

Antony and Cleopatra: Structure and Classification

Adam Hailes

Abstract

Tragedy cannot exist in a categorical sense within a performance text in which contradictory perceptions of the tragic co-exist. In *Antony and Cleopatra* Roman tragedy and Egyptian tragedy stand in opposition, the one being necessary to define the other. While *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* each offer single and consistent philosophical creeds as reference points to all speech and action within the theatrical world the performance creates, *Antony and Cleopatra* houses two such creeds, rendering speech and action open to intra-performance interpretation. This paper analyses this dualistic structuring of *Antony and Cleopatra* and suggests that classification of the play as a tragedy leads to a masking of the play's central dichotomy, thus diluting content.

Though a Caesar, Octavian came of a junior branch. From Julius he inherited at the age of eighteen aristocratic connections, great wealth and military support. For a time he cooperated with one of Caesar's henchmen, Mark Antony, in a ferocious series of proscriptions to destroy the party which had murdered the great dictator. Mark Antony's departure to win victories in the east, failure to do so and injudicious marriage to Cleopatra, Julius Caesar's sometime mistress, gave Octavian further opportunities. He fought in the name of the republic against a threat that Antony might make a proconsular return, bringing oriental monarchy in his baggage-train. The victory of Actium (31BC) was followed by

the legendary suicides of Antony and Cleopatra; the kingdom of the Ptolemies came to an end and Egypt too was annexed as a province of Rome.¹

While J. M. Roberts' almost comically concise explanation of the connections between Antony, Cleopatra, and Octavius Caesar clearly outlines the period of history employed by Shakespeare as source material for his play, the focus of Shakespeare's performance text appears to reach far beyond the realms of historical account. Possibly recognising this fact, Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* was initially recorded as being a tragedy by the editors of Folio 1 (1623).² (It should be noted that it is possible, although not currently verifiable, that Shakespeare included the word 'tragedy' in his own title for the play.) This initial classification has since been revised and, due to the play being 'in its total effect, so unlike the tragedies that preceded it'³ *Antony and Cleopatra* was famously not included in two seminal analyses of Shakespeare's tragedies: A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*⁴ and G. Wilson Knight's *The Wheel of Fire*.⁵ The common tendency nowadays is, perhaps unsurprisingly, to classify this text as a Roman play, and thus group it with *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*. A degree of critical opinion also suggests, however, that *Antony and Cleopatra* should be placed alongside *Measure for Measure* and *Julius Caesar* to create a trio of problem plays.⁶ Everett suggests that the argument behind this movement rests on the understanding that 'all three are alike, and unusual, in presenting a specifically moral problem in such a way as to leave radical indecision as to the rights and wrongs of the case'.⁷ (Curiously, however, Everett's Signet edition of the play employs the title *The Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra* on its frontispiece.)

Of initial concern here are the aspects of performance text that render categorisation so open to interpretation. What is it about *Antony and Cleopatra* that makes critics reluctant, or eager, to accept the label of tragedy, or indeed, Roman play, or problem play? In turn, how does classification, if imposed, influence audience response: Does a play titled *The Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra* differ in any way from a play titled *Antony and Cleopatra*?

In illustrating the qualities of Renaissance tragedy, Martin Wiggins explains that 'tragedy proper attends to... the hero's failure to realize his full human potential, either because of the kind of world he lives in or the kind of self he makes through his own actions'.⁸ Wiggins' extension of his definition of tragedy, historically-focused and embracing the relevant humanist perspective, despite referring directly to the theatre of Marlowe, initially seems to be particularly suited to *Antony and Cleopatra*:

The period's orthodoxy, inherited from medieval Christianity, gave mankind a comfortingly fixed place in the cosmic hierarchy between angels and beasts, but the humanist thinkers, whose protean creation myth Hamlet echoes, offered the more glorious and more frightening prospect of self-definition: man could rise to the perfection of divinity, but only with the corollary that he might alternatively degenerate to the ranks of the beasts; to use Hamlet's own terms, he could be Hyperion or a satyr. It is the same vertical scale that runs between *Tamburlaine* and tragedy, and the meaning of either depends on the contrasting possibility of the other: whereas, in the older conception of the genre, the mere fact of

going down to destruction was tragic in itself, in *Doctor Faustus* damnation is tragic because there is also salvation. The essence of the experience is our sense of shortfall, of the disparity between the central character's potential and his achievement.⁹

As intimated above, both Antony and Cleopatra seem to be definitive examples of potential discarded. The great warrior and the goddess of the Nile wallow in earthly delights and self-satisfying pleasures as the worlds they rule slip from their inattentive grasp. Of import, however, is the manner and direction of this slide into loss and, finally, suicide; the suggestion being that the apparent loss might, following an adjustment in perception, be deemed nothing of the sort. On being disturbed by a messenger delivering news from Rome during a flirtatious moment with Cleopatra, Antony's reaction suggests that his decline is, indeed, less a loss and more a philosophical realignment:

Let Rome in Tiber melt and the wide arch
Of the ranged empire fall! Here is my space.
Kingdoms are clay; our dungy earth alike
Feeds beast as man. The nobleness of life
Is to do thus, when such a mutual pair
And such a twain can do't—in which I bind,
On pain of punishment, the world to weet
We stand up peerless.¹⁰ (1.1.35-42)

G. Wilson Knight describes Antony's discovery of 'The nobleness of life' in his passionate relationship with Cleopatra as being a step

towards 'the more purely spiritual'.¹¹ This in turn leads to the awakening of 'a mutual and transcendental union that amply compensates for the sacrifices of power, warrior-honour, and material magnificence'.¹² The key word here is 'compensates' which, implies, of course, replacement rather than loss. Antony replaces Rome, and its connotations of order, worldly power and self-sacrifice, with Egypt, and its connotations of excess, spiritual fulfilment and self-fuelling pleasure. Here Stephen Greenblatt's suggestion that in *Antony and Cleopatra* 'the restless movement is organized around the deep structural opposition of Rome and Egypt' is apposite.¹³ While Greenblatt's comment focuses on the geographical setting of scenes, it would not be inappropriate to relate his statement to the inner-condition of Antony who sees tragedy in withstanding opposition and, consequently, seeks fulfilment in his selection of Egypt. Shakespeare's stagecraft thus allows the play's representation of locale to, in turn, represent the dichotomy faced by Antony. History is rendered tangible by theatre, and forms an objective correlative to the spiritual dilemma faced by the hero; 'the conflict between eros and public service'.¹⁴ Remarkably then, the history of the man serves to illustrate his spiritual state. The very essence of this spiritual state, the dilemma of choice between Cleopatra and the military duties of Rome, is presented, however, as a matter of debate rather than as a matter of tragedy. In simple terms, tragedy stems from error; in the dual societies of *Antony and Cleopatra*, however, error is open to interpretation. Rome's loss/gain is Egypt's gain/loss.

It is, as has been intimated, through Shakespeare's stagecraft that such a condition arises. This can be clearly explained through

detailed assessment of Antony's first and last scenes. At the very beginning of the play, prior to Antony's initial entrance, Philo, provides a militaristic and wholly Roman perspective on the changes that have taken place within his leader:

Nay, but this dotage of our general's
O'erflows the measure. Those his goodly eyes,
That o'er the files and musters of the war
Have glowed like plated Mars, now bend, now turn
The office and devotion of their view
Upon a tawny front. His captain's heart,
Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst
The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper
And is become the bellows and the fan
To cool a gipsy's lust. (1.1.1-10)

Philo's damning of Antony's translation from soldier to lover strikes deeper as he asks Demetrius and, of course, the audience, to survey Antony's behaviour closely. The audience members, being paired with Demetrius and led by Philo, are thus encouraged to adopt the Roman viewpoint:

Look where they come.
Take but good note, and you shall see in him
The triple pillar of the world transformed
Into a strumpet's fool. Behold and see. (1.1.10-13)

Thus, in the very first speech of the play, Shakespeare presents a Roman perspective, and judgement, on Antony's current behaviour

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
Valiently vanquished. Now my spirit is going;
I can no more.

CLEOPATRA Noblest of men, woo't die?
Hast thou no care of me? Shall I abide
In this dull world, which in thy absence is
No better than a sty? O see, my women:
[Antony dies]
The crown o'th'earth doth melt. My lord!
O, withered is the garland of the war;
The soldier's 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. (4.15.53-70)

Within the Egyptian context, here provided by Cleopatra, Antony does not die as a fallen man, but remains 'the crown o'th'earth' until his death. Of interest is the fact that Cleopatra's personal response to the end of her lover's life moves from the personal ('Hast thou no care of me?'), through the worldly (Young boys and girls/Are level now with men'), to the universal (And there is nothing left remarkable/Beneath the visiting moon.), thus broadening the depiction of the impact of the loss of Antony from the individual reaction of a passionate lover to the evocation of a

void filling the complete spectrum of human life. Inherent to both Antony's speech and Cleopatra's speech, of course, is a sense of completeness of life which denies any notion of tragedy. The fallen man of Rome is, at his death, a godlike king of Egypt.

The suggestion here is that Shakespeare's provision of commentary in the guise of Philo and Demetrius in Antony's opening scene and Cleopatra in Antony's final scene permits the communication of opposing interpretations of the hero's actions, and, therefore, allows threads of ambiguity to enter the spectrum of the play. It is possible that this ambiguity breeds incompatibility with the classification of 'tragedy'. As noted by Bevington, 'the ambiguity perceived by opposing critical traditions... ought to reside in all of us as audience.'¹⁵ Bevington extends his argument to suggest that 'those responses seem structured into the play itself in its many antitheses: Egypt and Rome, the contrary attractions of pleasure and of political or military ambition, and the like.'¹⁶ The suggestion is that as Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* is built upon antitheses and ambiguities, the stability of worldview necessary for tragedy is absent. In its place we find debate and conflict produced by the collision of two separate cultures. It is this very union of debate and conflict, forming the essence of the play itself, that is threatened by the restrictive classification of tragedy. For a production of *Antony and Cleopatra* to succeed as theatre, all that is encroaching, superfluous, or limiting should be stripped away. Presenting the play as a tragedy could represent such a counter-productive imposition.

To close, the argument can be further clarified through reference to

Orson Welles' now famous comments on the staging of his 1937 *Julius Caesar*, at The Mercury Theatre, New York:

I believe in the factual theatre. People should not be fooled. They should know they are in the theatre, and with that knowledge, they may be taken to any height of which the magic of words and light is capable of taking them. This is a return to the Elizabethan and the Greek theatre. To achieve that simplicity, that wholesomeness, to force the audience into giving the play the same creative attention that a mediaeval crowd gave a juggler on a box in a market, you have to enchant.¹⁷

The connection here is clear. The 'factual theatre' of Welles is a theatre of 'simplicity' and 'wholesomeness' that aims to evoke 'creative attention' in the audience.¹⁸ The play, then, should be allowed to breathe in an environment in which its theatricality is accepted and embraced. *Antony and Cleopatra* can only do so if presented according to its structure without the hindrance of a limiting and misleading classification.

Notes

¹ See Roberts, J. M., *The New Penguin History of the World*, 5th edition (London: Penguin, 2007) p. 245.

² The first version of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* to be issued in print was titled *The Tragedie of Anthonie, and Cleopatra* and placed in the final section of the Folio, labelled 'Tragedies'.

³ See Barbara Everett's Introduction to William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra*, (New York: Signet, 1968), p. xxi.

⁴ See Bradley, A.C., *Shakespearean Tragedy* 3rd Edition (London: Macmillan, 1992).

⁵ See Wilson Knight, G., *The Wheel of Fire* 2nd Edition (London: Routledge, 2001).

⁶ See, for example, Schanzer, Ernest, *The Problem Plays Of Shakespeare: A Study of Julius Caesar, Measure for Measure, Antony and Cleopatra* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965).

⁷ See Everett, p. xxii.

⁸ See Wiggins, Martin, *Shakespeare and the Drama of his Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 49.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 49-50.

¹⁰ Quotes are taken from Shakespeare, William, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. by David Bevington (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹¹ See Wilson Knight, G., "The transcendental humanism of "Antony and Cleopatra"", in *The Imperial Theme* (1931) rev. edn. (London: Routledge, 1951), pp. 204-5.

¹² See David Bevington's Introduction to William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 15.

¹³ See Greenblatt, Stephen, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 195.

¹⁴ See Rose, Mary Beth, *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 155.

¹⁵ See Bevington, p. 15.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See Callow, Simon, *Orson Welles: The Road to Xanadu* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 342.

¹⁸ Ibid.

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