

INTRODUCTION



The two plays immediately preceding *Antony and Cleopatra*, in the now reasonably well established canon of Shakespeare's plays, are two of the grandest dramas in the world's stage history, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. Like them, *Antony and Cleopatra* (dating from 1606 to 1607) is a tragedy. Unlike them, it presents a panoramically broad portrait that includes an unusually large number of characters, figures ranging from very great to very small indeed.

A cast's size, of course, does not in and of itself determine dramatic structure or even narrative pace. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare has deployed a large cast to create continuous high activity, employing a brilliantly managed, virtuosic structure. Critics have rightly insisted on these basic matters. "The world of *Antony and Cleopatra* is so immense that time yawns in it"; "The vastness of the [play's] world exceeds geography and reaches out to include the sky, the sun, the moon, that stars, and the cosmos, the realms of fire and air"; "[It] is in some respects the most complex, sustained, and magnificent piece of musical orchestration to be found anywhere in Shakespeare."¹ Of all Shakespeare's plays,

only *Hamlet* and *King Lear* run as long as *Antony and Cleopatra*. These are both well-paced plays with large casts, but *Hamlet* contains only twenty scenes, and *King Lear* twenty-six, whereas *Antony and Cleopatra* has forty-two. What this means, both in the theater and in private, silent reading, is that both the setting and the characters change more than twice as rapidly in *Antony and Cleopatra* as they do in *Hamlet*, and something less than twice as rapidly as they do in *King Lear*. This is almost a cinematic level of activity—a kind of constant ping-pong switching of audience- and reader-attention. The on-stage result is a beautifully focused and steadily accelerating dramatic tension, the progressive stages of which are carefully laid out for us, point by point. (“This universe is too large to be rendered in anything but fragments. . . . It can be handled only by a process of constantly reassembling its many small parts—moving them about in an always flexible mosaic.”)²

Perhaps the best approach to a necessarily brief analysis of how *Antony and Cleopatra* evolves is to examine aspects of some of its constantly interacting themes. In a sense, the play is almost equally a historical drama, a love story, and a tragedy, a tripartite main thrust that, in turn, generates an unusually wide variety of sub-themes—how power is gained, and lost, and the effects of both such gain and such loss on moral and characterological values; the difficult balance between romantic love and power, and the very different love impetuses of men and of women; and, finally, how our human limitations inevitably close in around us. (“*Antony and Cleopatra*—unlike *Julius Caesar*, to which it is a sequel—is only partly a political play; perhaps not a political play even primarily, but a play of passion.”)³

Antony and Cleopatra as Historical Drama

Shakespeare's audience, and Shakespeare himself, was plainly much preoccupied with historical stories in general. The deep interest in matters Roman, however, was part of an abiding, far-reaching Renaissance concern—both in England and all across Europe—for what was still regarded as the mother and model of great states and lasting civilizations. Then, and for another more than three hundred years, Austro-Hungary claimed to be an incarnation of the Holy Roman Empire. Just as Latin was without question the dominant language of intellectual discourse, and was also the basic subject of instruction in all but the most elementary of schools, so too Roman (and to a lesser extent Greek) mythology was, quite simply, “mythology.” The names and something of the stories of Roman gods, and famous Roman men (and a few Roman women), were known to virtually everyone, whether or not literate or possessing any knowledge of Latin. “As for [Renaissance] theory and practice of historical writing,” Douglas Bush has dryly observed, “it was the ancients who taught that.”⁴ George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) subtitles its second chapter even more revealingly: “That there may be an art of our English poesie, aswell [sic] as there is of the Latine and Greeke.”⁵

Seven characters in *Julius Caesar* have died by the time the play ends. Six other conspirators are as good as dead. The two characters who triumph, in that play, Octavius and Mark Antony, fight yet another deadly war in *Antony and Cleopatra*, this time against each other, a war that Antony will not survive. In both plays, all those who die have plainly chosen (or will choose) their own fatal path. Many have been warned, and have multiple opportuni-

ties to reconsider; none do. If we label these determinedly death-oriented stances “stoic,” we will be in good part correct, for Stoicism is indeed a set of beliefs central to the Roman way of life. Neither pain nor pleasure mattered a great deal, according to this strongly fatalistic viewpoint. And death, when at its own good time it chose to come, was neither avoidable nor worth avoiding. In those circumstances, one might as well welcome death and have it over with.

Shakespeare was writing a stage play, not a historical record (though the differences between the two genres are neither as great as is sometimes thought, nor were they in Shakespeare’s time as well defined as they are now). In terms of the historical record as he and his time knew it, however, his account is essentially accurate. His primary source was Sir Thomas North’s translation (from the French, rather than from the original Greek) of Plutarch’s *Lives of the Noble Greek and Romans*, dating from the end of the first century C.E. North’s translation of 1579 was augmented, in the editions of 1595 and 1603, by passages drawn from a variety of other authors. No full account of how Shakespeare handled North’s vigorous prose is needed, here: the two passages that follow, first North and then *Antony and Cleopatra*, provide a perfect illustration of Shakespeare at work. (In the Shakespeare passage, Caesar is speaking to Antony, reminding him of his great past exploits.)

And therefore it was a wonderful example to the soldiers, to see Antony that was brought up in all fineness and superfluity, so easily to drink puddle water, and to eat wild fruits and roots. And moreover it is reported that, even as they passed the Alps, they did eat the barks of trees, and

such beasts as never man tasted of their flesh before. (normalized spelling and punctuation)

Thou didst drink
The stale of horses, and the gilded puddle
Which beasts would cough at. Thy palate then did deign
The roughest berry on the rudest hedge.
Yea, like the stag, when snow the pasture sheets,
The barks of trees thou browsed'st. On the Alps
It is reported thou didst eat strange flesh,
Which some did die to look on.

(1.4.62–69)

North's robust bluntness is extremely effective. To describe a wealthy Roman aristocrat, which Antony was (indeed, his early reputation was that of a carousing playboy), being forced to drink "puddle water," is in a sense to say all that, in a work of history, needs saying (though I should add that Elizabethan streets were a great deal dirtier even than streets today). And Shakespeare's verse presentation vastly intensifies the picture. He first tells us that Antony had to drink the urine of horses. And then he adds that Antony was also obliged to drink from scum-covered pools of stagnant water that even animals could not tolerate. This is not a question, of course, of falsifying the historical record, for a dramatic re-creation and not a historical record is what Shakespeare is writing.

Further: North tells us that Antony then ate "wild fruits and roots" and, at a later point, as they "passed the Alps," ate even "the barks of trees." Not only does Shakespeare vividly amplify this but—for at least two reasons, which I shall examine in a moment—joins these two episodes into one. Antony's refined palate

was expanded, remarkably, to include “the roughest berry on the rudest hedge.” Note that, for Shakespeare’s time, the adjective “wild” bore, in dealing with both animals and plants, the notion of inferior characteristics, just as, in dealing with lands and whole regions, “wild” meant “waste, desert, desolate.” Human beings who were “wild” were, logically enough, not simply “savage” but also “uncultured, rude, uncontrolled.” Orderly animals, and plants, regions, and people, were of a higher and better sort. Shakespeare and North were contemporaneous, if not precisely contemporaries, so “wild” carried more or less the same associations for both men. But for Shakespeare’s purposes the plain word “wild” needed to be both particularized (into “berry”) and intensified (into “the *roughest* berry”). And even the “roughest berry” had to be picked from a “hedge” (such rows of bushes and small trees were universal in Elizabethan England), and not from just any hedge, but the “rudest”—that is, the most barbarous, uncultivated, irrationally unmaintained of all.

North treats “wild fruits and roots” separately from “bark” eating, but by combining what were historically separate episodes, Shakespeare achieves still further intensification, both of “wildness” and also of the flesh-eating episode that follows. Antony is compared to a stag—wild, to be sure, but without question animal-like (the Elizabethans preferred the word “beast” to the word “animal”)—perilously surviving, in bitter winter cold, by gnawing on the bark of trees. By separating the flesh-eating from the bark-eating portions, Shakespeare is able to amplify the latter—experienced on its own—as something a great deal more gruesome than merely eating the flesh of unknown animals. Antony does indeed, in Shakespeare, still eat “strange flesh,” but “strange” contains vastly more possibilities for dramatic effect than that

which is merely unknown. “Strange” incorporates notions of abnormality, queerness, mystery, and thus of a kind of unaccountable hostility. And Shakespeare nails this to the wall, as it were, by adding, with stunning invention, not simply that this “strange” flesh was dangerous, as North implies but does not directly state, but that it was mortally so. Worse, it could kill, like some inanimate, Medusa-like substance, simply by being seen: “which some did die to look on.” Magic and superstition were perceived by the Elizabethans as far more common, and often as far more venomous, than for the most part they are today. Elizabethans would shudder, at least inwardly, at such potently lethal once-living flesh. And that was exactly what Shakespeare meant to them to do: “such beasts as never men tasted of their flesh before” was adequate for his purposes. We might say, without I think impugning Shakespeare’s sense of history, that he was inventing as well as transmitting it.

Antony and Cleopatra as *Love Story*

Writers have always known that a love story, whether it ends tragically or happily, is defined as much by its setting as by its protagonists. The shabby dullness of French bourgeois life lies at the very center of Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*; Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* pivots on the contrasts between stodgy, sane Germany and brilliant, tawdry Italy; Bernard Malamud’s *The Assistant* is steeped in, and its lovers wonderfully triumph over, the harshness of big-city life in the Great Depression; and can one imagine the fairy-tale happiness of Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield* without the bustle and the misery of nineteenth-century London?

The love story that turns the plot of *Antony and Cleopatra* is