

‘Excellent Dissembling’: A View of
Anthony and Cleopatra

G.A. WILKES

‘To regard this tragedy as a rival of the famous four, whether on stage or in the study, is surely an error’.¹ Bradley made this judgement on *Anthony and Cleopatra* in a lecture in 1905, after he had excluded it from *Shakespearean Tragedy*. His lecture may be read as an attempt to justify the exclusion. Why is *Anthony and Cleopatra* different from *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*? Why does Shakespeare present no ‘inward struggle’ in Anthony before he decides to return from Rome to Egypt? Why is there a ‘sadness of disenchantment’ at the end of it all, mingled with the ‘reconciliation’ that we might properly feel? Bradley’s perplexity has been shared by later critics, some pointing to the contradictions in the source material, or to Shakespeare’s questioning of the heroic, or to his attempt to move across the frontier of tragedy into some new dramatic terrain. Recent criticism has diagnosed an ‘ironic gap’ in *Anthony and Cleopatra*, so that ‘word and action seldom coalesce’ in the play, and ‘the vows, the dreams, the ideals, the evocation through speech of human greatness in the characters are at odds with what we are allowed to see in their behaviour’.²

There is no one way of accounting for these different impressions. But there is an element in the play which certainly contributes to them, though it has not itself been particularly remarked. It can be isolated in the opening scene, which in this is a microcosm of what follows.

The first scene is set in Egypt, but the first speakers are two Romans, Philo and Demetrius. Philo delivers the opening speech of the scene, and Demetrius the closing speech, and then neither is heard of again. So we are given our first view of Anthony:

1 A.C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (1909: repr. 1962), p.282.

2 See David Bevington’s introduction in the *New Cambridge Shakespeare* (1990), p.16.

Nay, but this dotage of our General's
 O'erflows the measure: those his goodly eyes,
 That o'er the files and musters of the war
 Have glow'd like plated Mars, now bend, now turn
 The office and devotion of their view
 Upon a tawny front. His captain's heart,
 Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst
 The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper,
 And is become the bellows and the fan
 To cool a Gypsy's lust. Look where they come,
 Take but good note, and you shall see in him
 The triple pillar of the world transform'd
 Into a strumpet's fool. Behold and see.³

It is Anthony the soldier who is being portrayed here (as captain, as General, like plated Mars), but that self is fixed in the past. It is in the past that his eyes have glowed over the files and musters of the war; it is in the scuffles of great fights in the past that his heart has burst the buckles of his breast. Those 'goodly eyes' now bend their view on a 'tawny front', and Anthony's heart reneges all temper to become the bellows and the fan to cool a gipsy's lust. Anthony will be consistently shown in the play with this greater self behind him.

Philo's speech is also our first account of Cleopatra – as duskily complexioned, a gipsy and a strumpet. As she makes her first appearance, the stage directions are unusually detailed. First a 'flourish', then *Enter Anthony, Cleopatra, her Ladies, the Train, with Eunuchs fanning her*. This should alert the audience to some sort of performance to follow. Anthony and Cleopatra come in arguing, as though he has been making protestations of love which she challenges:

If it be love indeed, tell me how much.

Anthony's response, that love which can be measured is a form of beggary, meets her insistence that she can still set boundaries to it, and provokes his grandiose reply:

Then must thou needs find out new Heaven, new Earth.

3 *Anthony and Cleopatra*, I.i.1-13. All quotations are from the Challis Shakespeare, ed. A.P. Riemer.

Although this is a pre-Christian play, the audience would have picked up the allusion to the prophecy in Isaiah 65:17: 'For loe, I will create new heavens and a new earth'.⁴ The present world will have to pass away before any bounds can be set to Anthony's love.

The process that is occurring becomes clearer with the arrival of a messenger with news from Rome. Anthony is impatient at the interruption, but again Cleopatra is insistent:

Nay, hear them, Anthony.
 Fulvia perchance is angry. Or who knows
 If the scarce-bearded Caesar have not sent
 His powerful mandate to you: 'Do this, or this;
 Take in that kingdom, and enfranchise that:
 Perform't, or else we damn thee!' (I.i.20-25)

Anthony's 'How, my love?' acts as an incitement:

Perchance? Nay, and most like.
 You must not stay here longer, your dismissal
 Is come from Caesar, therefore hear it, Anthony.
 Where's Fulvia's process – Caesar's, I would say – both?
 Call in the messengers. As I am Egypt's Queen,
 Thou blushest, Anthony, and that blood of thine
 Is Caesar's homager: else so thy cheek pays shame
 When shrill-tongu'd Fulvia scolds. The messengers!
 (I.i.27-34)

This is Cleopatra the actress. The arrival of the messenger from Rome is a pretext to bring up Fulvia, Anthony's wife ('the married woman', as she later describes her); to taunt him about the power of Octavius, the youngest partner in the triumvirate, whose influence is hostile to her; and also to sneer at the war-games these men play ('Take in that kingdom, and enfranchise that'), because Anthony's responsibilities as a general take him away from her.

As he had taken up the cue before ('Then must thou needs find out new Heaven, new Earth'), so Anthony responds now, and the play finds its characteristic style:

4 Cf. 'We looke for new heavens, and a newe earth' (2 Peter 3.13) and 'I sawe a new heaven and a new earth' (Rev. 21:1) – quotations from the Geneva version (1589).

Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch
 Of the reign'd Empire fall! Here is my space,
 Kingdoms are clay. Our dungy earth alike
 Feeds beast as man; the nobleness of life
 Is to do thus: [*embracing*] when such a mutual pair
 And such a twain can do't, in which I bind
 On pain of punishment, the world to weet
 We stand up peerless. (I.i.35-42)

The opening scene exhibits Anthony and Cleopatra as actor and actress in their own drama. This is the mode the play will typically assume when they are together. The Anthony who asked 'How, my love?' had not really taken his cue, but in 'Then must thou needs find out new Heaven, new Earth' he was beginning to assume his role, and the 'Let Rome in Tiber melt' speech shows him in full command of it. When through the play one acts up to the other, the scene will end with the prospect of wine, feasting and revelry. Cleopatra may well be shown to be 'irresistible', and in the passion of Anthony and Cleopatra we may feel 'the infinity there is in man' (to adopt Bradley's words),⁵ but we rarely lose the sense of them as performers, as each displays a heightened version of himself or herself to the other. This is not to say that Shakespeare is presenting the relationship satirically: he is defining its particular quality.

Within the play of *Anthony and Cleopatra*, we follow the Anthony and Cleopatra show. The actress in Cleopatra may be partly motivated by her uncertainty about Anthony's love and also about her control over him, and by her attempts to secure both. This is disclosed in the opening scene in her aside following the 'Let Rome in Tiber melt' speech:

Excellent falsehood:
 Why did he marry Fulvia, and not love her?
 I'll seem the fool I am not. (I.i.43-5)

and again in the scene following, with Enobarbus, Charmian, Alexas and the rest, when she responds to the news of Anthony's approach with 'We will not look upon him. Go with us' (II.ii.90). Her actual parting from Anthony is another theatrical performance, as she reproaches him for not displaying

5 *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, pp.286, 293.

a proper grief for Fulvia:

Now I see, I see,
In Fulvia's death, how mine receiv'd shall be

and then prescribes the role he must play:

I prithee, turn aside, and weep for her,
Then bid adieu to me, and say the tears
Belong to Egypt. Good now, play one scene
Of excellent dissembling, and let it look
Like perfect Honour. (I.ii.90-94)

'Excellent dissembling' – she urges Anthony to a performance that will flatter her, even though she knows it to be false, so that the show may go on.

The theatrical quality of the relationship helps to deflect the Bradleyan approach. Bradley's preference is for a character such as Hamlet or Macbeth, who will debate his predicament in a soliloquy, search for the way in which he should behave, and allow us to experience the play with him. Anthony seems to be moving into this role as he responds to the tidings from Rome:

These strong Egyptian fetters I must break,
Or loose myself in dotage (I.ii.123-4)

then a dozen lines later:

I must from this enchanting Queen break off (I.ii.137)

and some lines later still:

Would I had never seen her. (I.ii.161)

But the 'inward struggle' that Bradley wants never comes to pass. Anthony and Cleopatra are not characters like Hamlet and Macbeth, who seem to draw us into their consciousness: we are asked rather to observe and admire their performance.

The critics who keep using such terms as 'pageant' and 'spectacle' to describe the play are catching an essential feature of it. When Anthony is separated from Cleopatra, she still pictures him dramatically:

Oh Charmian:
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!

Do bravely horse, for wot'st thou whom thou mov'st,
The demi-Atlas of this Earth, the arm
And burgonet of men (I.v.22-8)

and it is significant that the most memorable presentation of Cleopatra herself is like a staged scene:

The barge she sat in, like a burnisht throne,
Burnt on the water: the poop was beaten gold,
Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
The winds were love-sick.
With them, the oars were silver,
Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
The water which they beat to follow faster
As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,
It beggar'd all description: she did lie
In her pavilion, cloth of gold, of tissue,
O'er-picturing that Venus where we see
The fancy outwork Nature. On each side her
Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
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.221-36)

The description goes on to detail the role of the gentlewomen attending on Cleopatra, the 'seeming mermaid' at the helm, the swelling of the 'silken tackle', and the 'invisible perfume' reaching the wharves and the people thronging to them. She is seen in a tableau.

This theatrical expansiveness is not accorded to Octavius Caesar. There is a perceptible fall in temperature as he enters the play. His first speeches are austere and censorious: Anthony is deplored as 'he fishes, drinks, and wastes/The lamps of night in revel' (I.iv.4-5), tumbling on the bed of Ptolomy, tipping with a slave, reeling the streets at noon, lost in voluptuousness and surfeits. Octavius sets up an alternative scale of values in the play. Anthony and Cleopatra fail this standard, but it is more often Caesar, the cold man of stratagems, who seems the alienated figure. Although Cleopatra is devious and calculating herself, she always seems more warm-blooded than Octavius, or simply more human. Anthony is a flawed hero, arbitrarily deciding to fight at sea, preparing for battle with 'one other

gaudy night' (III.xiii.212), but when his behaviour is set against the cold efficiency of Octavius, he is still the more sympathetic.

The progress of the play will show how the new dispensation Anthony had envisaged will ineluctably come to pass, not as a 'new Heaven, new Earth', but as a new world of *Realpolitik*. We see the old order dying, as the Egyptian fleet forsakes the sea battle and Anthony follows 'like a dotting mallard', so that they are forced to sue for peace to Octavius. There are glimpses of magnificence in this decline: Anthony offers a ship laden with gold for his soldiers to buy their security, and sends his treasure after Enobarbus when he has defected. Cleopatra exercises her wiles to the end, in presenting Caesar with a false list of her possessions to be forfeit. The play itself is coming into conformity with the tradition of the 'fall of princes', and the 'inset' drama of Anthony and Cleopatra acquires a further dimension as it does so.

The governing forces of tragedy in the *De Casibus* tradition – Fortune, Fate, the stars – are admitted almost as extra characters in the action, and as antagonists of its two principals. Anthony increasingly sees himself as engaged in a personal combat with Fortune, as his spirits begin to revive after the first sea fight:

Fortune knows,
We scorn her most when most she offers blows (III.xi.81-2)

then as he prepares for the second battle:

Come good fellow, put thine iron on;
If Fortune be not ours today, it is
Because we brave her (IV.iv.4-6)

and again after the second defeat:

O Sun, thy uprise shall I see no more,
Fortune and Anthony part here, even here
Do we shake hands. (IV.xii.20-22)

Anthony also sees himself as in alliance with the stars, or as deserted by them (III.xiii.169-70), and will not have his death mourned to please 'sharp fate' (IV.xiv.160). This pattern is reflected in the 'mirror scene' when the watchmen hear a strange music (IV.iii), intimating that the God Hercules, whom Anthony

had loved, is now to leave him.⁶

So the theatre is expanded. As Fortune, the stars and Fate are added to the cast, Anthony is still seen as defiant and heroic. At the same time the forces he invokes belong to a tradition of tragedy which is itself in decline. The modern general, Octavius Caesar, does not think in these terms, but concerns himself with securing military advantage. It is Cleopatra who asserts control over the process and shapes it to her purpose. She too sees Fortune as an immediate adversary:

No, let me speak, and let me rail so high,
That the false huswife Fortune break her wheel,
Provok'd by my offence (IV.xv.50-53)

but then perceives that the victorious Caesar can still be made a plaything of Fortune, however much he may be unaware of it, and so plans his defeat:

My desolation does begin to make
A better life. 'Tis paltry to be Caesar;
Not being Fortune, he's but Fortune's knave,
A minister of her will: and it is great
To do that thing that ends all other deeds,
Which shackles accidents, and bolts up change,
Which sleeps, and never palates more the dung,
The beggar's nurse, and Caesar's. (V.ii.1-8)

Cleopatra here takes charge of the tragic pattern, and chooses her final role. The resolution 'to do that thing that ends all other deeds' is strengthened by another dramatic visualisation of Anthony, a counterpart to the description of Cleopatra on Cydnus, in the speech 'His legs bestrid the ocean' (V.ii.98-108). Her action is then precipitated by the thought of being led in Caesar's triumph. Cleopatra describes the prospect to Iras as a theatrical performance: they will be mimicked by 'Egyptian puppets', on a stage improvised by 'mechanic slaves' in greasy aprons:

Nay, 'tis most certain, Iras: saucy Lictors
Will catch at us like strumpets, and scal'd rhymers
Ballad us out a tune. The quick comedians

6 I use 'mirror scene' to refer to a scene which does not advance the plot, but in which a larger theme of the play is reflected.

Extemporally will stage us, and present
 Our Alexandrian revels: Anthony
 Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
 Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
 I' th' posture of a whore. (V.ii.250-57)

Someone else will be taking over the Anthony and Cleopatra show. Cleopatra responds by staging the scene that will turn Caesar into 'Fortune's knave' and subdue the traditional tragic scheme to her will. This is metaphorically to break Fortune's wheel. Instructions are given for the costume ('my best attires') and the properties ('our Crown and all'), the rustic brings in the asps, and the scene is set. Iras will fall in the course of it, and Charmian commit suicide at the end:

Give me my robe, put on my crown, I have
 Immortal longings in me. Now no more
 The juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip.
 Yare, yare, good Iras, quick. Methinks I hear
 Anthony call. I see him rouse himself
 To praise my noble act, I hear him mock
 The luck of Caesar, which the Gods give men
 To excuse their after wrath. Husband, I come:
 Now to that name, my courage prove my title.
 I am Fire and Air; my other Elements
 I give to baser life ... (V.ii.319-29)

The last image of Cleopatra and her court is a tableau. While *Anthony and Cleopatra* is not alone among Shakespeare's tragedies in this, the theatrical perspective is none the less unmistakable. While this may encourage interpretation of the play as ironic, the effect is much more that Anthony and Cleopatra are most themselves in their 'excellent dissembling', as a pair who have outlived their time. The play becomes a requiem for the heroic.