The Metamorphic Tragedy of *Anthony and Cleopatra*

ANTHONY MILLER

When he turned the pages of Plutarch, his principal historical source for *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare was confronted with the values of a sober ethical arbiter. Plutarch treats Anthony's tragic fall as the consequence of his subservience to fleshly pleasure. Such pleasure is a 'pestilent plague and mischief', a 'sweet poison'. It makes mature manhood regress to childishness: Anthony 'spent and lost in childish sports (as a man might say) and idle pastimes, the most precious thing a man can spend, ... and that is, time'. Even more shamefully, it makes courageous manhood descend to cowardliness. By his flight at the battle of Actium, Anthony 'had not only lost the courage and heart of an Emperor, but also of a valiant man. ... In the end, as Paris fled from the battle and went to hide himself in Helen's arms, even so did he in Cleopatra's arms'.[1] Yet Shakespeare's management of his tragedy, like his understanding of Roman history in general, is not circumscribed by Plutarch. There are indications that Shakespeare looked far afield to furnish his play with quite minor details, such as Anthony's account of Egyptian farming practices, which apparently derives from Pliny or from the Renaissance historian of Africa, Johannes Leo. The play's treatment of the historical significance of Augustus Caesar's victory over Anthony and Cleopatra derives not only from Plutarch, but from the Augustan poets Horace and Virgil.[2] In dramatizing the tragedy of Anthony, and in amplifying it with the tragedy of Cleopatra, Shakespeare voices not only Plutarchan censoriousness. He adds generosity towards human weakness.

1 Plutarch, *The Life of Marcus Antonius*, in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough, vol. 5 (London, 1964), pp. 283, 284, 275, 301, 319-20. Spelling modernised by the present author.

2 See Reuben Brower, *Hero and Saint* (Oxford, 1971), ch. 8; Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare's Rome* (Cambridge, 1983), ch. 5; Anthony Miller, *Shakespeare's Anthony and Cleopatra*, Horizon Studies in Literature (Sydney, 1992), ch. 3.

He adds admiration of the spectacle of human excess – excess inz folly as well as in heroic aspiration. He adds awe at the irresistible powers of Eros and mutability – powers that are by turns life-giving and destructive. These new voices speak in the accents of Horace's and Virgil's younger contemporary Ovid, especially the Ovid of the *Metamorphoses*.[3]

Shakespeare's Ovidianism in *Anthony and Cleopatra* is partly a matter of poetic style. The exotic appeal of remote geographical and historical settings draws from Shakespeare resonant catalogues:

> He hath assembled
> Bocchus, the King of Libya, Archelaus
> Of Cappadocia, Philadelphos, King
> Of Paphlagonia; the Thracian King Adallus;
> King Manchus of Arabia, King of Pont,
> Herod of Jewry ... [4]

The monarchs in this catalogue are named by Plutarch, but in a more scattered and more matter-of-fact way. Shakespeare's treatment owes something to the convention of the epic catalogue, but something too to Ovid's pleasure in rich nomenclature and exotic locales. In describing the lovesick Hyperion, for example, Ovid descants on his past and present loves:

> *nec te Clymeneque Rhodosque*
> *nec tenet Aeaeae genetrix pulcherrima Circes ...*

Now neither Clymene seems fair to thee, nor the maide of Rhodes, nor Aeaean Circes'mother, though most beautiful, nor Clytie ... Leucothoe makes thee forgetful of them all, she whom

3 For the relation of *Anthony and Cleopatra* to Ovid's *Amores* and *Heroides*, see T.W. Baldwin, *William Shakspere's Small Latine & Lesse Greeke* (Urbana, 1944), ii, 424-5, and Donna B. Hamilton, '*Anthony and Cleopatra* and the Tradition of Noble Lovers,' *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 24 (1973), 245-51. A revaluation of the relation between Shakespeare and Ovid is foreshadowed in Jonathan Bate, 'Ovid and the Mature Tragedies: Metamorphosis in *Othello* and *KIng Lear*', *Shakespeare Survey*, 41 (1988), 133.

4 *The Tragedy of Anthony and Cleopatra*, ed. A.P. Riemer, The Challis Shakespeare (Sydney, 1985), III.vi.75-80. Further references to this edition are incorporated in the text.

most fair Eurynome bore in the land of spices. ... Her father, Orchamus, ruled over the cities of Persia, himself the seventh in line from ancient Belus.[5]

The accomplished virtuosity of Shakespeare's style in *Anthony and Cleopatra* has often been remarked on. The play contains set-piece speeches of rich profuseness that might be expected to impede the play's action but do not, partly because they modulate into down-to-earth terseness or harshness. Cleopatra's splendid dream of the dead Anthony is cut across by her shrewish answer to the sceptical Dolabella 'You lie up to the hearing of the Gods'(V.ii.113). Anthony's hypnotic evocation of dissolving cloudscapes itself dissolves in the bitter charge that Cleopatra has 'Packt cards with Caesar's'(IV.xiv.22). Enobarbus' description of the languorous Cleopatra on the river Cydnus is followed by a sharply contrasting memory: 'I saw her once/ Hop forty paces through the public street'(II.ii.263-4). Ovid, perhaps more than any other poet, models Shakespeare's rapid transitions between a virtuoso richness, verging sometimes on the grotesque, and pleasure in everyday observation. Thus his description of sailors transformed into dolphins:

> And first Medon's body begins to grow dark and his back to be bent in a well-marked curve. Lycabas starts to say to him: 'Into what strange creature are you turning?' But as he speaks his own jaws spread wide, his nose becomes hooked, and his skin becomes hard and covered with scales. ... Another, catching at a twisted rope with his arms, finds he has no arms and goes plunging backwards with limbless body into the sea: the end of his tail is curved like the horns of a half-moon. They leap about on every side, sending up showers of spray; they emerge from the water, only to return to the depths again; they sport like a troupe of dancers, tossing their bodies in wanton sport and drawing in and blowing out the water from their broad nostrils. (iii.671-5, 679-86; vol. i, pp. 171-3)

Ovid's rhetorical inventiveness often takes the form of paradox, and he often deploys his witty paradoxes in narratives

5 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. and trs. Frank Justus Miller, Loeb Classical Library (London, 1916), iv.204-6, 208-10, 212-3; vol i, p.193. Further references to this edition are incorporated in the text.

of terrible tragedy. When Medea deceives the daughters of Pelias into murdering him in the belief that they are prolonging his life, 'as each was filial she became first in the unfilial act, and that she might not be wicked did the wicked deed' (vii.339-40; vol. i, p. 367). When Ceres torments with hunger the sacrilegious Erysichthon:

> The more he sends down into his maw the more he wants. And as the ocean receives the streams from a whole land and is not filled with his waters, but swallows up the streams that come to it from afar; and as the all-devouring fire never refuses fuel, but burns countless logs, seeks ever more as more is given it, and is more greedy by reason of the quantity: so do the lips of impious Erysichthon receive all those banquets, and ask for more. All food in him is but the cause of food, and ever does he become empty by eating. (viii.834-42; vol. i, pp. 463-5)

Such conceits captivated the Elizabethans, including the early Shakespeare. Juliet's love rhapsody may be a variation on this passage:

> My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
> My love as deep; the more I give to thee
> The more I have, for both are infinite.[6]

In *Anthony and Cleopatra* too Shakespeare exploits paradox to represent the allure of Cleopatra or the magnanimity of Anthony. On Cleopatra's barge are boys,

> With divers-colour'd fans whose wind did seem
> To glove the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
> And what they undid did. (II.ii.234-6)

Panting with exertion, 'she did make defect perfection,/And breathless pour breath forth' (II.ii.266-7). For Anthony's bounty, 'There was no winter in't. An Anthony it was,/ That grew the more by reaping' (V.ii.103-4).[7]

The general affinity in style between the *Metamorphoses* and *Anthony and Cleopatra* is sharpened by what may be particular borrowings. One occurs when Cleopatra contemplates the absent

6 *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Christopher Bentley, The Challis Shakespeare (Sydney, 1990), II.i.184-6.

7 Or, according to a common and attractive emendation, 'an autumn it was.'

Anthony in an idiom touchingly but humorously lovesick:

> Where think'st thou he is now. Stands he, or sits he?
> Or does he walk? Or is he on his horse?
> O happy horse to bear the weight of Anthony!...
> He was not sad, for he would shine on those
> That make their looks by his. He was not merry,
> Which seem'd to tell them his remembrance lay
> In Egypt with his joy, but between both.
> Oh heavenly mingle! Be'st thou sad, or merry,
> The violence of either thee becomes,
> So does it no man's else. (I.v.23-5, 62-8)

There is no equivalent to this passage in Plutarch. Cleopatra's determination to love Anthony's every gesture and her envy of the very horse that bears him imitate and transpose instead Ovid's description of the princess Scylla, infatuated with her father's enemy Minos:

> If he had hidden his head in a crested casque, Minos in a helmet was lovely to her eyes: or if he carried his shining golden shield, the shield became him well. Did he hurl his tough spear with tense muscles, the girl admired the strength and the skill he showed. ... But when unhelmed he showed his face, when clad in purple he bestrode his milk-white steed gorgeous with broidered trappings, and managed the foaming bit, then was Nisus' daughter hardly her own, hardly mistress of a sane mind. Happy the javelin which he touched and happy the reins which he held in his hand, she thought. (viii.24-37; vol. i, p. 409)

The connection between Cleopatra and Scylla is tightened – and might have been prompted – by the resemblance both figures bear to Virgil's Dido. Dido is the classic instance of the royal temptress who fatally transgresses the boundaries of the masculine military and political orders. All three women exhibit a love that is condemned by the poets' official voices as impiously passionate but that nevertheless elicits admiration for its intensity and boldness.

A more distinctive resemblance between Shakespeare's play and Ovid's poem arises from the metamorphic nature of *Anthony and Cleopatra*. Part of the rich astonishment of the *Metamorphoses* resides in the way in which gods and mortals are

intermingled, in which beings pass from one state to the other. Niobe boasts of her forebears – Tantalus ('the only mortal ever allowed to touch the table of the gods'), the Pleiades, Atlas, Jove (vi.170-9; vol. i, p. 301). The river-god Achelous despises his rival suitor Hercules because '"It is a shame for a god to give place to a mortal" (Hercules had not yet been made a god)' (ix.15-16; vol. ii, p. 3). Hercules, human on his mother's side but divine on his father's, finally experiences the metamorphosis of deification. As his body burns on the funeral pyre,

> no shape of Hercules that could be recognized remained, nor was there anything left which his mother gave. He kept traces only of his father; and as a serpent, its old age sloughed off with its skin, revels in fresh life, and shines resplendent in its bright new scales; so when the Tirynthian put off his mortal frame, he gained new vigour in his better part, began to seem of more heroic size, and to become awful in his godlike dignity. (ix.263-70; vol. ii, pp. 21-3)

The leading persons of *Anthony and Cleopatra* tread the same border region between divinity and humanity. Enobarbus compares Cleopatra to Venus. An association between Cleopatra and the goddess Isis is also hinted at throughout the play. In her role as 'serpent of old Nile' and in her knowledge of serpent lore, in her association with the Nile's fertility, in her death pose when she imagines herself suckling an infant, Cleopatra assumes characteristics of Isis, known to the Renaissance from Pliny and Plutarch's *Moralia*. There are allusions to Anthony's descent from Hercules, and his remembered feats as a soldier have the legendary repute of the labours of Hercules. The connection becomes closest as Anthony approaches death, when he imagines himself afflicted with Hercules' shirt of Nessus and emulating Hercules' act of throwing his servant Lichas through the air. The confidence with which Anthony and Cleopatra speak of their triumphant progress in the next world gives their deaths an equivalence to the deifications and stellifications that frequently end Ovid's tragic narratives, not least with the 'godlike dignity' of the metamorphosed Hercules. No less miraculous than their merging of divinity and humanity is the way Anthony and Cleopatra merge masculine and feminine. Caesar complains that Anthony

> is not more manlike
> Than Cleopatra, nor the Queen of Ptolomy
> More womanly than he. (I.iv.5-7)

Cleopatra remembers with delight how

> I drunk him to his bed,
> Then put my tires and mantles on him, whilst
> I wore his sword Philippan. (II.v.24-6)

Ovid sports on this border region when his Iphis and Caenis are metamorphosed from women to men. More challengingly, Ovid's Tiresias owes his prophet's wisdom, as Shakespeare's Anthony and Cleopatra owe their heroic magnitude, partly to the experience of 'knowing both sides of' love: *Venus huic erat utraque nota* (iii.323; vol. i, p. 147).

Anthony and Cleopatra is most profoundly faithful to Ovid's metamorphic vision in its representation of a world ruled – or capriciously overruled – by instability. *In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas corpora* (My mind is bent to tell of bodies changed into new forms): Ovid's declaration of his purpose stands in defiant challenge to the firmness, the fixity, valorised by stoic ethics and by much of the poetry of Ovid's predecessor Virgil. *Anthony and Cleopatra* likewise constitutes a kind of challenge to the marmoreal *Romanitas* embodied in the dramaturgy and the style of Shakespeare's own *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*. The career of the play's hero is a career of metamorphosis. The first Anthony to make his appearance is the hedonist, extravagantly casting off the restraints of Roman military virtue:

> Now for the love of Love and her soft hours,
> Let's not confound the time with conference harsh;
> There's not a minute of our lives should stretch
> Without some pleasure now. (I.i.47-50)

This Anthony metamorphoses into the conscience-stricken soldier and statesman:

> These strong Egyptian fetters I must break,
> Or loose myself in dotage ...
> I must from this enchanting Queen break off.
> (I.ii.123-4, 137)

Having vowed to play the Roman, Anthony yet does so half-heartedly, bearing his arms in the service of Cleopatra (I.iii.80-2). Again, in his marriage to Octavia he plays the man of Roman rectitude: 'I have not kept my square, but that to come/ Shall all be done by th' rule'(II.iii.8-9). But by the end of the same short scene he reverts with reckless abruptness to the Egyptian voluptuary: 'And though I make this marriage for my peace,/ I' th' East my pleasure lies' (1.2.43-4).

After his defeat at Actium Anthony undergoes the most extreme and painful of metamorphoses. 'Unqualitied with very shame' (III.xi.45), he forfeits not only his 'quality' in the usual Renaissance sense, his nobility, but even his 'quality' in its root Latin sense, his essential character as a man or as a human being. Anthony is metamorphosed from himself. Yet even this extremity of shame is not sustained. Anthony's vacillations of mood continue in his decline, and become ridiculous, as registered by the dry commentary of Enobarbus on Anthony's exaggerated bravado: 'Now he'll outstare the lightning' (III.xiii.225), and his stagy pathos: 'What does he mean?' – 'To make his followers weep' (IV.ii.30-1).

Anthony's instability produces the internal division that marks the tragic hero, or one kind of tragic hero – the 'man to double business bound'. In this self-division too, Anthony represents a type that fascinates Ovid. The most celebrated and impressive instance in the *Metamorphoses* of the lover torn, like Anthony, between passion and guilt is the tragic Medea. In her love for Jason, Medea also transgresses, like Anthony, political as well as ethical boundaries:

> Come, thrust from your maiden breast these flames that you feel, if you can, unhappy girl. Ah, if I could, I should be more myself. But some strange power holds me down against my will. Desire persuades me one way, reason another. I see the better and approve it, but I follow the worse. Why do you, a maiden, burn for a stranger, and think upon marriage with a foreign world? (vii.17-22; vol. i, pp. 343-5)

The impropriety of sensual indulgence in traditional Roman ethics is voiced in Ovid by Pentheus, King of Thebes, in a denunciation of the cult of Bacchus. Pentheus' speech, with its

contrast between degraded pleasure and martial prowess, is perhaps imitated by Shakespeare in the opening lines of *Anthony and Cleopatra*, with their contrast between the despicable 'tawny front' or 'Gypsy's lust' and the admirable 'files and musters of the war':

> can shallow tricks of magic, women's shrill cries, wine-heated madness, vulgar throngs and empty drums – can all these vanquish men, for whom real war, with its drawn swords, the blare of trumpets, and lines of glittering spears, had no terrors? (v.534-7; vol. i, pp. 161-3)

Yet, in Ovid as in Shakespeare, such persuasions are powerless against the force of passion. Pentheus is torn to pieces by the Bacchantes. Even Jove – Jove especially – struggles between the demands of marital duty and sensual pleasure, and succumbs to pleasure. In love with Io, he transforms her into a heifer in order to conceal his passion from his wife Juno; but Juno suspects the ruse and begs the heifer as a gift:

> What should he do? 'Twere a cruel task to surrender his love, but not to do so would arouse suspicion. Shame on one side prompts to give her up, but love on the other urges not. (i.617-9; vol. i, pp. 45-7)

Jove's predicament lacks the tragic intensity of Medea's. It verges on the comical in its feeble subterfuge, as Anthony's vacillations make him merely indecisive as much as tragically divided. Hence the nostalgia of the audience, of the play's other persons, and of Anthony himself for Anthony as he formerly was. Tragedy in *Anthony and Cleopatra* assumes an elegiac aspect, as it often does in the *Metamorphoses*, distinguishing it from the immediacy and intensity that more usually characterizes Shakespearean tragedy.

Cleopatra's 'infinite variety' encompasses a series of metamorphoses that is perhaps even more spectacular than Anthony's. Terrifying rage, witty repartee, helpless pathos, shrewd perceptiveness – one state of mind gives way to another in dazzling succession. Even at the play's tragic climax, Cleopatra's roles metamorphose '*in mutatas formas*'. She plays the stoic displaying fortitude in adversity, the desperate woman

seeking death, the lover dreaming of a godlike Anthony, the respectful captive submitting to Caesar, the satirical scoffer envisaging Caesar's triumph, the gracious queen indulging a rural fellow, the faithful wife joining her husband in death. In a telling difference from Anthony, however, Cleopatra's metamorphoses usually seem controlled and strategic, designed to impress or captivate her audience:

> Fie, wrangling Queen,
> Whom every thing becomes: to chide, to laugh,
> To weep; whose every passion fully strives
> To make itself in thee fair and admired! (I.i.52-5)

The versatility with which Shakespeare endows Cleopatra is in part deduced from Plutarch's account. Plutarch writes on the one hand of 'the good grace she had to talk and discourse, her courteous nature that tempered her words and deeds'; on the other hand he reports how 'she would play at dice with him drink with him, and hunt commonly with him'.[8] But in the abruptness of her changes and the violence of her passions Shakespeare's Cleopatra approximates more closely to the fierce goddesses of the *Metamorphoses*. In her threat to 'unpeople Egypt' (I.v.89), in her readiness at one moment to shower her messenger with gold and at the next to whip him with wire and stew him in brine, she recalls the vindictive jealousies of Juno, Minerva, or Diana. In her jealousy of Io, Juno 'Straightway ... flamed with anger, nor did she delay the fulfilment of her wrath. She set a terror-bearing fury to work before the eyes and heart of her Grecian rival, planted deep within her breast a goading fear, and sent her fleeing in terror through all the world' (i.724-7; vol. i, p. 53). Then, as in the reconciliations between Cleopatra and Anthony, Juno is just as suddenly reconciled with Jupiter and her anger assuaged: 'The goddess's wrath is soothed; Io gains back her former looks, and becomes what she was before' (i.738-9; vol. i, p. 55). Like Cleopatra in her jealousy of Fulvia and Octavia, Juno rails against her rivals Semele and Ino. Cleopatra is acutely aware of her regal rank ('Remember/ if e'er thou look'st on majesty'); Ovid's goddesses are jealous of their godly rank and mercilessly persecute those who infringe upon it, like Juno with

8 *Life of Marcus Antonius*, pp. 275, 276.

Niobe and Hercules, Minerva with Arachne, and Diana with Actaeon.

The love that joins Anthony and Cleopatra is not simply the lamentable weakness diagnosed by Plutarch but the awesomely powerful, unpredictable force that animates human life – and overthrows the self-mastery of many a god – in the *Metamorphoses*. The richly contending perspectives on love opened up by Shakespeare's play are created, it might be said, by overlaying Plutarch with Ovid. Unlike Plutarch's Anthony, Shakespeare's is not invariably debilitated by love. He loses battles at sea when misled by Cleopatra, but at other times his soldiership is inspired by love. Cleopatra arms him for battle with Caesar, and he vows himself to her service like a chivalric knight:

> I go from hence
> Thy soldier, servant ...
> If from the field I shall return once more
> To kiss these lips, I will appear in blood.
> (I.iii.80-1; III.xiii.202-3)

So Ovid's Medea empowers Jason to heroic victories through a love figured in her gift of magic herbs and spells (vii.92-158). On the other hand, Medea is also a type of the malevolent and deceitful woman, and the power of love in the *Metamorphoses* as in *Anthony and Cleopatra* produces tragic disaster no less than heroism. Apollo's love for Daphne is cruelly relentless:

> Just as when a Gallic hound has seen a hare in an open plain, and seeks his prey on flying feet, but the hare, safety; ... so ran the god and maid, he sped by hope and she by fear. But he ran the more swiftly, borne on the wings of love, gave her no time to rest, hung over her fleeing shoulders and breathed on the hair that streamed over her neck. Now was her strength all gone. (i.533-4, 539-43, vol. i, pp. 39-41)

In this instance, the intensity and rapacity of love overwhelm its object. The tragic suffering that love produces in turn receives the consolations of release and memorialization, in one of the compensatory myths that characterize the *Metamorphoses*. Daphne is transformed into a laurel tree,

> And the god cried out to this: 'Since thou canst no be my bride, thou shalt at least be my tree. My hair, my lyre, my quiver shall always be entwined with thee, O laurel. With thee shall Roman generals wreathe their heads, when shouts of joy shall acclaim their triumph, and long processions climb the Capitol'. (i.557-61; vol. i, p. 41)

The Ovidian pattern of love, tragic transformation, and consolation recurs in the tales of Pan and Syrinx (who is turned into the reeds that make up Pan's musical pipes) and of Venus and Adonis (who is turned into the delicate anamone). In other stories, the compensation for faithful lovers is to be reunited in the afterlife. After the death of Orpheus,

> The poet's shade ... seeking through the blessed fields, found Eurydice and caught her in his eager arms. Here now side by side they walk; now Orpheus follows her as she precedes, now goes before her, now may in safety look back on his Eurydice. (xi.61-66; vol. ii, p. 125)

The same pattern concludes Shakespeare's tragedy. Love drives Anthony to a despair in which he is 'unqualitied with very shame' (III.xi.45), Cleopatra to the recognition that she will be displayed and mocked in Caesar's Roman triumph. The lovers believe that in death they will be received into a lovers' elysium. Anthony envisages them promenading like Orpheus and Eurydice: 'Where souls do couch on flowers, we'll hand in hand,/ And with our sprightly port make the ghosts gaze' (4.14.50). Cleopatra gives the moment of reunion a comically competitive tinge. When her attendant Iris dies before her, she fears that

> If she first meet the curled Anthony,
> He'll make demand of her, and spend that kiss
> Which is my heaven to have. (V.ii.341-3)

The difference between the two texts is at the this point as significant as the similarity. Ovid's poem declares the fact of reunion in the afterworld. In Shakespeare's Ovidian play, his lovers declare what can only be their faith or their conviction. Caesar's decorous dolour confines them with equal conviction to the realm of earth:

She shall be buried by her Anthony.
No grave on earth shall clip in it
A pair so famous. (V.ii.411-13)

If only by virtue of his dramatic form, Shakespeare is even more a poet of metamorphosis than Ovid himself, giving voice to changing images of love's survival but not settling on any of them.

Metamorphosis rules too over the political affairs which, in *Anthony and Cleopatra*, are never separable from affairs of love. The unreliable allegiances of the common people and the opportunistic political manoeuvres of their rulers both manifest alike an Ovidian instability. In deploring this instability, Anthony reserves his bitterness for the fickle Roman people; the fact that worthy men too lapse from worthiness is a matter for regretful acknowledgement:

Our slippery people,
Whose love is never link'd to the deserver,
Till his deserts are past. (I.ii.194-6)

Anthony is echoed by Caesar in his elaborate conceit of the people as a 'flag', or species of iris, growing on or over a stream and helplessly carried back and forth by its movement. The flowing stream is an ancient figure for the flux of time and the ceaseless play of metamorphosis. Caesar amplifies the figure by suggesting that the people metamorphose between the distasteful opposites of unruly vagabonds and subservient lackeys:

This common body,
Like to a vagabond flag upon the stream,
Goes to, and back, lackeying the varying tide,
To rot itself with motion. (I.iv.47-50)

In their unusually concordant assessment of Roman political life, Anthony and Caesar locate the source of instability in the common people. Yet even Enobarbus, represented by Shakespeare as a man of rank and sturdy soldierly sense, without political aspiration, vacillates tragically in his loyalties. As Anthony's fortunes begin to fail, Enobarbus continues to follow his 'wounded chance'. He shortly begins to find this 'faith' or

allegiance 'mere folly', but keeps his resolve nonethe less. At the end of the same scene, he discards it, deciding to seek some way to leave. He meets his end repenting in turn this 'revolt', and confiding in the proverbially mutable moon. Equally unstable are the political courses of other great persons. Anthony's marriage to Octavia is negotiated by Agrippa with the aim of creating 'perpetual amity, ... an unslipping knot', to stand against the perpetually changing alliances of the great and the slippery affections of the people. Yet this marriage is followed by, and exacerbates, the collapse of the amity between Anthony and Caesar. This collapse occurs in the sequence of scenes from III.iv to III.vi, with Anthony's grievances against Caesar, the news of Lepidus' imprisonment and Pompey's murder, Anthony's alliance with Cleopatra, and Octavia's return to Rome. Shakespeare's swift and somewhat bewildering dramatization of these mutations of allegiance suggests the operation of a capriciously changing fortune by which human agents are carried along and over which human volition has little control. Swift and arbitrary change also characterizes the battle sequence. All the battles take place offstage – not only the sea battles but also, it seems, the land battle of IV.vii, which Shakespeare could readily have staged. The audience thus merely hears tidings of the battles, the sudden shocks of 'Naught, naught, all naught', or 'Retire, we have engag'd ourselves too far', or 'All is lost'. Anthony's fleeting victory, between his two defeats, has an evanescent quality, as if fortune's wheel is making its last turns.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is in general an exception to the rule of Augustan poetry, which celebrates the stability embodied in the person of Augustus Caesar and in his institution of the principate. The imaginative energy of the *Metamorphoses* is deeply implicated with change, irrespective of whether change is celebrated or dreaded. Yet there is a structural pattern in the poem that seeks to counter this feature. Below the richly various narrative surface, universal change moves gradually in the direction of order: the poem's first change occurs when the crude matter of original chaos shapes itself into elements; its last occurs when the soul of the murdered Julius Caesar is transported to the heavens and is there metamorphosed into a star. This pattern is Ovid's gesture toward the political mission of the Augustan poet,

and perhaps toward the patronage that rewarded it. The empire of Rome in general and the rule of Augustus in particular become bulwarks against disorder, prophesied in passing many times throughout the *Metamorphoses* and at the conclusion pronounced definitively by Jupiter, who is seconded by the visions and prayers of the vatic poet. In these pronouncements, the defeat of Anthony and Cleopatra takes its place as a necessary preliminary to the establishment of the peace and rule of Augustus, while even the chronically disputatious gods of the *Metamorphoses* are invoked as unanimous:

> *Romanique ducis coniunx Aegyptiae taedae*
> *non bene fisa cadet...*
>
> A Roman general's Egyptian mistress, who did not well to rely upon the union, shall fall before him, and in vain shall she have threatened that our Capitol shall bow to her Canopus. ... Jupiter controls the heights of heaven and the kingdoms of the triformed universe; but the earth is under Augustus' sway. ... Vesta, who hast ever held a sacred placed midst Caesar's household gods, and thou Apollo, linked in worship with our Caesar 's Vesta, and Jupiter, whose temple sits high on Tarpeia's rock, ... far distant be that day and later than our own time when Augustus, abandoning the world he rules, shall mount to heaven and there, removed from our presence, listen to our prayers! (xv.826-8, 858-60, 865-70; vol. ii, pp. 423-7)

Shakespeare's rendering of the imperial theme in *Anthony and Cleopatra* shows something of Ovid's enthusiasm. At a juncture when English imperialism was first expanding from Ireland to the East Indies and the Americas, Shakespeare responds to Ovid's geographical expansiveness. 'The wide arch of the rang'd empire,' the exotic remoteness of Egypt and Parthia, Media and Mesopotamia, help endow the play with its spaciousness and its sense of mastery over spaciousness. In this respect *Anthony and Cleopatra* is akin to the *Metamorphoses* with its catalogue of the world's rivers, culminating in 'the Tiber, to whom had been promised the mastery of the world' (ii.259, vol. i, p. 79). Caesar's fortune stamps the action quietly but firmly, in the pronouncements of the soothsayer and in Caesar's own confident terseness:

> The time of universal peace is near:
> Prove this a prosp'rous day, the three-nook'd world
> Shall bear the olive freely. (IV.vi.5-7)

Yet the imperial reading of *Anthony and Cleopatra* is challenged within the play itself. In defiance of Augustan historiography, Cleopatra denies Caesar his unique place as the culmination of Roman history:

> 'Tis paltry to be Caesar;
> Not being Fortune, he's but Fortune's knave,
> A minister of her will. (V.ii.2-4)

Like any other figure in the history of our mutable world, Caesar will enjoy his moment of mastery but will also suffer eclipse. When she foils him in his ambition to lead her in his Roman triumph, Cleopatra delights in calling 'great Caesar "Ass" unpolicied' (V.ii.347) – or "Ass unpolicied," that is, without the political skill on which he prides himself. Cleopatra's scoffs depend for their full effect on her conviction that she is to metamorphose into a lover inhabiting the 'blessed fields' of Orpheus and Eurydice, and that she and Anthony will thus triumph over the time that still rules Caesar. Whether or not the audience shares this Ovidian faith, Cleopatra's defiance deprives Caesar of the unchallenged preeminence he enjoys at the end of the *Metamorphoses*.

The reader of the *Metamorphoses* is in any event likely to find that preeminence strained. Ovid's opening book narrates the history of the four ages, placing his readers – and any ruler, however virtuous – in the iron age, when 'modesty and truth and faith fled the earth, and in their place came tricks and plots and snares, violence and cursed love of gain' (i.129-31; vol. i, p. 11). Political compliment in the *Metamorphoses* cannot constrain the poem's unbounded curiosity about and delight in instability:

> There did the creator bid the mists and clouds to take their place, and thunder, that should shake the hearts of men, and winds which with the thunderbolts make chilling cold. ... they can scarce be prevented, though they control their blasts, each in his separate tract, from tearing the world to pieces. So fiercely do these brothers strive together. (i.54-60, vol. i, p. 7)

> Jove now shortened the bounds of the old-time spring, and through winter, summer, variable autumn, and brief spring completed the year in four seasons. Then first the parched air glared white with burning heart, and icicles hung down congealed by freezing winds. (i.116-20, vol. i, p. 11)

Such a mutable world is a source of wonder, and hence of the romance that pervades the *Metamorphoses*. It is also a source of perplexity and a burden to the humanity that it buffets and discomforts: hence the tragic dimension of the *Metamorphoses*. It is a mutable world that will not readily be brought under the rule of any political dispensation.

It is by representing all of nature in a condition of endless metamorphosis that *Anthony and Cleopatra* reveals its deepest affinity with Ovid. The play's interest in Anthony's sometimes tiresome shortcomings, for example, is gradually subsumed by a sense that his vacillations are part of a universal pattern of flux. The tragedy modulates accordingly from an ethical exemplum of the fall of a great man because of sensual excess towards a recognition of the bewildering conditions of human existence. Anthony's dreamlike meditations on metamorphosis after his final defeat merge definite and indefinite, solid and vaporous, viewer and viewed, selfhood and the dissolution of selfhood :

> Sometime we see a cloud that's dragonish,
> A vapour sometime, like a bear, or lion,
> A tower'd citadel, a pendent rock,
> A forked mountain, or blue promontory
> With trees upon 't that nod unto the world,
> And mock our eyes with air ...
> That which is now a horse, even with a thought
> The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct
> As water is in water ...
> My good knave Eros, now thy Captain is
> Even such a body. Here I am Anthony,
> Yet cannot hold this visible shape (my knave).
> (IV.xiv.3-17)

This is Ovid rendered as tragedy. Anthony apprehends a world of change, but without the inspired knowledge of the seer-poet. It is a world of magical beauty but also of bewilderment.

Elsewhere the play shares Ovid's zest for nature's mysteries. Nature is full of hidden potentials; any form of existence may conceal or reveal a different form. The nascence of political upheaval at Rome, stability metamorphosing into conflict, resembles the horse hair placed in water and coming to life as a worm. The metaphor catches the process in train, not yet complete, witnessing in this way to the fact of continual flux. The strangeness of the comparison adds a further dimension to the strangeness of the two phenomena that it compares:

> Much is breeding,
> Which, like the courser's hair, hath yet but life,
> And not a serpent's poison.
>
> (I.ii.201-3)

The mud of the river Nile, impregnated by the sun, is miraculously fertile, bringing forth creatures by abiogenesis. Anthony swears 'By the fire/ That quickens Nilus' slime' (I.ii.79-80), and Lepidus remembers that 'Your serpent of Egypt is bred now of your mud by the operation of your sun; so is your crocodile' (II.vii.26-7). Cleopatra envisages her death as a metamorphosis in which the elements of her body are transformed: 'I am Fire and Air; my other Elements/ I give to baser life' (V.ii.328-9). One of the many treatments of the different elements and their properties that Shakespeare might have known occurs in the great discourse of Pythagoras on mutability in the last book of the *Metamorphoses*.

> And even those things which we call elements do not persist. ... In the eternal universe there are four elemental substances. Two of these, earth and water, are heavy and of their own weight sink down to lower levels. And two, air and fire, purer still than air, are without weight and, if unopposed, fly to the upper realms. These elements, although far separate in position, nevertheless are all derived each from the other, and each into other falls back again. The element of earth, set free, is rarefied into liquid water, and, thinned still further, the water changes into wind and air. Then, losing weight again, this air, already very thin, leaps up to fire, the highest place of all. Then they come back again in reversed order; for fire, condensed, passes into thick air, thence into water; and water, packed together solidifies into earth. Nothing retains its own

> form; but Nature, the great renewer, ever makes up forms from other forms. ... What we call birth is but a beginning to be other than what one was before; and death is but cessation of a former state. (xv.237-57, vol. ii, pp. 381-3)

Cleopatra's faith in an afterworld of lovers might readily be vindicated by such a passage. So, equally, might Anthony's disorientation. Confronted by the dizzying variety of a metamorphic reality, exhilarating and disturbing by turns, even a Soothsayer modestly disclaims wisdom. 'In Nature's infinite book of secrecy a little I can read': the reader of *Anthony and Cleopatra* will not wish to make any greater claim.