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"A PLACE I'TH' STORY"
Narrative, Meaning and Identity in *Antony and Cleopatra*

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Abstract – *Antony and Cleopatra* is one of several plays in the Shakespearean canon that evince a particularly acute interest in the role played by narrative in giving shape and significance to experience and contributing to the formation of individual identity. Not only does the drama situate itself within a matrix of pre-existent literary narratives which frequently diverge from one another in the interpretations they give to events, but the major characters within it tend to define themselves in relation to stories of mythological origin which are also often highly ambivalent in their implications. While dramatizing the mechanisms through which the various kinds of story in which the individual's sense of self is vested are elaborated, Shakespeare's play also illustrates some of the ways in which these narratives can come into collision with one another to the detriment of a selfhood constructed by such means.

Keywords: Shakespeare; *Antony and Cleopatra*; narrative; myth.

Given their constructed nature and their dependence upon the cultural conventions and language usage, life narratives obviously reflect the prevailing theories about "possible lives" that are part of one's culture. Indeed, one important way of characterizing a culture is by the narrative models it makes available for describing the course of a life. And the tool kit of any culture is replete not only with a stock of canonical life narratives ... but with combinable formal constituents from which its members can construct their own life narratives.
(Bruner 2004, p. 694)

The absence of narrative capacity or a refusal of narrative indicates an absence or refusal of meaning itself.
(White 1980, p. 6)

1.

At a certain point in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Antony's friend and effective aide-de-camp Domitias Enobarbus, racked with misgivings over the conduct of a man who is flagrantly courting disaster in his final military confrontation with Octavius Caesar, begins for the first time to entertain the possibility of abandoning his captain. Notwithstanding the gravity of his apprehensions, he does for the moment determine to persevere in his loyalty, but the grounds he adduces for his decision are curious:

> Yet he that can endure
> To follow with allegiance a fallen lord
> Does conquer him that did his master conquer,
> And earns a place i'th' story. (3.13.44-47)[1]

What Enobarbus appears to be saying is that it is participation in what he calls a "story" that confers dignity and significance upon the life of an individual, irrespective of the fact that the story concerned may be one of decline and inevitable defeat. Enobarbus will eventually think better of his decision and defect to Caesar's camp, but no sooner does he do so than he repents bitterly of his action. By allowing prudence to prevail and deserting Antony, he has forfeited his place in a story which, however inglorious it might seem from the Roman perspective, has been capable of infusing his existence with some measure of personal significance. In his own eyes at least, what he has done is inscribe himself in another story in which the role he is allotted is that of traitor: "But let the world rank me in register / A master-leaver and a fugitive" (4.9.24-25). To be part of a story seems inevitable, but it is not always a story of the individual's own choosing, nor one in which he is necessarily afforded the possibility of playing a worthy part. Bereft of his existential bearings, and confronted by the prospect of a life emptied irrevocably of meaning, Enobarbus resolves to seek out a ditch in which to bury his ignominy, and shortly thereafter dies in a final paroxysm of shame and self-disgust.

The "story" that Enobarbus is renouncing when he forsakes his general and makes his way to Octavius's camp is not, at least according to the Roman standards in which he has been nurtured, a particularly creditable one. He has allied himself with Mark Antony, a formerly exemplary soldier who, though one of the triumvirate formed after the assassination of Julius Caesar, is now leading what many of his countrymen consider to be a dissolute existence in Alexandria in the company of the queen of Egypt Cleopatra. Enthralled by the charms of Cleopatra and her court, Antony now concerns himself only intermittently with the welfare of Rome, which is beset by threats both internal and from without. Octavius, another member of the triumvirate and the adopted son and heir of Julius Caesar, has made strenuous efforts to bring Antony to his Roman senses and has even gone so far as to arrange a marriage between Antony and his own half-sister Octavia in order to fortify their alliance. Notwithstanding these endeavours, Antony remains obdurate in his ways, affronting Roman sensibilities by apportioning provinces among his children by Cleopatra, and thereby provoking Octavius into launching a massive military campaign against him. The culminating engagement in this conflict is the Battle of Actium of 31 BCE, in which Octavius deals a crushing blow to the fleet of Antony and Cleopatra, both of whom withdraw from the battle while it is still at its height. Enobarbus will not live to see the sequel of the story in which he has become enmeshed, one which will reach its tragic termination in the deaths by suicide of both Antony and Cleopatra. Those in Shakespeare's audience who knew their history would remember however that the destruction of these opponents of Rome was a watershed event that signalled the definitive demise of the Republic and the inauguration of the Roman Empire under the aegis of Augustus Caesar, and that it therefore represented a decisive turning point that set European history on a new trajectory.

[1] With the exception of those to *Antony and Cleopatra*, all references to Shakespeare's works throughout this article are to the single volume *Arden Shakespeare Complete Works* (Shakespeare 2001). References to *Antony and Cleopatra* are to the edition of the play edited by John Wilders (Shakespeare 2018).

As Enobarbus's case illustrates, to earn a place in one story potentially entails being assigned a place of an entirely different kind in others as well. Even in its broadest outlines, what we see operating in Shakespeare's drama are two narratives running counter to one another. On the one hand we have the story of Antony and Cleopatra in which Enobarbus plays a peripheral but by no means negligible role, and on the other we have that of the Roman Empire itself, and it is the latter which, silencing or subsuming all those opposed to itself, will eventually be dignified with the status of "history". The title characters are perceived in very different lights within the contexts of the two clashing narratives in which they figure: as heroic lovers struggling to affirm the sanctity of personal values in the face of the merciless Roman juggernaut in the first, as enemies of Rome to be neutralized by any means possible in the second. But as is evidenced even at the level of the images and figures of speech that comprise its poetic texture, the play is deeply permeated by concerns that might be described as narratological in character, situating itself self-consciously within an intricate matrix of stories, both pre-existent and in the process of formation, in terms of which the protagonists envisage and even construct their own identities, and in relation to which the play itself establishes its meanings. It is this preoccupation with narrative in its various aspects and implications, one which *Antony and Cleopatra* shares with other works in the Shakespearean canon but pursues in a manner all its own,[2] that will be examined in what follows.

2.

Most obviously, of course, *Antony and Cleopatra* takes its place within a broad array of other literary treatments of what in a cursory view might appear to be the identical subject, renditions of the same sequence of historical events so different from one another in tone and evaluative stance however as to constitute distinct stories in their own right. In the decades immediately prior to the composition of Shakespeare's tragedy, versions of the story of Antony and Cleopatra had been produced by the Countess of Pembroke in her *Antonius* (1592),[3] derived from Robert Garnier's *Marc Antoine* (1578), and by Samuel Daniel in his *The Tragedie of Cleopatra* (1594). The latter was composed as a companion piece to the work by the Countess of Pembroke and was dedicated to her, and its very existence testifies to the manner in which the same event can be rendered in different ways and from different points of view. Some two centuries earlier, Geoffrey Chaucer had offered his own rather idiosyncratic variant of the story in *The Legend of Good Women*, the first section of which, though rehearsing in general terms the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra at Actium and their subsequent deaths, focuses particular attention on the figure of Cleopatra. Chaucer represents Cleopatra as a martyr to love, and her suicide by leaping into a snake pit as a rebuke to men whom he declares are incapable of such extremes of heroic devotion:

> Ye men, that falsly sweren many an ooth
> That ye wol dye, if that your love be wroth
> Heer may ye seen of women whiche a trouthe! (Chaucer 1969, pp. 367-368)

[2] For a discussion of *Hamlet* and *Othello* in narratological terms, see Lucking 2012, pp. 153-78, pp. 185-93.
[3] Some of the more significant verbal parallels between this work and Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* are enumerated in Hannay, Kinnamon and Brennan 1998, p. 40.

Although Chaucer concludes his story in much the same vein, continuing to express doubts as to whether a man can be found who is capable of sacrificing himself for love as Cleopatra does, there is a flippant tone to his final observations that belies their apparent solemnity:

> Now, er I finde a man thus trewe and stable,
> And wol for love his deeth so freely take,
> I pray god lat our hedes never ake! (Chaucer 1969, p. 368)

The pointedly bathetic note with which the story concludes suggests not only that the poet is not taking entirely seriously the task he has taken upon himself of extolling the virtues of his faithful heroines, but that he fully intends his reader to be aware that this is the case.

What were for Shakespeare such comparatively recent elaborations of the story as these were based on versions that had proliferated in the years following the Battle of Actium, in which the characters of the protagonists of that event loomed large as significant objects of interest in their own right. The most detailed of these, of course, is Plutarch's account of Marcus Antonius's career, upon Sir Thomas North's translation of which Shakespeare drew heavily in *Antony and Cleopatra*, paying it the oblique tribute of transcribing phrases and one entire passage from it virtually verbatim. Not only did Plutarch provide the raw historical material upon which Shakespeare worked, but he also supplied indications as to how that material might be interpreted as well, clues which Shakespeare seems to take some account of even as he distances himself from their judgmental stance. "Had Shakespeare not read Daniel or the Countess of Pembroke", the most recent Arden editor of the play observes, "*Antony and Cleopatra* would probably have been much as it is; without Plutarch it could not have existed" (Wilders 2018, p. 63). Although Plutarch takes a largely dispassionate view of the events surrounding the Battle of Actium and the principal characters involved in it, there can be no mistaking what his final verdict on the conduct of these characters is. His view is that "it was predestined that the government of all the world should fall into *Octavius Caesars* handes" (Plutarch 1579, p. 997), so that the resistance of Antony and Cleopatra to the growing ascendency of Julius Caesar's heir is contrary to the momentum of historical process. Plutarch is by no means oblivious to the positive qualities of the personages he describes. Antony is a redoubtable and often magnanimous general capable of displaying great fortitude and of inspiring intense devotion in his soldiers, Cleopatra a woman of considerable personal talent and charm. But, intransigent moralist as he is, he dwells even more insistently on their defects, and on what he obviously considers to be the moral turpitude which is in the end responsible for the disaster that overwhelms them even as it contributes to what is essentially the providential movement of history.

Plutarch's life of Marcus Antonius was written well over a century after the Battle of Actium, and displays all the happy omniscience of hindsight. Those writing in the immediate shadow of that momentous event, some of whose works were also available to Shakespeare as he was writing his play, were somewhat less capable of such detachment. Among the more notable literary accounts of the story of Antony and Cleopatra produced very shortly after their deaths are those found in Virgil's *Aeneid* and in Horace's Ode 1.37 – often referred to as the "Cleopatra" ode although the queen is not explicitly alluded to by name – in which the writers evince radically contrasting attitudes concerning the characters they describe. Virgil himself tries for his own purposes to incorporate the story, which was still relatively fresh in the collective memory of the Romans, within an epic set in what was already the remote context of the founding of the Roman race by Aeneas, and the manner in which he does so is ingenious. In a celebrated ekphrastic passage in the

eighth book of the *Aeneid*, the poet describes the elaborate ornamentation on Aeneas's shield, fashioned by Vulcan at the behest of Venus. This harks back to description of Achilles's shield in the eighteenth book of the *Iliad*, crafted by Hephaestus at the bidding of the hero's mother Thetis. But whereas Achilles's shield portrays various scenes from the life of every day, Aeneas's shield depicts decisive episodes in what from the temporal perspective of the poem is the *future* history of Rome. Most particularly, it is Octavian's victory over Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium that is exalted as a definitive turning point in Roman history. Octavian, sometimes referred to anachronistically as Augustus (he was not in fact awarded this honorific title until 27 BCE), is described as being a semi-divine figure, and is clearly identified as the son of the Julius Caesar who had himself been deified in 42 BCE:

> On the one side Augustus Caesar stands on the lofty stern, leading Italians to strife, with Senate and People, the Penates of the state, and all the mighty gods; his auspicious brows shoot forth a double flame, and on his head dawns his father's star. (Virgil 2000, pp. 107-109)

Whereas Antony is described in Virgil's narrative as an individual who, though undeniably a renegade, was still recognizably a Roman whose qualities as such had enabled him to triumph over his barbarous enemies, Cleopatra is referred to in tones of scathing contempt:

> On the other side comes Antony with barbaric might and motley arms, victorious over the nations of the dawn and the ruddy sea, bringing in his train Egypt and the strength of the East and farthest Bactra; and there follows him (oh the shame of it!) his Egyptian wife (Virgil 2000, p. 109)

The moment in which Cleopatra flees the naval battle, obeying an impulse that will lead to the destruction of her fleet, is described by Virgil thus:

> In the midst the queen calls upon her hosts with their native sistrum; not yet does she cast back a glance at the twin snakes behind. Monstrous gods of every form and barking Anubis wield weapons against Neptune and Venus and against Minerva. (Virgil 2000, p. 109)

It is interesting that Virgil's account of the battle should implicate the respective gods of the cultures that are clashing, and interesting too that the "twin snakes" should be mentioned. The editor of the Loeb edition of the *Aeneid* glosses this phrase with the observation that "the twin snakes are a symbol of death" (Virgil 2000, p. 109n). It is not therefore an explicit reference to the serpents through whose venom Cleopatra was reported to have died, but it may well be a detail that lodged itself in Shakespeare's memory and helped to inspire the two asps by which Cleopatra commits suicide in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Plutarch, Shakespeare's main source, only mentions one "Aspicke", although he also alludes to the fact that there are "two little pretie bytings in her arme" (Plutarch 1579, p. 1010), a detail that may also have reinforced the notion that the queen availed herself of two serpents in order to bring about her death and not only one.

Shakespeare's debt to Virgil, not only in the matter of the Battle of Actium and its protagonists but also in that of the story of Dido and Aeneas which constitutes a kind of intertext for *Antony and Cleopatra*, is self-evident. Dido is another African queen, Aeneas's love for whom precipitates the same division of imperatives – between public duty and private sentiment – that will later afflict the Antony of Shakespeare's tragedy. In the fourth book of the *Aeneid* Aeneas, at the instigation of the gods, gives precedence to his duty to the future Rome and abandons Dido, who commits suicide in despair.

Shakespeare's Antony, on the other hand, does the precise opposite by disregarding his duty to Rome and remaining in the thrall of Cleopatra. "Thy beck might from the bidding of the gods / Command me" (3.11.60-61), Antony tells Cleopatra, in what would seem to be a kind of inverted echo of Aeneas's undertaking to comply with the divine injunction he has received. In another such echo, if Virgil's Aeneas has told Dido that he must complete his journey to Italy because "there is my love, there my country!" (Virgil 1999, p. 445), Shakespeare's Antony exclaims to Cleopatra that "Here is my space!" (1.1.35). Antony is aware that Aeneas is the antitype of himself, and sees his relation to Virgil's hero almost as one of rivalry, invoking the story of Aeneas and Dido as it will be recounted in the *Aeneid* when he imagines himself walking hand in hand with Cleopatra in the place "Where souls do couch on flowers", and so impressing the ghosts inhabiting that realm that "Dido and her Aeneas shall want troops, / And all the haunt be ours" (4.14.52-55). It is ironically the case that he gets the story wrong, for, as Adelman reminds us, in Virgil Dido deliberately spurns Aeneas when she encounters him in the afterlife, and the scene of their encounter is not in the Elysian Fields but in the *campi lugentes* or plains of mourning (Adelman 1973, p. 68).

Although it is generally recognized that Virgil's Dido is to some degree modelled on Cleopatra, the poet betrays, perhaps in spite of himself, a tinge of sympathy for the Carthaginian queen that he does not extend to her Egyptian successor. Even greater sympathy for Dido is exhibited by Ovid in the seventh epistle of his *Heroides*, which purports to be a letter addressed to Aeneas by the forsaken queen as she is preparing to take her own life, and in which the Trojan's violation of his vows of love and devotion is seen from her perspective.[4] Chaucer explicitly cites Ovid in the section dedicated to the figure of Dido in his *The Legend of Good Women*, which emulates its model by relating the story of Dido and Aeneas from the point of view of the former (Chaucer 1969, p. 377). Perhaps influenced by the *Heroides* as much as by the *Aeneid*, Christopher Marlowe also gives Dido a passionate voice of her own in his *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, a work which, as Adelman demonstrates, presents numerous analogies with *Antony and Cleopatra* (Adelman 1973, pp. 76-78), and which might therefore be regarded in the light of an intertext for that play. The image of Dido being abandoned by an Aeneas intent upon fulfilling his divinely ordained destiny as the progenitor of the Romans is one that haunts Shakespeare's drama as well. As early as *Titus Andronicus* we find a reference to "the wandering prince and Dido" (2.2.22), Lorenzo will evoke the memory of the forsaken queen who "Stood … with a willow in her hand / Upon the wild sea banks" in *The Merchant of Venice* (5.1.10-11), and the "widow Dido" will figure in an opaque and rather puerile exchange of repartee between Antonio and Sebastian in *The Tempest* (2.1.78ff.). "Aeneas' tale to Dido" is mentioned in *Hamlet* (2.2.445), while in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* the Jailer's Daughter asserts that "in the next world will Dido see Palamon, and then will she be out of love with Aeneas" (4.3.14-16), the girl apparently forgetting, as Antony does in *Antony and Cleopatra*, that in Virgil's epic Dido has been reunited with her husband Sychaeus in the afterlife and shuns Aeneas when she encounters him. The

[4] Sergio Casali discusses the connection between *Heroides* 7 and the confrontation between Aeneas and Dido in the fourth book of the *Aeneid* in Casali 2004/2005. Wilders relevantly points out that Cleopatra's lines in *Antony and Cleopatra* "What, says the married woman you may go? / Would she had never given you leave to come" (1.3.20-21) may be derived from Dido's epistle in the *Heroides*: "'But your god orders you to go.' I wish he had forbidden you to come" (Wilders 2018, p. 108n). It might be further speculated that Dido's words to her dead husband Sychaeus "I come, I come thy bride" (Ovid 1914, p. 91), may have inspired Cleopatra's words as she prepares for her death: "Husband, I come!" (5.2.286).

association of Dido and Cleopatra in Shakespeare's own mind is suggested in the juxtaposition of the two figures in *Romeo and Juliet*, when Mercutio mockingly asserts that in comparison with Rosaline "Dido [is] a dowdy, Cleopatra a gypsy" (2.4.42).

While there is not the least trace of sympathy for Cleopatra in Virgil's account of the Battle of Actium, Horace's ode 1.37, probably written in 30 BCE in the immediate aftermath of Cleopatra's suicide, exhibits distinct symptoms of ambivalence in its treatment of the late queen of Egypt, and already contains the potentiality for divergent narratives with very different moral implications.[5] Mark Antony is not mentioned, so the conflict that has just come to an end with the Battle of Actium is represented as being one waged with a foreign power and not as a civil war. The poem begins in an orthodox enough vein by exulting in the death of Cleopatra, declaring that this is the occasion for dancing and bibulous celebration, of broaching the reserves of Caecuban wine that it would have been inappropriate to partake of during the previous state of emergency. Cleopatra is portrayed as a deranged and drunken queen (the inebriation induced in her case by the Mareotic wine of her own country rather than by more respectable vintages), surrounded by corrupt counsellors – "the mad queen / with her contaminated flock of men / diseased by vice" – threatening destruction to the Capitoline hill itself (Horace 2000, p. 54). Horace evokes Octavius's success in destroying Cleopatra's fleet and goes on to describe his pursuing her in order "to put in chains / this monster sent by fate" (Horace 2000, p. 55). At this point however the tone of the poem changes, and so does the image of the Egyptian queen herself, as Caesar is described in predatory terms as a hunter relentlessly pursuing his fleeing prey:

> … like a hawk
> after gentle doves or a swift hunter
> after a hare on the snowy plains
> of Thrace (Horace 2000, p. 55)

The focus has at this point shifted to the by now defenceless woman being mercilessly hunted down, and who, cornered in her palace in Alexandria, unexpectedly rises superbly to the occasion. Contemplating the ruins of her kingdom, and stoically resolved to take her own life rather than attempt further flight, Cleopatra is described as being impervious to "a woman's fear / of the sword", and as being "brave enough to take deadly serpents / in her hand, and let her body / drink their black poison" (Horace 2000, p. 55). Far from being an act of desperation that sets the seal on her defeat, Cleopatra's suicide becomes a victory that thwarts Caesar's project of parading her through the streets of Rome as a trophy:

> Fiercer she was in the death she chose, as though
> she did not wish to cease to be a queen, taken to Rome
> on the galleys of savage Liburnians,
> to be a humble woman in a proud triumph. (Horace 2000, p. 55)

The tones in which the vanquished but proudly defiant queen is described in the final lines of the poem are those of admiration that essentially contradict the gloating celebration of her death in its opening, the ode in its entirety thus exhibiting, as Charles Martindale remarks, "not so much balance or detachment as two bizarrely juxtaposed and opposing stances" (Martindale 2009, p. 4).

[5] This ambivalence is examined in Grummel 1954, and DeForest 1989.

Whereas there can be little doubt that Shakespeare was thinking of the *Aeneid* when he wrote *Antony and Cleopatra*, there can be no comparable certainty that he had the Cleopatra ode explicitly in mind as well. Nonetheless there is considerable reason to believe that Horace, whose poetry Shakespeare would certainly have read in school,[6] did significantly influence his treatment of his heroine. As Perry D. Westbrook points out, there is little resemblance between the Cleopatra of the final scenes of Shakespeare's play and that described by Plutarch, in whose account she becomes unhinged by grief and suicidal only because of her separation from Antony, and it might therefore legitimately be concluded that "in his characterization of Cleopatra, Shakespeare's debt to Horace seems highly probable" (Westbrook 1947, p. 398). Even more importantly, perhaps, the radical shift in viewpoint whereby the lunatic queen of the opening lines is suddenly perceived as a heroic figure opposing herself to the arrogance of the Romans after the disaster of Actium might also have constituted a precedent for the imaginative strategy pursued in Shakespeare's tragedy, a work which distinguishes itself precisely for the manner in which it delineates, and fluctuates restlessly between, alternative and mutually antagonistic perspectives.[7]

3.

It is not only as a dramatic artefact that *Antony and Cleopatra* is constructed of antecedent stories concerning the events surrounding the Battle of Actium, for its protagonists are also constructed – and in large measure construct themselves – by means of other stories alluded to within the play itself. These stories are predominantly mythological in origin. Discussing what he terms "Cleopatra's habit of mythologizing herself", Robert Miola points out that this tendency is in fact a reflection of what occurs in the play at large, that "like Cleopatra, Shakespeare sees the action on stage in mythological terms" (Miola 2004, p. 130). This is particularly the case with Antony and the way he both envisages himself and is ambivalently envisaged by the play itself. In Plutarch's account of his life, Antony is associated with two figures from the world of myth which serve him in the capacity almost of tutelary spirits, the biographer relating that "it was sayd that *Antonius* came of the race of *Hercules* … and in the manner of his life he followed *Bacchus*: and therefore he was called the new *Bacchus*" (Plutarch 1579, p. 999). According to Plutarch, Antony went so far as to affect apparel reminiscent of the mythological personage he claimed as his ancestor (Plutarch 1579, p. 972), a sartorial detail that Shakespeare wisely chose to overlook in his drama. Hercules is the type of the invincible hero, the veteran of a long series of arduous labours from which he has emerged triumphant, and therefore would seem to be an eminently suitable mythic prototype for Antony in his character as Roman

[6] For Horace's influence on Shakespeare, see Baldwin 1944, pp. 497-525. Horace is explicitly alluded to in *Titus Andronicus* 4.2.20-24, a play which is also, as I have argued elsewhere, deeply interested in the manner in which the stories found in literature impinge upon life (Lucking 2012, pp. 43-61). Horace is also mentioned in *Love's Labour's Lost* 4.2.101-102.

[7] For a stimulating account of how *Antony and Cleopatra* creates a "simultaneity of competing visions", and how as it "moves among several perspectives, it suggests the futility and the validity of each", see Adelman 1973 (these quotations, p. 51, p. 170). Harold Boom similarly comments on the fact that the play presents "an enigmatic range of possible judgments and interpretations" through a "kaleidoscopic shifting of perspectives" in which "no privileged perspective is granted to the audience" (Bloom 1999, p. 546, p. 560). In a similar vein is Sara Munson Deats's description of the tragedy as "Shakespeare's great anamorphic drama" (Deats 2005, p. 3). Other critics have expressed analogous views.

general with an extensive list of military successes to his credit. But there is nothing unproblematic about Antony's connection with this mythical forebear. If at one point in *Antony and Cleopatra* a soldier displays his martial spirit by swearing by Hercules (3.7.66), he ironically does so only after failing to prevail upon Antony to engage the enemy forces on land as good sense dictates. Since Antony has fallen egregiously short of the expectations aroused by his association with Hercules, it is significant that in a departure from his source in Plutarch, in which Antony is abandoned on the eve of his final battle by Bacchus (Plutarch 1579, pp. 1005-1006), Shakespeare should insert into *Antony and Cleopatra* a suggestive scene in which it is not the god of wine and revelry but his other guardian deity who deserts him to the strains of mysterious music: "'Tis the god Hercules whom Antony loved / Now leaves him" (4.3.21-22).

Notwithstanding the many stories concerning the superhuman exploits of which he was the protagonist, moreover, there are others in which Hercules appears in a far more vulnerable light, and these also reflect on Antony. Antony himself explicitly invokes one such story when he compares the mental anguish he is experiencing after Cleopatra's apparent betrayal of him to the agony – provoked by the poisoned tunic brought to him by his servant Lichas – that drives Hercules to immolate himself on a funeral pyre:

> The shirt of Nessus is upon me. Teach me
> Alcides, thou mine ancestor, thy rage;
> Let me lodge Lichas on the horns o'th' moon,
> And with those hands that grasped the heaviest club
> Subdue my worthiest self. (4.12.43-47)

As a number of commentators have noted, there are other stories concerning Hercules that have relevance to Antony's situation as well, and the implicit comparisons are not always flattering. One concerns the subjugation of Hercules by Omphale, found for instance in Deianeira's letter to Hercules in Ovid's *Heroides* (Ovid 1914, pp. 113-117). During his period of servitude to Omphale, Deianeira recalls, Hercules dressed himself in female attire, "binding your shaggy hair with a woman's turban" (Ovid 1914, p. 113), while Omphale appropriated his darts and his club and "tricked herself out in your arms" (Ovid 1914, p. 115).[8] Perhaps taking his cue from this, Shakespeare has his Cleopatra recall that when Antony was incapacitated by drink she "put my tires and mantles on him, whilst / I wore his sword Philippan" (2.5.22-23). Deianeira's taunt to Hercules that Omphale "has proved herself a man by a right you could not urge" (Ovid 1914, p. 117), is perhaps recollected in Octavius's disparaging remark that Antony is "not more manlike / Than Cleopatra, nor the queen of Ptolemy / More womanly than he" (1.4.5-7). If Shakespeare did not derive this story from Ovid as these specific analogies would seem to suggest, he would have found it in Plutarch, who explicitly evokes this mythological precedent in connection with Antony in his "Comparison of Demetrius with Antonius", alluding to "painted tables, where *Omphale* secretlie stealeth away *Hercules* clubbe, and tooke his Lyons skinne from him. Even so *Cleopatra* oftentimes unarmed *Antonius*" (Plutarch 1579, p. 1012).[9]

[8] For the relevance of this anecdote, see Adelman 1973, pp. 81-83.

[9] Adelman and Wilders are among those critics who cite another story concerning Hercules, sometimes referred to as Hercules at the Crossroads or Hercules's Choice, that might be construed as having some bearing on Antony's situation. In this story Hercules encounters two women, one in sober and the other in voluptuous attire, representing Virtue and Vice respectively. In the myth Hercules chooses Virtue, whereas Antony, in preferring Cleopatra over the virtuous Octavia, does the reverse (Adelman 1973, p. 81ff,

For her part Cleopatra locates her mythic prototype in the Egyptian goddess Isis, whose name appears no fewer than eight times in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and whom Shakespeare would have read about in the long essay dedicated to the myth of Isis and Osiris in Plutarch's *Moralia*. It seems quite likely that, as has several times been suggested, Shakespeare is echoing this work when he has Antony describe Cleopatra as a queen "Whom everything becomes" (1.1.50), which would seem to hark back to Plutarch's statement that Isis "becommeth all maner of things" (Plutarch 1603, p. 1319).[10] Cleopatra deliberately assimilates herself to this goddess, attiring herself in what Octavius describes as the "habiliments of the goddess Isis" when she appears with Antony in a public ceremony in which kingdoms are distributed among her children (3.6.17). This is another detail that Shakespeare derived from Plutarch, who reports that Cleopatra was in the habit of appearing in "the apparell of the goddesse *Isis*, and so gave audience unto all her subjects, as a new *Isis*" (Plutarch 1579: 996). Although the play does not specify as much, it seems very likely, as Alison Findlay points out, that it is precisely this costume which Cleopatra arrays herself in as she is preparing for her suicide (Findlay 2010, p. 206).

The best known story concerning Isis is the myth recorded by Plutarch in his essay "Of Isis and Osiris". In this myth Isis is the sister and wife of Osiris, and after Osiris is slain and dismembered by their brother it falls to her to reassemble the scattered fragments of his body and restore him to life in the form of a god. It has been suggested by several critics that it is something of the sort that Cleopatra is doing for Antony when, in the final scene of the play, she virtually apotheosizes her dead lover in her rhapsodic evocation of his virtually superhuman qualities (Bono 1984, pp. 199-219, Adelman 1992, pp. 183-184):

> His legs bestrid the ocean; his reared arm
> Crested the world; his voice was propertied
> As all the tuned spheres, and that to friends;
> But when he meant to quail and shake the orb,
> He was as rattling thunder. (5.2.81-85)

Such an interpretation is not without its difficulties, because the Isis that Plutarch describes in his essay is associated by the Egyptians with the earth, whereas her brother Osiris is the Nile that yearly inundates the land: "they both hold and affirme, *Nilus* to be the effluence of *Osiris*; even so they are of opinion, that the body of *Isis* is the earth or land of *Aegypt*" (Plutarch 1603, p. 1303). In Shakespeare's play it is Cleopatra herself who is associated with the Nile. For those familiar with Plutarch's essay, nonetheless, the frequent references to Isis in *Antony and Cleopatra* might well have served not only to enhance the Egyptian atmosphere but also to conjure up recollections of the slain and resurrected god and thereby impart a further mythic resonance to the play.

If the bearing that the story of Isis and Osiris has on that of Antony and Cleopatra is far from being self-evident, what is less doubtful is the relevance of another myth to their story. This is the story of Venus and Mars, which is explicitly alluded to by the eunuch Mardian when he admits that although he lacks the anatomical equipment to

Wilders 2018, p. 65). The suggestion is an attractive one in view of the fact that the story was a popular subject of art in the Renaissance and, as Richard Hillman among others has pointed out, lends itself to treatment in Neoplatonic terms that enrich our perception of Antony's predicament (Hillman 1987, p. 447ff). For a discussion of the folklore origins of the story, see Davies 2013.

[10] For discussions of this connection, see for instance Bono 1984, pp. 198-213, Lloyd 2002, Adelman 1992, pp. 183-185, and Wilders 2018, pp. 67-69.

engage in such activities on his own account he nonetheless thinks about "What Venus did with Mars" (1.5.19). Antony is several times compared to Mars (1.1.4, 2.2.6, 2.5.117), while Cleopatra is described by Enobarbus as "o'erpicturing" Venus as she reclines upon her barge on the River Cydnus (2.2.210). Mardian's allusion to what Venus did with Mars evokes a tangled literary and iconographical tradition which is itself highly ambivalent, the liaison between the two deities giving rise to a number of stories of very different tendency and tenor, all of which provide potential perspectives in which the situation of Shakespeare's lovers can be viewed. One is the account, found in the fourth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, of the trap that Venus's husband Vulcan springs on the couple, catching them in flagrante and exposing them to the ridicule of the Olympians. As Miola observes, this myth "undercuts the pretensions of the human lovers and deflates their swelling rhetoric", and "by suggesting the folly of sexual appetite … the Ovidian perspective increases the ambivalence of the love affair" (Miola 2004, p. 13). Another mythological tradition is that of a Mars subdued so utterly to the charms of Venus that he has divested himself of his weapons and, having preferred the goddess's arms to his own, lies prostrate and enervated in the aftermath of their embrace, a subject that has frequently found its way into art down through the ages and that Shakespeare himself rehearses in *Venus and Adonis* (97-114).[11] This is a scenario that is itself subject to radically different interpretations, since it can be construed as depicting the power of love to overcome the principle of strife, which is what it is made to allegorize for instance in Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* 1.29-40, or as representing the pathos and even the depravity of martial valour succumbing to erotic passion. "In other words", says Wilders, "it is capable of both an 'Egyptian' and a 'Roman' reading" (Wilders 2018, p. 64).[12] The fact that Antony and Cleopatra can be seen in such a diversity of mythological contexts, and quite often see themselves in such contexts as well, is another element contributing to the perspectivism which is so notable a feature of this work. As Cleopatra herself remarks in connection with Antony, making what would seem to be implicit reference to the perspective pictures that were in vogue in Shakespeare's time,[13] and at the same time also providing a kind of metadramatic comment on the perspectivist strategy operating throughout *Antony and Cleopatra* as a whole, "Though he be painted one way like a Gorgon, / The other way's a Mars" (2.5.116-117).

4.

At the same time as they are seen, and in greater or lesser measure also see themselves, within narratological perspectives constituted by such classical myths as these, the protagonists of *Antony and Cleopatra* are also trying to forge independent narratives of their own, stories in which their sense of self is vested to the degree that, to adapt Jerome Bruner's phrase, they "*become* the autobiographical narratives by which [they] 'tell about' [their] lives" (Bruner 2004, p. 694).[14] References to recording chronicles through action,

[11] Perhaps the most celebrated Renaissance depiction of this scene is Botticelli's panel painting of Venus and Mars, probably painted around 1485, and housed in the National Gallery of London.

[12] See also Adelman 1973, p. 81.

[13] A point made in Shickman 1978, p. 225, and in Wilder's note to these lines in his edition of the play (Shakespeare 2018, pp. 153-154n).

[14] For recent discussions of what is sometimes described as "narrative identity", by which is meant the evolving life stories through which individuals effectively create their personal selves and invest their existences with unity and purpose, see Singer 2004, and McAdams and McLean 2013.

to individuals metaphorically writing their identities in the feats they perform, appear at a number of points in the play. Preparing to encounter Octavius's army in the field, Antony promises Cleopatra that "I and my sword will earn our chronicle" (3.13.180), his choice of verbs recalling Enobarbus's words earlier in the same scene when he describes the manner in which a subordinate "earns a place i'th' story" through the steadfastness of his allegiance (3.13.47). After Antony's suicide Dercetas says that he died by "that self hand / Which writ his honour in the acts it did" (5.1.21-22). When Eros chooses to kill himself rather than assist Antony in his project of committing suicide, Antony comments that "My queen and Eros / Have by their brave instruction got upon me / A nobleness in record" (4.14.98-100). But if the characters of the play are seeking to tell their own stories in a way that reflects the maximum credit upon themselves, they are also vulnerable to having stories told about them by others that may undermine that credit. After marrying Octavia Antony admonishes her not to heed the tales that are being told about him by what Demetrius has earlier generically described as "the common liar" who speaks maliciously about him in Rome (1.1.61). "Read not my blemishes in the world's report" (2.3.5), he tells her, although it is precisely this report that he proceeds to corroborate in his own subsequent actions. Antony's friend Enobarbus, having forfeited the place in the story he formerly occupied, recognizes that he is now subject to narrative mechanisms that are beyond his control, and that "When men revolted shall upon record / Bear hateful memory" it is the "blessed moon" that must bear witness to his repentance (4.9.9-11). The possibility of such lunar intervention in setting the record straight being somewhat remote, Enobarbus must resign himself to the inevitability of the fact that the world will "rank me in register / A master-leaver and a fugitive" (4.9.24-25), that his identity will be defined by narratives woven by others and not by his own.

Even as it insists on the role played by stories in giving shape and meaning to human existence, *Antony and Cleopatra* reminds us continually of the relative nature of stories, of the fact that they are interested constructions rather than faithful representations of reality. The play is full of instances of stories being revised, or of new stories being invented to meet the exigencies of the moment. Justifying the fact that he gave short shrift to the messenger Octavius dispatched to him in Alexandria, Antony explains that his apparent discourtesy was not a deliberate slight but due to the fact that when the messenger burst upon him unannounced he had just entertained three kings, and "did want / Of what I was i'th' morning" (2.2.81-82), thus devising a story which is at variance with that Octavius has read into the situation. A messenger reporting on Octavia's appearance for Cleopatra's benefit deliberately misrepresents her appearance in response to the queen's tacit invitation to portray her rival in an unflattering light (3.3.8ff.), thereby substantiating the inference that her marriage to Antony is a purely political arrangement which is not destined to endure. Antony's lieutenant Ventidius, knowing that it is inadvisable to trespass too heavily on the stories that others are telling about themselves, prudently refrains from tarnishing Antony's heroic narrative by permitting himself to win too many victories even if they are in his captain's name (3.1.11-27). Cleopatra arranges for a false story about her death to be conveyed to Antony by her eunuch (4.13.7-10, 4.14.27-34), and later manages to deceive Octavius about her own intentions by giving him to believe that she has not been entirely forthcoming in declaring the amount of her treasure, the implicit story being that she is holding much of her wealth in reserve for a future she has no intention of foregoing (5.2.137ff.). If, as many recent contributions to the burgeoning field of narratological theory suggest, we are such stuff as stories are made on, that stuff is infinitely malleable.

In his own unimaginative way, even Octavius is constructing a story. Caesar's story, with its relentless momentum culminating in the triumphant inauguration of the Pax

Romana, will ultimately be consecrated as History, and Octavius, confident that the "time of universal peace" of which he will be remembered as the architect is at hand (4.6.5), is resolute that this narrative be invested with lineaments of his own choosing.[15] There are moments in the play in which Octavius betrays an obscure consciousness that what he is doing is making history in more than one sense of the phrase. Plutarch informs us that upon learning of Antony's death Octavius showed his officers the correspondence exchanged between himself and Antony in order to justify his own actions (Plutarch 1579, p. 1007). Shakespeare makes a subtle but significant adjustment to this anecdote, having his Octavius speak not specifically of the missives he sent to Antony but of his "writings" generally:

> Go with me to my tent, where you shall see
> How hardly I was drawn into this war,
> How calm and gentle I proceeded still
> In all my writings. Go with me and see
> What I can show in this. (5.1.73-77)[16]

The story of himself as being mild and magnanimous even in victory is one that Caesar wishes to promulgate at all costs, and having gained effective hegemony over the whole of the known world he has the power to accomplish this design. When he tells Cleopatra that "The record of what injuries you did us, / Though written in our flesh, we shall remember / As things but done by chance" (5.2.117-119), what he is essentially saying is that he can rewrite even the most deeply etched records according to his own fiat and thereby dictate the contours of reality itself. Octavius's officers are complicit in this narratological project, and in urging Cleopatra, who has made a feeble effort to kill herself, to "Let the world see / His nobleness well acted, which your death / Will never let come forth" (5.2.43-45) they are telling her that she too must play her part in a personal story destined to become the story of the Roman Empire itself.

But both Antony and Cleopatra have their own stories to defend, and they do so until their dying breaths. Although Antony bungles the Roman suicide he has planned for himself, failing to kill himself outright when he impales himself upon his sword, he does nonetheless manage to deliver what amounts to being a eulogy to his own memory as he is on the point of death:

> 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. (4.15.53-60)

[15] For an extended discussion of how the Battle of Actium was put to ideological use by the Augustan regime, and more particularly of "the story of the Victor and how he 'wrote' the history of the period", see Lange 2009 (this quotation, p. 2).

[16] As it happens, Augustus did leave a kind of record of his accomplishments in the form of the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, a funerary inscription written in the first person and detailing his political career, public benefactions (including extravagant spectacles), and military exploits. Whether Shakespeare himself knew of the existence of this edifying specimen of self-aggrandizing propaganda is moot.

Antony thus recaptures for one final moment the narrative initiative, becoming once again the hero of his own saga in spite of Octavius, and asserting that it is he himself and not Caesar who has vanquished him. Cleopatra pursues a course of action analogous to that of her lover. She learns that Octavius's intention is to exhibit her as a captive and thereby use her to reinforce his own narrative of conquest, and that if he is anxious that she remain in good health it is only because, as he himself says, "her life in Rome / Would be eternal in our triumph" (5.1.65-66). Cleopatra recognizes that if he is successful in his scheme the characters both of herself and of Antony will be manipulated to conform to the story that Octavius is telling about the world, that even her attendant Iras will be reduced to being an "Egyptian puppet" in a pantomime not of their own making (5.2.207):

> … scald rhymers [will]
> Ballad us out o'tune. The quick comedians
> Extemporally will stage us and present
> Our Alexandrian revels; Antony
> Shall be brought drunken forth; and I shall see
> Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
> I'th' posture of a whore. (5.2.214-20)

The boldness of Shakespeare's metatheatrical gesture of having a boy actor pronounce these words on an Elizabethan stage has been much applauded. What is less frequently remarked is that the boy who delivers this speech, far from degrading himself or the woman he impersonates, is enacting the role of a proud queen reappropriating her own story notwithstanding all efforts to suppress it, and precisely by not doing what he is himself predicting he will do is thereby vindicating the dignity of the character he plays. As in the case of Horace's Cleopatra, the queen's decision to kill herself – arrayed in regal robes which may well be the "habiliments of the goddess Isis" that Octavius has referred to earlier – is a gesture of personal defiance, but what it also amounts to being is, in narratological terms, a refusal to allow the Roman conqueror to absorb her within the monolithic story he is imposing on events.

Even Octavius, hardly a sentimentalist by any stretch of the imagination, is obliged to concede in the end that the story of love and loss that has just reached its conclusion with the death of Cleopatra is no less compelling in its way than the narrative of power in which his own identity is inscribed. Contemplating the body of the dead queen, Octavius acknowledges indeed that the story of the lovers, though it may be one terminating in defeat and death, is invested with a splendour scarcely inferior to his own:

> She shall be buried by her Antony.
> No grave upon the earth shall clip in it
> A pair so famous. High events as these
> Strike those that make them, and their story is
> No less in pity than his glory which
> Brought them to be lamented. (5.2.357-362)

But Octavius's words are double-edged, and neither as candid nor as magnanimous as they are meant to sound. Antony and Cleopatra are dead, and Octavius is alive. They may arouse pity, but it is he who has attained glory, and his glory derives precisely from the fact that he has made them objects of pity. As an attentive reader of Plutarch, furthermore, Shakespeare would have been aware of a circumstance not expressly mentioned in his tragedy, and this is that notwithstanding her suicide Cleopatra *was* exhibited, if only in symbolic form, in Caesar's triumph in Rome, since among the trophies paraded during that spectacle was "*Cleopatraes* image, with an Aspicke byting of her arme" (Plutarch 1579, p.

1010). Not only Cleopatra, but also the serpent she chose as the instrument of her death, were destined to become part of Octavius's self-congratulatory narrative, her suicide being rewritten not as a triumphant escape from his hegemony but as a confirmation of it. The rising emperor's story would therefore appear to have prevailed over all others, as the stories of victors generally do. But there is a final irony to be discerned even here. What Octavius cannot know as he is pronouncing his eulogy over Cleopatra's body is that in states unborn and accents yet unknown he will become a character in a play named not for himself but for those he boasts of having destroyed, and that for many of those watching that play the only place he can ultimately claim to have earned is in their story.

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