrous performances by David Garrick in 1759) of Shakespeare's play in the theatre until 1849, and then only in radically cut and re-arranged versions. The Restoration didn't know what to make of *Antony and Cleopatra*. They performed John Dryden's *All for Love* instead, and as late as the 1830s what passed for *Antony and Cleopatra* was actually a mash-up of Dryden's play and Shakespeare's. If the Victorian theatre used Shakespeare's text, it used it as a pretext for staging its own imperialist fascination with Egyptology, archaeology and antiquarianism, played out with casts of hundreds and a text adapted to accommodate scene changes that made lavishly illusionist settings the background to glittering processions, 'authentic' bacchic rituals, oriental ballets, projections of dissolving sphinxes, and, most sensationally, the arrival of Cleopatra and her lover on her barge, a stage history

that peaked with Lillie Langtry's Cleopatra in 1890 and had run its course by the time of Beerbohm Tree's 'play pictorial' staging in 1906. It wasn't until the 1920s when the writings of Harley Granville-Barker — in his *Prefaces* — took hold of directors like William Bridges-Adams at the Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon (ironically abetted by austerity measures thrust onto the cultural industries by the Great Depression) that something very like the play Shakespeare wrote returned to the theatre.

This eventful history from Dryden to Bridges-Adams has been accounted for elsewhere and admirably in Richard Madelaine's *Antony and Cleopatra* and Barbara Hodgdon's *The Shakespeare Trade* and will only briefly be recapitulated here. For my purposes, the modern history of *Antony and Cleopatra* in performance, which is also a history of its earlier histories partly remembered, not least (as we will see) in traces like Cleopatra's 'authentic' red hair and costumes after Veronese or Tutankhamun, begins in 1953, at the Memorial Theatre in Stratford, directed by Glen Byam Shaw with Peggy Ashcroft as Cleopatra, Michael Redgrave as Antony, and Marius Goring as Caesar.

Before turning to *Antony and Cleopatra* in performance, however, I want in this Introduction to tease out from Shakespeare's writing a little more of the quality he builds into the theatrical DNA of this play, what I'm calling 'wrong-footing', to instance more of how this play operates as a theatre machine. *Antony and Cleopatra* gives every director, designer and company of actors who tackles it the same set of problems to solve (and opportunities to explore). In the chapters that follow, we will see them working them out. Here, I want to anticipate their struggles under four headings: dramatic structure; scenic writing; character and casting; and six deaths.

2. Dramatic structure

In or about 1606, in or about the third year of James I's reign (King James having Caesarean aspirations, styling himself at his coronation the 'new Augustus'), Shakespeare returned to Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* to write a sequel to *Julius Caesar* (1599), to follow the story after Philippi, to see how the triumvirate who'd so efficiently mopped up the bloodbath of Caesar's assassination, who'd picked off enemies and routed the conspirators, managed the peace.¹ That play fell neatly into two halves, 'jaw-jaw, war-war', set tidily in two locations: a play built on handsome symmetries, two murders (one at the hands of politically motivated republican conspirators, the other, the mindless

¹ On the date of *Antony and Cleopatra* I follow J. Leeds Barroll, in *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare's Theatre: The Stuart Years* Cornell University Press (1991), 151-171. 'The Chronology of Shakespeare's Jacobean Plays and the Dating of *Antony and Cleopatra*' in Gordon Ross Smith (ed.) *Essays on Shakespeare* (1965), 115-62, supported with contemporary evidence in the 1607 revision of Samuel Daniel's *The Tragedy of Cleopatra* (1593) that appears to quote from Shakespeare in business attached to Antony's death. E.K. Chambers, 1607: 'in fact largely rewritten, perhaps under the stimulus of the production of Shakespeare's A&C' (2: 275).

mob), two funeral orations; the eerie grave-opening storm in the first half echoed by the tent-haunting scene in the second. A formal play where characters spoke textbook oratory ('It must be by his death'; 'Friends, Romans, countrymen').

The sequel was altogether less measured. Indeed, 'measure' was in its iconoclastic sights from the play's opening speech.

From the *Life of Mark Antony* Shakespeare wrote a play that both used (sometimes word for word) and confounded Plutarch's history, particularly Plutarch's view of Cleopatra. It's almost as if Shakespeare following Plutarch applied the notion of the 'parallel life' to Antony himself, writing two Antonies, the Roman, the Egyptian, and a double life for him in the play, one authored squarely Roman, the other promiscuously Alexandrian. Taking the events of some dozen years sprawled across the 'ranged empire', Shakespeare made no concessions to the map but framed the action in a narrative seemingly lasting days, employing a kind of time-lapse technique to synchronise two clocks, the one trying to keep breathlessly up with Roman imperial ambitions, the other slowed to the half-pace of Alexandrian doldrums. In the Roman scenes of the first three acts, the play travels across time and space from Alexandria to Rome to Parthia, Misenum, Athens and back again. It brings the triple pillars of the world (Caesar, Antony, Lepidus) to a summit meeting, negotiates factions into alliance, spends a gaudy night in boys' own drunkenness on Pompey's galley, makes a political marriage (and wrecks it), then summarily disposes of allies and wife and liquidates rivals. Meanwhile, in intercutting scenes, it returns the focus three times to Alexandria to play out, as it were frame by frame, one slow motion sequence in Egypt's quotidian domestic history that sees the notoriously unmarried queen taking the news of her just-widowed lover's remarriage. Even as Shakespeare constructs a world 'past the size of dreaming' in *Antony and Cleopatra* he cuts it down to size. In Act 3, the battle that changed the course of western history — Actium — is heard as 'noises off'. (What spectators see staged as its proxy is an unseemly squabble about whether Cleopatra should lead her troops or not, which ends in a smutty joke.) The love affair whose 'bourn', it's said in Act 1, 'needs find out new heaven, new earth' shows itself first in scenes of maddening teases then in increasingly sour, savage wrangles. (Antony found the mood-swinging Cleopatra 'Whom everything becomes — to chide, to laugh, / To weep' fascinating in Act 1. In Act 3 such 'becoming' makes her a 'boggler'.) The 'death of the hero' moment that tragedy looks to for its generic culmination — compare *Julius Caesar* — is a botched farce made more grotesque when the trussed-up body is raised cack-handedly into Cleopatra's monument, and it comes, anti-climactically, long before the end. Wrong-footing on a grand scale.

And then, structurally, in Act 5 Shakespeare does something extraordinary. He hands the play to Cleopatra. Reacting to Plutarch, who disposes of Cleopatra in a few paragraphs ('Her death was sudden'), he writes a final scene of some 430 lines, nothing remotely approaching it earlier in the play, that never takes the focus off the queen and that manages, pushing relentlessly toward the inevitable ending that history records, to dice with an alternative ending. Astonishingly, he makes the suspenseful question of the play's last act 'What is Cleopatra going to

do?' and so audaciously keeps the dramatic tension strung to breaking point as he, the playwright, looks set to wrong-foot history: to tell historian Plutarch 'you lie!' In 4.15, her Antony a bloody corpse dead in her lap, she seems resolved to follow him, indeed, to 'rush' after him 'into the secret house of death', to do 'what's brave, what's noble' 'after the high Roman fashion' and make 'the briefest end.' But then she tarries. Meets Caesar. Presents her household accounts. That appear to provide for a future very much alive.

Every production of *Antony and Cleopatra* is going to have to decide how to manage its emotional switchbacks and peripatetic moves, how to characterise location for instant legibility, how to negotiate the kind of kaleidoscopic scenic intercutting Shakespeare writes as continuous action in Acts 3 and 4 (given in modern textual editions as 28 scenes, some of them only four lines long), how to place its sequences of arrested story telling ('I'll tell you. The barge ... '), and how to stage its big 'production number', including taking a line on what that 'number' is showing. Shakespeare writes at least one such information-dense scene into every play: Capulet's ball in *Rome and Juliet*; the sheep shearing in *The Winter's Tale*; the wedding masque in *The Tempest*; the apparitions and show of kings in *Macbeth*; the storm in *Julius Caesar* (that anticipates 'Blow winds and crack your cheeks!' in *Lear*). Here, the big 'number' is set on Pompey's galley in 2.7. Exclusively male, exclusively Roman, it's meant to be a feast celebrating a pan-peninsular alliance. But it plays out the ruptures that will shred it. From one angle there's the politic treachery Menas proposes to Pompey, having the triumvirate at his disposal, to 'cut the cable', set the galley adrift, then 'fall to their throats'. From another, there's the distraction, played out in front of our eyes, of the kind of voluptuary pleasure imported from Egypt that un-makes Romans and corrupts their duty. The boys invite a woman on board. Absent Cleopatra is planted in the scene in her proxy, the 'strange serpent' the crocodile, who, like the queen, can only be known by reference to itself, 'shaped...like itself'. Her absence tropes the action on the ship. As the drinking 'ripens towards' 'an Alexandrian feast', and men, told to 'Be a child o' th' time', raucously belt out a tune ('battery to our ears') to 'Plumpy Bacchus' while they 'dance ... the Egyptian bacchanals', we see Romans travestied in a 'wild disguise' that, says Caesar, 'almost / Anticked us all'. Most of the Romans will survive this 'levity' with a bad hangover. The triumvirate won't. The scene spells out the 'pleasure' that 'I' th' East' for Antony 'lies', and marks in advance his Egyptian return.

3. Scenic writing

Playwriting on this scale defeated 18th century neoclassical decorum and 19th century scenic illusionism (and as I've suggested, continues to challenge textual editors, including the First Folio's, who simply gave up on its scenic arrangement one scene in). The Globe's open platform stage could take the traffic. At the Globe play was continuous and scenes changed with actors' entrances: 'Welcome to Rome'. Moreover, that stage might have been purpose-built for the particular kind of scenic writing Shakespeare does in *Antony and Cleopatra* to set up a viewing economy that enacts dramaturgic wrong-footing: scenes built on the principle of looking twice, of seeing double.

We can see the strategy in action from the opening lines of the play. Shakespeare frames the scene to be viewed first with Roman eyes in tight close-up on two men. Philo is grouching to Demetrius who, hot foot from Rome, will shortly be staggered when his messages are fobbed off. For the veteran Philo, this tour of duty in Alexandria has robbed Romans of their manhood. Egypt has 'turned' their general. They've lost him, once Mars, to 'dotage' and 'a gipsy'. 'Look where they come,' he urges, prepping Demetrius to look like a Roman, to see Antony, the 'triple pillar of the world', 'transformed / Into a strumpet's fool'. But what do spectators see? The entrance of a debauched Alexandria? Confirmation of Philo's disgust? (Shakespeare's Folio stage direction wants Cleopatra to enter '*with Eunuchs fanning her*'. How did the early modern theatre *do* eunuchs? What erotic culture, what pleasures or dangers are they there to signify?) Or do we see the entrance of a vibrant, colourful circus that confounds Philo's sour disapproval in the fun it has staging and mocking its own hyperboles ('Let Rome in Tiber melt'; 'Excellent falsehood!')? With Antony and Cleopatra now in front of us, spectators are invited to look, wide-angle, with Alexandrian eyes. From that point of view, the point of view of carnival, of revelry and sensuous indulgence, 'News from Rome—' 'Grates.' Politics is tedious, the empire paltry, so much 'dungy earth', and Caesar a tetchy nag. Is this magnificent? Or folly on a breathtaking scale? Where are Philo and Demetrius? They're watching. But from what angle? And what is their watching doing? How are spectators reading their silent faces? A mere fifty lines later, Alexandria exits and the scenic aperture closes down again. The scene ends once again in close-up on troubled Roman eyes.

This is just the first of many scenes written like this. In 2.2 the Roman generals stage their summit. They reach their politically expedient agreements. They conclude a marriage to make them brothers. Job done. But just after, the subalterns take over. They remember an earlier summit meeting, when a Roman who thought he was the star of the imperial show, instead of being attended obsequiously by the local client queen, sat 'Enthroned i' th' market-place, ... alone, / Whistling to th' air'. Then, 'Barbered ten times o'er', went to a feast where 'for his ordinary' he paid 'his heart / For what his eyes eat only'. Enobarus's tale of Cydnus brings Egypt to Rome, makes Maecenas and Agrippa, hanging on every word, look with Egyptian eyes, and situates for them a radical re-view of what's just been transacted. The Roman deal just brokered and sealed with Octavia's chaste body and with rehabilitated Antony's promise to 'keep square'? A mirage. Antony 'leave' Cleopatra 'utterly'? 'Never. He will not.' So much for 'Roman thoughts'.

Mostly these scenes of double viewing are set up to offer contesting points of view: like the opening of 2.7, fifteen lines exchanged by two of Pompey's servants, true-bred Romans to their bootstraps, that act as curtain-raiser to the riotous night of reeling drunkenness to come. To be falling-down drunk, they say, (as Lepidus is) if you're a great man (as Lepidus is supposed to be), is contemptible. You've been 'called into a huge sphere', but drunk, you're helpless 'to be seen to move in 't'. And that's like having 'holes where eyes should be, which pitifully disaster the cheeks.' So much for Alexandrian revels.

But some scenes are written so opaquely that they defy single meaning. In these scenes it's hard to fathom exactly what game's being played (*by whom to whom*), not helped by the playwright's enigmatic non-disclosures. I offer three examples.

In 2.2 there's Agrippa's stunning proposal of the marriage with Octavia to 'knit' the disaffected generals 'brothers' with 'an unslipping knot'. Surely, even if it is a 'studied' thought, it's above Agrippa's pay grade. Surely he wouldn't spring it on Caesar mid-summit, would he? (These are the kinds of 'surelies' that actors ponder in rehearsal.) The Caesar spectators have seen so far is always fully briefed. (It's almost a joke: Caesar always has to hand the self-justifying 'writings' that show 'How hardly' he is 'drawn' into this move or that.) So have Caesar and his lieutenant worked out this scheme ahead of time? Caesar's wishful thinking, 'Yet if I knew / What hoop should hold us staunch...', sounds like a rehearsed cue to Agrippa's naming the 'hoop'. But then, what's Caesar's aim? Cynical, to use his sister to bait a trap? Later, he'll reveal he has 'eyes' in Antony's household, knows Antony's thoughts before he thinks them, 'his affairs' being brought to Caesar 'on the wind'. Is Octavia acceptable collateral damage en route to world domination? But then, if Agrippa's intentions are honourable, if he's sincere about the recuperative chances of this marriage, why is he the one voyeuristically lapping up Enobarbus's tale of Cyndus that follows on in 2.2 after Antony has exited to meet his bride? Why is he the one ratcheting up the tale's salaciousness? 'O, rare for Antony!'; 'Rare Egyptian!'; 'Royal wench!' are all Agrippa's interventions, and he doesn't turn a hair when Maecenas's tight-lipped 'Now Antony must leave her utterly' is answered with Enobarbus's 'Never. He will not.'

In 3.13 there's the embassy from Caesar to Cleopatra, Thidias in 3.12 having been instructed to fake the part of ambassador, to corrupt her, to 'win' her 'From Antony':

Promise,
And in our name, what she requires; add more,
From thine invention, offers. Women are not
In their best fortunes strong, but want will perjure
The ne'er touched vestal. (3.12.33-37)

Enobarbus is on hand to hear Thidias do his message, to hear him give Cleopatra the subtly hypocritical diplomatic means to save her life by betraying Antony's, conveyed in the subtext of Caesar's message (wholly invented by Thidias) that Caesar 'knows that you embrace not Antony as you did love, but as you feared him'. And Enobarbus is there to hear her answer: 'O'. Then to hear her elaborate:

He is a god and knows
What is most right. Mine honour was not yielded,
But conquered merely. (3.13.73-75)

Enobarbus sees the scene with Roman eyes. Sees Cleopatra packing cards with Caesar. Sees, that is, the scene Caesar-the-misogynist has scripted, a scene of weak female perfidy, where Cleopatra's 'want', strung along with promises, will naturally be duped into treachery. A scene Enobarbus needs to put a stop to. He

exits, returns with Antony, then stands by grimly satisfied when Thidias is dragged off for flogging and Cleopatra is savaged: 'You have been a boggler ever'; 'I found you as a morsel cold upon / Dead Caesar's trencher...' But is Enobarbus's looking right? Is Cleopatra Caesar's stooge? Or is another scene being played here, one that Cleopatra is instantly improvising, cued by 'O' and the grotesque extravagance of 'He is a god', which makes Thidias a bit-player in Cleopatra's political carry-on? 'O' is uninterpretable until it's voiced. 'O' can make this a scene of devastating consciencelessness — or excellent dissembling. The rhetorical move that sums this scene up is 'Not know me yet?' The question is put to Antony — and wrong-foots him. He can't answer. But neither can spectators.

Finally, mid-way through 5.2, there's Seleucus, Cleopatra's treasurer, summoned to hand over the inventory of her possessions to conquering Caesar and to audit her accounts — which Seleucus tells the Roman she's falsified. She's 'kept back', he says, 'Enough to purchase what [she has] made known'. The queen flies into a rage. Attacks the 'soulless villain'. Protests only 'lady trifles' have not been inventoried. Rails against 'ingratitude'. Caesar laughs off the deception. Indeed, he approves her 'wisdom in the deed' and in a grand gesture that appears to acknowledge that she's going to be needing her cash he hands back to Cleopatra both what's been counted *and* concealed: 'Still be 't yours!' for 'Caesar's no merchant to make prize with you / Of things that merchants sold.' So who's deceiving whom in this scene? Seleucus his mistress, declaring Cleopatra's fraud? Cleopatra dead Antony, hiding a hoard she'll use to bankroll a future in a new Roman settlement? Or Cleopatra Caesar (in collusion with her treasurer?) in the materialist currency Caesar understands, presenting a faked inventory to make it look like she intends to live, so to buy herself time to arrange to die? Certainly, Caesar is lying. 'Still be 't yours'? That's a sop to fool her trust. (When news in real history of Cleopatra's capture reached Rome, bank interest rates plummeted. Romans knew Caesar had every intention of despoiling Egypt, and that the spoils would enrich Rome.) The dazzlingly tangled wrong-footings of this scene give spectators a Seleucus who's either selflessly faithful (and prepared to take a real beating to authenticate a scene of 'excellent dissembling') or a time-pleaser; a Caesar who's statesmanlike or a sleazy con-man; Cleopatra, a self-dramatising diva triple turned whore or a savvy politician, out-manoeuvring Caesar every step of the way by covering her tracks.

4. Characters and casting

There's no one way of looking at such scenes in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Or at the characters they portray: myths who 'inhabit "real" bodies' that in the act of performance 'demystify the myths they construct' (Hodgdon, 245). And it's not just the super-sized characters from history who trail the kind of notoriety that makes every subsequent celebrity couple a 'squeaking' mini-version of their full-throated passion. For actors and directors trying to measure up to them, so too do the parts Shakespeare wrote. Their citational past — not just in previous productions of Shakespeare's play but in high, mass, alternative and counter-cultural representations in theatre, painting, opera, film, marketing — has loaded them with a vast baggage of expectation. Antony and Cleopatra are

figures of history, but also of fantasy. Through them we explore not just events, world-shattering as they were, at the centre of the known world on the eve of that other world re-ordering event which the play keeps predicting, the birth of Christ. We use them to map our own psychic and erotic imaginaries. They are our 'play' space to experiment with power, politics, gender, glamour, grunge; iconoclasm, monstrosity, conformity; death. Where can we find actors to play them? One reviewer of the 1953 *Antony and Cleopatra* thought Shakespeare wrote 'the parts of the two lovers for the express purpose of ruining histrionic reputations' (*Times*, 29 April 1953). Another, calling Cleopatra 'the sum and perfection of all that men, in their worst moments, have reckoned perfection in women' concluded that the part was 'almost unplayable by mortal woman' (*Birmingham Dispatch*, 29 April 1953). Laurence Olivier called Antony a 'twerp'; Glen Byam Shaw's initial character note on the part states simply 'This man is great.'

It's not just that these roles, as I've suggested, are anamorphs, the 'gipsy' who's also the 'lass unparalleled', the 'Mars of men' who's also a sottish buffoon. It's that they are some many things also in between. John Styan, writing about the 'endless possibilities' of Shakespeare's character, long ago taught us to 'speak of the "parameter" of a part and the "tolerance" of a performance.' In *Antony and Cleopatra*, these are huge.

As Byam Shaw saw him, Caesar, who appears in 14 of the play's 43 scenes, is the character who 'develops throughout the play more than any other' (but perhaps along a relentlessly single-minded line). He's a man the audience should find 'absorbing' as they watch him 'ruthlessly cutting his way through life, with all the intelligence, egotism, cunning and capacity for work' that mark the 'brilliance of his nature'. Work: that's his ethic. It's what marks him as so completely unlike Antony. Caesar's executive efficiency is staggeringly impressive. (Witness the incredible speed of his march into Egypt.) His success is magnetic. (Witness all the followers of Antony who revolt to Caesar. Clearly, in the political play *Antony and Cleopatra*, Caesar is man of the match.) More than a politician, he's a bureaucrat. Note his attention to dispatches, to paper trails, to sound bites. His face, Byam Shaw thought, should have a 'mask-like quality': the face of a poker player? And 'when he smiles one feels it comes from the brain & not the heart'. Caesar is never more opaque than when he's brokering his sister's marriage; never more foolish than when he's po-facedly resisting inebriation on Pompey's galley; never more attractive than when he's bidding Octavia tenderly farewell (and listening to whatever it is she needs to whisper in his ear); never more despicable than when, giving battle orders, he tells Agrippa to plant the soldiers revolted from Antony 'in the van', so that, attacking, Antony will have to kill his own men before he gets to Caesar's. He'll have 'to spend his fury / Upon himself': an order revolted Enobarbus is on hand to hear.

If Caesar's part walks a straight line, Antony's rides a roller-coaster. He's first and foremost the soldier Caesar never has been, never will be; the kind of commander, Byam Shaw thought, loved by his men who's the despair of the generals. Is going AWOL in Egypt just the most triumphant move he could make, the man of war staking his future life on love? Or is he a 'doting mallard' stupidly

pursuing his hen on heat? John Dryden subtitled *All for Love 'or the world well lost'*. Shakespeare's play keeps the betting open. We never get to see Antony in action. We see him hearing Caesar's refusal of single combat. (Caesar's no fool. Match himself against 'a sworder', even if the 'old ruffian' is twice his age? No chance.) We see Antony arm: an endearing 'domestic' scene, 4.4, that has Mars squired by Venus, Cleopatra turning bits of kit this way and that to see how they might fit on the soldier's body. But we never see him practising the 'royal occupation' that's made his name. Instead we see him in scenes where he's bamboozled by politics: in the heavily-freighted messages from Rome he finally hears in 1.2; in the summit (2.2) that has him contracting a Roman marriage he avows (in 2.3.1-11) and, in the same scene, *disavows* (2.3.12-46). Just as Shakespeare never gives us Antony the soldier, so he never gives us Antony the lover. There are no scenes of intimacy between Antony and Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Like the battle of Actium, the love affair is heard as 'noises off'. What Shakespeare does give him, perhaps the only character in the play who's totally without guile, is scenes that register Antony wholly, unequivocally in the moment: deep-drinking on Pompey's galley; self-loathing after Actium (3.11); in mad rages (like his Herculean avatar) savaging Cleopatra one moment, embracing her the next (3.13); betrayed, as he thinks (but really out-manoeuvred by Caesar's shrewd tactics), and in a moment of rare self-reflection, sitting with his squire, the aptly named Eros, staring up at the sky watching the clouds make shapes then 'dislimn[]' them — dragon, bear, lion — analogising himself to the clouds: 'Here I am Antony / Yet cannot hold this visible shape'. Then, hearing of Cleopatra's death, instantly capitulating from fury to heartbreak: 'Unarm Eros. The long day's task is done... / Off, pluck off! / The sevenfold shield of Ajax cannot keep / The battery from my heart' (4.14).

It is, of course, the part of Cleopatra that marks this play's greatest distance from its prequel *Julius Caesar*. In *Cleopatra*, history has to take on her-story. The initial actor's note must be, for starters, 'infinite variety'. Gipsy, royal Egypt, boggler, eastern star. The key to this 'variety' is a self constituted of performances played to a rolling cast of spectators; a self, then, fundamentally unknowable? The grand theatre of Cydnus defers to fringe performances like the pleb-queen hopping forty paces through a public street, which defers to domestic farces like the time she drank Antony to his bed, dressed him in her tires and strapped on (her naked body?) his sword Philippan or histrionic dramas like the farewell in 1.3 that has her out-Proteusing Proteus even as she accuses Antony of 'excellent dissembling': 'play one scene'; 'You can do better yet'; 'Look ... / How this Herculean Roman does become / The carriage of his chafe'. That word 'become' is, of course, Cleopatra's character signature, she, the woman in scene 1 whom 'everything becomes', whose 'becomings' grow increasingly troubling to the political destinies of Antony and Egypt as they register perpetual motion, shifting-ness, constant inconstancy: the somersaulting and triple turning that defines (in Roman minds) the whore. Only in the final hundred lines of the play does Cleopatra's dazzling restlessness 'become' 'marble-constant' by 'becoming' her final form, queen ('Give me my robe. Put on my crown'); wife ('Husband, I come!'); and (Shakespeare's invention upon Plutarch) mother suckling the serpent that like Cleopatra *is* Egypt ('Peace, peace! / Dost thou not see my baby at my breast / That sucks the nurse asleep?'). In this final form she re-imagines a

triumvir to mock Rome's, its feminine knowability decidedly ambiguous. By then of course she's played out her last 'turn', as straight-man to the 'rural fellow' who delivered a bucket of asps and a report of a woman who, no later than yesterday, died of the worm whose 'biting is immortal': 'a very honest woman, but something given to lie, as a woman should not do but in the way of honesty'. The Asp Man might be writing the pop-cultural life of Cleopatra.

Cleopatra puts in play erotic charge, sensuousness, sexual danger, but also sheer fun: she is the joker in the pack, the comic genius whose anarchy is devastating to Roman high seriousness, the personification of wrong-footing. Like Antony needing an actor who can play both Mars and mallard, who can move from volcanic rage to stunned broken-hearted grief, Cleopatra needs an actor not beautiful (Plutarch makes that point) but fascinating, and one who can move from scintillating temptress to raddled harridan in the space of a half line: 'He's married'. One more point, which I will explore in the following chapter as I think about the Jacobean *Antony and Cleopatra*: Cleopatra is written black. This is an element of the script that has been almost entirely repressed in performance (while continuously represented in proxies), a history of 'whiting out' Cleopatra that can be traced from the Restoration, and here, from 1953; a history finally broken in main-stream theatre in 2013 when the Royal Shakespeare Company in Tarell McCraney's production cast Cleopatra as Shakespeare wrote her, a black gipsy queen.

Writing three 'impossible' roles at the centre of *Antony and Cleopatra*, the playwright does give his players important helps. For one thing, while he keeps them almost continuously present before spectators (in all but 8 of 43 scenes totalling a mere 265 lines) he writes them from the outside. They are never alone on stage, never made to account for the self's interiority in soliloquies. (The only exception might be Antony's nine lines between messengers in 1.2 when he's conscience-stabbed at the news of his wife Fulvia's death — 'There's a great spirit gone! ... The hand could pluck her back that shoved her on' — a mood of worthiness that Enobarbus, minutes later punctures with laughter: '...dead...dead...' 'Fulvia?' 'Dead.' 'Why, sir, give the gods a thankful sacrifice.')

Making these roles sites of performativity, Shakespeare has their reputations rendered *beyond* performance by others. People constantly talk about each other in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Memorial turns abound. Enobarbus remembers Cleopatra as a tourist destination: 'a wonderful piece of work' which 'left unseen' 'would have discredited [Antony's] travel'. Enobarbus remembers Cydnus, a city that emptied itself to stand on the wharfs and gaze on a queen whose description in oxymoronic hyperboles nevertheless 'beggared' her actual self. Antony remembers Philippi when the 'boy' Caesar 'kept his sword e'en like dancer'. Caesar remembers Antony's retreat from Modena, pursued by famine which he endured 'with patience more / Than savages could suffer, drinking the 'stale of horses', eating the 'roughest berry on the rudest hedge', and on the Alps consuming 'strange flesh / Which some did die to look on'; all endured 'so like a soldier that [his] cheek / So much as lanked not.' Charmian remembers Julius Caesar (a certain Egyptian queen, to get his attention, had herself delivered to him, as the Romans remember, rolled up in a carpet); which Cleopatra re-remembers as her 'salad days', 'green in judgment, cold in blood'. Instead, she

remembers Antony alive ('That time? — O, times!) and dead ('I dreamed there was an Emperor Antony...') Such memories may function as reportage. They certainly function in the space of the imaginary, to frame reputations 'past the size of dreaming' — and to appropriate them. Modena 'then' is summoned to mind to reprove Antony 'now' ('Leave thy lascivious wassails'); Philippi, to hang on to what once *was* in the face of what now *is*.

Most helpfully, too, the playwright surrounds his principals with another thirty-odd named parts who all 'earn a place i' th' story' by giving perspectives on the main players. Enobarbus, built from just a name-check in Plutarch, the hard-bitten antidote to hyperbole and myth-making (so just the right rememberer of Cydnus), able to talk turkey to both Antony and Cleopatra. He finally follows his head. Abandons Antony. And dies of a broken heart. Eros, Antony's squire (or, in a later war, his batman) who never leaves his master's service and plunges the sword Philippian into his own gut rather than Antony's. Ventidius, still on active duty (while Enobarbus appears to have traded in his combat boots for sandals); sent to Parthia on the mega-campaign that's supposed to be Antony's military business, where he's to proxy his general (and knows not to take any credit for victory). The Soothsayer, a human stand-in for Antony's conscience. Antony's Schoolmaster, kept in his retinue as perhaps some kind of placeholder for childhood or bookishness; sent in sign of humility (or humiliation, the Romans think) as Antony's ambassador to Caesar in 3.12, a man 'of late as petty to his ends / As is the morn-dew on the myrtle leaf / To his grand sea'. Iras and Charmian: Cleopatra's 'girls'. Constantly in attendance, monitoring her performances, anchoring her volatility, writing her notices on their faces. Visually composing the female triumvir before, fixing Cleopatra in her final form, she solely becomes it. Humouring. Needling. Talking of figs and male inches. Raunchy. Reverential. At the last, making defect perfection: 'Your crown's awry,' says Charmian to her dead mistress. 'I'll mend it, and then play.' Her final words, though, wonderfully flip the rare back to the riggish: 'Ah, soldier!'

5. Six deaths: tragedy becoming comedy

This play starts killing off its players long before the end. Fulvia is reported dead in 1.2; the corpse of Pacorus, heir to Parthian Orodes, is hauled off as victor's trophy in 3.1; the execution of Lepidus (by Caesar, on trumped up charges) and the assassination of Pompey (by one of Antony's officers) are noticed in passing in 3.5 (as Antony walks in his garden furiously kicking the grass 'that lies before him'); in 4.6, Enobarbus reports the 'pains' Alexas-the-turncoat did, which got him hanged by Caesar who's even now putting the other men who've capitulated to him from Antony in his front lines.

From 4.9, report turns to enactment, and the astonishing achievement of the last great arc of *Antony and Cleopatra* is not simply that Shakespeare writes six deaths and makes them uniquely significant (from Enobarbus's last words 'O Antony!' to Charmian's 'Ah, soldier!') but that, by the time the final one comes, he has made us re-think death so thoroughly as to redefine genre. In the final act, *Antony and Cleopatra* has more in common with *The Merchant of Venice* than *King Lear*.

Leaving 4.6 'alone the villain of the Earth' and seeking 'Some ditch wherein to die', Enobarbus stands observed by sentries in 4.9 invoking the moon as 'mistress of true melancholy', wanting her to 'Throw my heart / Against the flint and hardness of my fault / Which, being dried with grief, will break to powder / And finish all foul thoughts'. Antony leaves 4.14 like Hercules, 'The shirt of Nessus is upon me'. He enters 4.16 like Pliny reading natural philosophy in the clouds. These two deaths come closest to articulating the tragic in this play. Tragedy is not loss of life, but loss of self, an Enobarbus 'infamous' in 'revolt', an Antony who 'cannot hold this visible shape'. Antony may bring Eros to tears reminding him of his oath to 'Do't'; 'kill me'; 'The time is come'; and pushing on the death blow by imagining a scene, 'windowed in great Rome', himself led in triumph 'with pleached arms' and 'corrigible neck' 'bending down'. If spectators are going to weep, this is where their tears will likely fall. But then the mood flips. In a classic comic turn of events, Eros falls on the sword himself, dying for love. Antony, spectacularly wrong-footed, has to cast about for a method to kill himself, follows the heroic pattern Eros has set, then discovers he's botched it. Shortly thereafter comes news that Cleopatra isn't dead. What response can there be but laughter? This is death as farce, and the logistics of the dying body hauled ingloriously up into the monument make that a scene of heroic death travestied. That's its point.

For Antony's death is the anti-masque to Cleopatra's last, wondrous performance. She dismisses her Alexandrian Dogberry. (The Asp Man is surely Shakespeare's greatest clue to how he's writing Egypt's ending. What a gamble, grounding it upon the groundling, making, as Byam Shaw wrote, the audience 'smell the earth before it rises to heaven on the poetry that follows' (NB April 1944).) Then she begins the ascent to her final becoming. Her death, duping Caesar, is going to be the best of practical jokes. In her last moments of theatrical magic, the drama queen who moments earlier rejected her own medium, the stage with its 'quick comedians' who can only 'boy' greatness like hers, self-consciously stages the spectacle of her death. Where Antony dressed down for death ('Off! Pluck off!') Cleopatra dresses up. She dresses to kill: 'Show me my women like a queen.' She dresses to reenact her original seduction of Mark Antony: 'I am again for Cydnus.' Her jokes are still riggish: needing to race after Iras, who's simply died upon her mistress's farewell kiss, in case her 'girl' gets to 'curlèd Antony' before her, and he 'spend[s] on her 'that kiss / Which is [Cleopatra's] heaven to have'. But the ultimate triumph of her death is political: 'Great Caesar' is 'beguiled'. He's proved an 'ass / Unpolicied'. He gets the last lines of the play, appropriating the lovers and 'their story' to 'his glory which / Brought them to be lamented.' But it's Dolabella who gets the last exit — an exit that performs, in what it knows, *Antony and Cleopatra's* final wrong-footing.

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