
ANTONY: THE SHAKESPEAREAN COLOSSUS - Part II *

David Cremona

Among the problems with which Shakespeare was faced when he was contemplating ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA, which was to be in some sort a sequel to JULIUS CAESAR (as well as a tragedy in its own right), there were two which he had met before and solved reasonably well. The first is partly technical: how to maintain a fairly close continuity of events with the preceding play in a sequence, and yet allow for a change, often an extreme change, in a principal character. The other, rather more difficult, how to present a personage onstage who is to be truly heroic, without having him fall into Marlovian rhetoric or more rhodomontade.

In both cases, the chronicle plays had already presented analogues. The resolute implacable figure of Bolingbroke in RICHARD II is already 'weary' and 'wan with care' in the first line of HENRY IV part 1, and is broken in health and spirit halfway through part 2, yet the events in all three plays are otherwise felt to follow on each other without interruption. Earlier still, the lusty and triumphant Edward IV, newly restored to the throne in the last scene of HENRY VI part 3, is already spoken of as wasted and ailing in the first scene of RICHARD III and dies shortly thereafter, yet hardly enough time seems to have passed, judging by concurrent events, to allow for this. In effect, Shakespeare adopts

an elastic concept of time, in terms of which objective circumstance proceeds at a regular unhurried rate, whereas individual characters of note seem to live at a subjective speed which is considerably accelerated. That Shakespeare was not unaware of the paradoxes involved may perhaps be gleaned from Rosalind's patter on the subject in AS YOU LIKE IT: 'Time travels in divers paces with divers persons'. Once the convention is accepted — and in the general suspension of disbelief accorded to the play, this is not difficult — it is seen to work very well.

The problem involved in the delineation of a heroic figure on stage is rather more complex and more delicate; and this is a matter central to ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA, and made further complicated by the dramatic necessity of showing that heroism obliquely, askance, as it were, in the distorting mirror of unflattering vicissitude; indeed, often in eclipse and finally in decline. Many of the plays, concerned with warfare either as matter for conquest, means of political domination, or merely gentlemanly avocation, deal with figures of soldierly eminence, but the nearest parallels must be with those whose protagonists are warriors before they are anything else, even if they overlay individual prowess with some other gloss. A Henry V, simplified as

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he is from the earlier Hal, who is yet not without either subtlety or policy — his father's son in that; an Othello, whose 'occupation' is war, victim of his own image of himself; a Macbeth, a fighting general of high birth and higher ambition whose conduct in battle is described in terms which very closely recall those applied to Antony. All three, like Antony, are much concerned with 'honour', a word whose multifarious ramifications lent themselves to paradox; it is when Macbeth begins to quibble with the word that he destroys himself, losing honour in seeking to augment it, in spite of Banquo's warning. He would not, of course, have taken kindly to advice from Banquo in any case, since he feels that 'under him/My Genius is rebuk'd; as it is said / Mark Antony's was by Caesar's'. The analogy is there, certainly, though the other circumstances differ greatly.

The Antony we hear of in the exasperated opening speech of the play is complained of in terms the very antithesis of heroic; he is described as besotted, maudlin, hag-ridden in one sense at least, and ridiculous: 'a strumpet's fool'. Yet the same speech reminds us that this man has been a very god of bottle, Herculean in his strength and feats: all of which is constantly confirmed by other sources, favourable to him or hostile, in the course of the play. Skilfully Shakespeare interweaves disgust and admiration, each setting off the other; and if for the present the Olympian energy is withdrawn, and the Egyptian degradation a squalid reality, yet the existence of that mighty potential has been established. That the context is negative is unimportant. Antony, moreover, will not be drunk forever. The Roman soldier who austere condemns him for his excess — and

it is a heroic excess in debauchery which is, when all is said, only the other side of the coin, of which the obverse is his heroic excess in battle — concedes that 'sometimes, when he is not Antony. He comes too short of that great property / which still should go with Antony'. Sometimes. This then is not a permanent condition, a period of 'poison'd hours', a bank of clouds obscuring for a while the bright luminary that is Antony. A 'Roman thought' can still break through the clouds, and Antony re-assume himself. After all, this is the 'masker' and 'reveller' of the earlier play; if we have not had the opportunity before of seeing him in his cups or at his whoring, it was because the pressure of greater events allowed time for neither. Now the crisis is over, and some relaxation is permissible. In Cleopatra, too, Antony has met a 'royal wench', one who has already fascinated the mighty Julius and Pompey the Great, neither (in Shakespeare) much addicted to incidental amours or Sybaritic luxury. Antony, as we know, is particularly prone to just those things. In coming to Egypt he has found, if not a spiritual home, at least an earthly Paradise for that part of his disposition given to sensuality and self-indulgence. It is Aeaëa, and Cleopatra is the Circe whose charms effect a swinish metamorphosis in him, for if he is of the Odyssean brand of heroism, no thoughtful Hermes has provided him with the moly to ward off her compelling charms. The only counterspell he can intermittently use is his *Romanitas*. This should not be discounted however: he is Roman, very much so, and a noble Roman at that. He has in fact become one of the three mightiest Romans, one of the 'world-sharers', and it is entirely by dint of the Roman virtues of manly vigour, spartan self-denial, Stoic

cal indifference to hardship, relentless and unflinching effort in pursuit of his aims. It is his misfortune perhaps that these admirable qualities should in him each be matched, and at times overmatched, by its opposing vice; sottiſh lethargy, groſs ſelf-indulgence, an Epicurean love of ſensual delight, total abandonment in a languor of endleſs debauch. And Egypt the land, and certainly Egypt the queen, are moſt exquiſite'y gifted to gratify theſe vices on a truly heroic ſcale. It may be ignoble, but it iſ conſiſtent, that the negative Antony ſhould ſo exactly parallel the poſitive one. The ſcale, whether of achievement or of loſs, of ambition or of indifference, iſ at all times ſuperhuman, and at certain times, terrifying. The negative aſpect may be, at iſt worſt, an appalling ſelfiſhneſs, an unpardonable irreſponſibility; but there iſ nevertheless a perverſe ſort of magnanimity in ſuch a ſtatement aſ 'Let Rome in Tiber melt, and wide arch/ Of the rang'd empire fall'. Thiſ iſ a man who conquers the world with Roman doggedneſs in Roman ſobriety, and careleſly giveſ it away piecemeal in Egyptian carouſal and jeſt. One man, indiviſible; yet hiſ Roman friendſ can only ſee the great triumvir through theſe ſtraightened viſion, and regret one aſpect of hiſ aſ betraying the other. Hiſ Roman enemyſ hardly concede hiſ nobility at all.

Antony himſelf, haſ no ſuch univerſal view of hiſ own character aſ will permit hiſ to accept hiſelf for what he iſ, the good and the bad together. He cannot ſay, with Parolleſ, 'Simply the thing I am / Shall make me live'. He lackſ the detachment in hiſ Roman momentſ; eſpecially when hiſ awakening awareneſs, laſhed by ſelf-contempt, iſ further exacerbated by the ſalt ſmart of external event — ſuch aſ

the 'garboilſ' created by hiſ brother and wife in Italy, the latter'ſ death in Sicyon, the victoryſ of Labienuſ at a time of hiſ own inertia, the political jockeying for poſition in Rome, and the Pompey rebellion, all of which might have been prevented, matched or ſettled by energetic action on hiſ part. Yet though he caſtigates hiſelf unſparingly, he iſ never recriminatory or hysterical, fatal ſignſ of weakneſs. Nothing iſ more miſtaken than to conſider hiſ a 'weak' character. True, he haſ weakneſſeſ, flawſ; but Lepiduſ ſpeakſ for ſhakespeare when he declareſ theſe to be negliſible in comparison with the ſtrong poſitive qualityſ; adding that the very magnitude of hiſ character enhanceſ, if only by contrast, the diſfiguring blemiſheſ. When Antony grave'y ſpeakſ of hiſ ſelf aſ 'the firm Roman', it iſ no vaunt: he iſ firm in the contemplation of hiſ defectſ, firm in apologiſing for them where a man of weaker character would not riſk compromiſing hiſ 'dignity', firm equally in refuſing to be cruſhed by thoſe defectſ, and firm, in the face of ſpiteful accuſationſ by Caſar, in refuſing at once to be provoked into loſing hiſ temper and to be browbeaten into ſhoulderinſ more of the reſponſibility for paſt miſunderſtandinſ than he diſpaſſionately conſiderſ to be rightly hiſ. He iſ weak only in confrontation with Cleopatra, and then it iſ largely becauſe (aſ with Lady Macbeth and her Thane) ſhe iſ, to a very conſiderable extent, a powerful externaliſation of impulſeſ at work within hiſ. Might Macbeth have reſiſted the murderouſ ambition within hiſ had he not an even more ruthleſſy ambitious wife to ſpur hiſ on (to ſay nothing of the Weird ſiſterſ)? Could Antony have kept under control the anarchic ſenſuality within hiſ had he not fallen into the toilſ of the

voluptuously sensual queen of a land of eternal hedonism? Profitless speculation, in either case. In both the plays, events ran otherwise. The parallel is one of which Shakespeare could not but have been aware, I think; there are strong affinities between the two plays. In each, a vigorously heroic soldier yields to the blandishments or persuasion of a succuba, against his better nature and judgment, to his brief gratification and eventual ruin; both of the women concerned are overwhelmed in the *debacle* they have been instrumental in bringing about. The differences are as significant as the similarities, it may be thought. Where inordinate ambition is a corrosive, destroying predator and prey in that order, having already destroyed the positive bond of love between them, sensuality is with difficulty separable from love (in our play, there is no separation, in fact) and through over-indulgence is as assuredly ruinous, there is an Elysium for Antony as there is not for Macbeth, nor any corresponding Heaven; and Cleopatra survives him, partly to suffer longer that she may the more properly purge herself of that remnant animality which still in part tinges her; that done, she too has immortal expectations.

She has moreover another function to perform: with the clear vision of the disillusioned and the dying, freed finally of time and wormy circumstance, she portrays for Dolabella and for the world the true — dramatically, poetically, pneumatologically true — stature of Antony: not the less true for being told, as it were, in a vision, and with the dying rapture of dream music. The Romans can only be expected to see the externals, simplified in the burlesque *reductio ad absurdum* of a play for stink-

ing mechanics to smirk and titter at: Antony to be brought drunken forth, Cleopatra's greatness exposed for entertainment 'i' the posture of a whore'. Yet already in the first act of the play, eternity was in their lips and eyes, bliss in their brows' bent; their every part, a race of heaven. As early as then, they had left the plodding succession of days (the dreary 'tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow' which is Macbeth's affliction), for an eternal now whose instancy is love, not perhaps as rarefied as moralists would wish, but love notwithstanding. In this time outside time, the normal division of night and day, with the activity conventionally assigned to each, hardly exists; the concerns of the everyday world matter not at all; the world can go hang. In anyone of lesser stature, this colossal indifference, already remarked on above, would be a foolish and reprehensible solipsism. In them — well, to the Roman world it is a monstrous irresponsibility, no doubt; to us, filtered through the lens of the Shakespearean vision, it might even seem a truly superhuman unconcern with anything so trivial as mortality. They have entered upon eternity — or a reasonable facismile thereof; what have the irksome squabbles and sordid affrays over a few feet — or a few thousand miles — of grubby soil here or there to do with them? It is incapable, that aura of divinity about the indifference, though it is the alchemy of poetic presentation that makes the vision golden. New earth, new heaven are required to compass the love that an Antony can give — cannot but give — to a Cleopatra; the existing arrangement will not do. Antony away, the intervening period till his return to Alexandria is a 'great gap of time' to Cleopatra; similarly, when her barge

is rowed down Cydnus, and time stands still, the city empties itself, and the very air almost had left too, to gaze on her, making 'a gap in nature'. They have their own time; their own space; their own dimension. All about them is larger, richer, other than the mundane world in which, nevertheless, they yet exist, and towards which both, but especially Antony, have grave responsibilities. Which he is ignoring. It is part of their dilemma that they are called upon to live in both worlds at once, and these are incompatible, with different rules, and obligations which run counter to each other. They are constantly being condemned, where they should not even be assessed, by the rules of this world; yet their own views are conditioned by it. The paradoxes abound. Antony acknowledges that he has not 'kept the square'; yet we are told that the excess of all passions beomes him — 'so do they no man else'. Cleopatra equally is seen to be more gracious by reason of her faults: 'everything becomes' her; defects physical and moral are transformed into so many perfections, so that even the holy priests bless her when she is riggish. It is felt to be fitting that two such personalities should be at the top of the hierarchical pyramid of the world; it is no less appropriate that, by a different logic, they should ignore that world and its needs, being who they are and what they are: they stand up peerless. For them it is manifest that 'the nobleness of life is to do thus' (be totally absorbed in each other, in effect) 'when such a mutual pair and such a twain can do't'. No egalitarian nonsenes here about the idylls of Jack and Jill: these are two matched colossi, their legs perhaps of friable Egyptian clay, ultimately frangible, but their heads of super-refined gold towering high above the region cloud, breathing the

heady air of Olympus. Or so Shakespeare induces us to interpret the matter. Granted, this brave claim is made by Antony when in his cups; the later Antony seems to recant, involving himself anew with imperial business. But then, his view of himself, coloured by Roman convention, is not necessarily correct, as has already been suggested. An appeal is always open from Antony sober to Antony drunk. *In vino veritas* is a Roman proverb, after all. Rather than those defects of character which Roman severity and the censorious world condemn as flaws, it might be more profitable, reversing the viewpoint, to examine what considerations inhibit the 'mutual pair' from achieving their own kind of harmony. One element is implicit in the sequencing of the plays already referred to. The Alexandrian revel which opens the play takes place, we are made to feel, at no great time after Philippi, yet we see an Antony not only apparently far gone in 'dotage', beyond all expectation engendered by the finale of JULIUS CAESAR, but naggingly conscious also of his advancing years. With Cleopatra too, and perhaps more keenly, this is a source of unease and self-doubt. Each is regretfully aware of it in himself or herself; both consequently fear for the stability of their love, based as it partly is on manly vigour and feminine beauty, transient qualities. The irony is that their worries and fears are unjustified; but their self-confidence is eroded. Antony is conscious, as every man must be who has reached the head of his particular profession, of nothing left to strive for, and, in the retrospective pause, of the expenditure of energy, concentration and — above all — youth in the achieving of his present status. Since love is traditionally a young man's vocation, yet he is himself passionately involved

with Cleopatra, there cannot fail to colour his love certain complicating factors: uncertainty, jealousy, a loss of dignity keenly realised, an underlying melancholy, a bitterness at times. The jealousy may be extended outside the amatory; to rising soldiers such as Labienus, Ventidius, young Pompey; this in his own profession of arms. It is not a strong jealousy, to be sure — Ventidius' comments may be a little sour, and Pompey's assessment the truer tribute. Such as it is, however, it is age which lends edge to it. Essentially the uncertainty is emotional; unsure of her love, and even of her loyalty, through-out much of the fourth and fifth acts, he torments both himself and her. That she should have 'pack'd cards with Caesar' must have seemed at any time unlikely; but his judgment, distorted by conflicting passions at that stage, is vitiated. A third strand of jealousy may have served further to warp his mind: that of the 'boy' Caesar. Cleopatra is prone to goad him with references to Caesar, suggesting that Antony feels a sense of inferiority to him which is nowhere apparent, except in the matter of luck analysed by the soothsayer and confirmed by Antony. (Macbeth had been similarly scornful of 'the boy Malcolm', who was to defeat him in battle and succeed him as king). It is a jealousy compounded of various elements: the resentment of middle age towards youth, and a youth already established, at that; the scorn of a good man-at-arms, a 'sworder', for one who held his weapon 'Elen like a dancer'; the amused contempt of a professional general for an amateur whose victories were won for him by proxy, by 'lieutenantry'; the total incompatibility and ensuing antipathy between two men whose talents and faults were

almost diametrically opposed; the natural fear and suspicion between two equally powerfully rivals in a shifting situation. Add to these the psychological inhibition Antony feels in Caesar's presence, and we have the makings of a very pretty little ferment of resentment. The one element that seems not to have contributed its venom is a fear that Cleopatra might enchant Caesar sexually; Octavius no doubt is as forbiddingly chaste (to the temperaments of Antony and Cleopatra) as his unenthusiastic sister. Even the eye of jealousy, quick to perceive betrayal where none yet exists, and prompting savage reprisal (not that Thidias/Thyreus wins much sympathy) stops short of considering Caesar as a rival in love.

There are other betrayals possible, to be sure. Cleopatra has been 'a boggler ever', and might (after all) have accepted Caesar's terms; so Antony believes. Yet this is not entirely fair to Cleopatra. True, there is a deal of moral obliquity in her character; she is a born 'survivor'. Then, she has had to be, in the turbulent politics, domestic and international, of her Egypt. She has a highly developed instinct to adapt to any situation she is faced with, however drastic, however desperate; hers in the sinuousness of the serpent that Antony calls her. She is infinitely supple morally, and bends where others might break. Not so Antony: his backbone may be a little curved with age and debauchery, but he has never learnt, will never learn, it is not in his nature, to bow before the whirlwind. Eastern he may be in his sympathies and in many of his pleasures, but this particular flexibility he will find contemptible. And since she cannot make an Egyptian of him, and keep him great, or even alive, she borrows *Romanitas* of him,

most Roman in his death, and kills herself in turn 'in the high Roman fashion', making death proud to take her. Possibly, though, there was little choice left her. The lip that had charmed C. Julius Caesar, Cn. Pompeius Magnus, and M. Antonius in turn is 'wan'd'. She is 'wrinkl'd deep in time'; her complexion darker than it was in her 'salad days'. Even with Antony she dare not rely on her physical appeal alone, but must play an elaborate and sterile game, taunting him constantly, plaguing him with tantrums. She cannot afford, so she thinks, to let him take her for granted. So the jaded meat she has to offer must be made more piquant by sharp sauces and astringent herbs. How far this policy accounts for her more-than-lunar changeability, and how far she is the Elizabethan concept of Woman carried to the nth degree, is uncertain. She is queenly and sluttish at once, noble and bawdy by turns, now girlishly sentimental, now shrewishly spiteful, again tearful and pathetic: the epitome of wilfulness, yet stable enough at bottom if she might only be sure of her anchor, Antony. Again paradox obtrudes itself: she can, yet she can not. That is, did she but know, Antony is safely hers: they are the 'mutual pair' of his claim. But of this she cannot be sure for much of the play, or he of her towards its end. *Hinc illae lacrymae*.

The actual events of the play, seen from this aspect, seem unimportant. They allow Antony to make a bid to reassert himself in his own mastery; he shows great forbearance towards Caesar under gross and petty-minded provocation; his presence dwindles the mighty menace of Pompey's bid for domination to a piratical expedition, and the budding world-ruler is fobbed off with the crumbs of Sicily and Sardinia. With some shuffling of his con-

science — for he is a gentleman — Antony marries Octavia 'for his peace', and plays fair for as long as he can; until her brother high-handedly takes it upon himself to suppress Pompey and depose Lepidus, without consulting his new brother-in-law and former partner; moreover he goes out of his way to alienate Antony by slighting remarks publicly made and by a grudging and ungenerous official mention. Morally relieved of his obligations, Antony heads back to Cleopatra, giving Caesar the excuse he needs for launching on all-out, winner-take-all war. Cleopatra and Antony have in the meantime officially crowned themselves in a ceremony as much religious as royal; they seem to have arrogated to themselves the trappings, and something of the status, of divinity. Totaly committed to Cleopatra now, he is more heavily infatuated with her than ever before: and his infatuation has by this time not only affected his statesmanship: it is fast corrupting his generalship and invading his common sense. No doubt what he is suffering from is a kind of *hubris*; he has for so long been the heroic warrior and *triumphator* that the thought of his losing to the amateur soldier Octavius is inconceivable, so why should he not indulge darling Cleo's whim and fight on her bright new navy? Protest only evokes stubbornness, and he ignores the remonstrances of Enobarbus, of his seasoned general, even of the old legionary. And after *hubris*, *peripeteia*; eventually, in both the technical and the idiomatic sense of the word, *catastrophe*. And this is just: Antony the mortal, however exalted and renowned among men for his eminence and luck in warfare, is subject to the gods, not least to Fortuna, notoriously fickle. He must die before the immortal can be wholly freed. The Roman commander-in-chief,

self-charged in the most vehement manner of conduct unbecoming a soldier, let alone an *imperator*, and of turpitude disgraceful in any Roman, but especially base in the greatest Roman of all, disintegrates; in successive fits of self-disgust, horror, rage, recrimination, bewilderment, reconciliation, melancholy and after an attempt at rallying of spirits — all totally introspective, as if he cannot escape the fascinated contemplation of his own falling apart — he staggers on to one more heroic but inconclusive victory, then is finally shattered in irreversible defeat. He gropes blindly, wondering for identity: Antony in defeat is no longer the Antony he remembers and recognises, the only Antony he has known; who then is he? He has hardly vitality enough now to curse Cleopatra, though he believes she has betrayed him. Yet the news of her death (false though it is) resolves matters once and for all: it is the touchstone that tests true metal. The complex issue is miraculously clarified. The fugitive soldier, the defeated general, the disgraced 'emperor', the renegade Roman, these aspects all cease to matter: the situation is drastically simplified by death. It becomes a clear case of, can he live, and be essentially himself as he now realises that self to be, without Cleopatra. All the ceremony and deference taken for granted in the past, stripped of which he had felt so diminished, are now seen to be nonessentials: robes of state, indeed, but one is a king without them. It is symbolic that at this point he throws off his armour; it is as irrelevant to the real soldier as purple and gold to the lord of men. Macbeth, faced with defeat and death, puts on his armour: soldiership is the one thing in himself he has not betrayed, and which will not therefore betray him. Antony has,

indirectly, betrayed his soldiership; but it no longer matters. His horizons have suddenly widened — widened beyond mortality. Nothing now remains but for him to release that true inner self, finally identified, which can only find empery and satiety in Cleopatra's arms. As with Brutus in the earlier play, his friend and servant declines to be the instrument of killing him; Eros indeed stabs himself sooner than fulfil an oath. Antony is wonderfully humble now: no rating, no intemperate bellowing under the pricks of Fortune. The tone is quiet, resigned: he accepts the tribute of Eros' death, and if he is a little bitter at botching his own suicide, he has the felicity of learning that Cleopatra lives still. He makes no reproaches for her deceit, he is haunted by no guilt, he experiences no shame now: that is all past. He is dying honourably — a Roman by a Roman valiantly vanquished; he is lying in her arms, her kisses on his brow. They may not staunch his wounds nor salve his hurts, but his tormented spirit is wonderfully at peace. His thoughts are for her: with what his failing breath will allow, he soothes her anguish, comforts her for the future, giving what counsel he can; there is no thought that he expects she should follow, though he has attempted to follow her. Finally, without bragging, he invites her to consider what splendour their common past had achieved. And so he dies. The star is fallen; and time is at his period. There are no earthquakes, no mighty upheavals, no fissures in the orphaned earth, no reversal of the natural order, such as even Caesar half-expects at so momentous an event. 'A moiety of the world' is dead; the other half lives on impoverished. Fortune now flaunts Caesar like a minion: he is the 'sole sir o' the world'. Increasingly, however,

we are made to see, as the dying Antony has seen perhaps, as Cleopatra with her mind set on death sees also, how paltry it is to be such, great merely by grace of Fortune, a sop given to men by the gods 'to excuse their after wrath'. Caesar may now dispose of men and kingdoms; he may even dispose of Cleopatra, so it seems. But he is not Fortune; and, 'not being Fortune, he's but Fortune's knave.' All his far-sighted schemes, his tortuous deep-laid policies, the studious cultivation of the public image seen from the standpoint of eternity, they seem childish, petty, absurd. He is as truly 'an ass unpolicied' as she 'a lass unparalleled'. To rise above Fortune and her current servant by doing 'that thing ... Which shackles accidents and bolts up change', that is greatness. There is moreover some small relish in frustrating Caesar's triumph in its determined fullness — a flick on the nose at the last, to show him how far his power extends, world-master though he may be. It is not easy for so vital a creature as Cleopatra to do, this: to release her hold on life, and with such amused assurance. All her past cries against it: her every instinct must be overborne. In the general *catharsis* brought about by sorrow and humiliation, all her grosser elements are laid aside: she is air and fire. Now indeed worthy of Antony at the last, she can see him with a clarity and a vividness unsullied by the vicissitude of change. Dolabella will not acknowledge the justice of the vision; and we ourselves hardly recognise it from our personal experience of the man. Yet there is no sentimental canonising here, no wistful aggrandizement by hindsight. If Cleopatra has survived her Antony by an entire act that she may prepare herself for him, she also lives that she may provide us with this exceptional portrait

of Antony as she has known him in a timeless past, as he now is in her mind as an abiding reality.

I dreamt there was an Emperor Antony
 ...His face was as the heav'ns, and therein
 stuck
 A sun and moon, which kept their course
 and lighted

This little O, the earth,

His legs bestrid the ocean: his rear'd 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. For his bounty
 There was no winter in't; an autumn 'twas
 That grew the more by reaping. His
 delights

Were dolphin-like, they show'd his back
 above

The elements they liv'd in: in his livery
 Walk'd crowns and crownets; realms and
 island were

As plates dropp'd from his pocket.

To be the eternal wife of such a Titan is in itself an apotheosis; and her courage earns her the right to that title, in the teeth of all pallid moralities. The finale is solemn, hieratic, stately: she is the hierophant presiding over her own dissolution, and all must be done well. Robed, crowned, crook and flail in hand, finally serene beyond change, supreme in majesty and beauty, as if she were once more for Cydnus to meet her Antony: she has never been so self-possessed, so regal, yet tender and lyrically gentle withal. It is a wildly improbable yet exquisitely apt conclusion: one more paradox. She is, what Charmian calls her, the Eastern star, most beautiful at its setting, yet in setting finally matched in an eternal firmament with that other fallen star which is Antony. A last paradox: she kills herself, dying in the high Roman fashion; yet the instrument of her death is as essentially

Egyptian as Antony's shortsword is Roman. More, it is just such a 'serpent of old Nile' as Antony has always called her. Only Cleopatra can kill Cleopatra, as Antony can be killed by Antony alone. Demigods are mortal, but they lay down their own lives at will.

The tragedy — insofar as it is a tragedy — is electric with paradox, as has appeared. Its theme is greatness, its protagonists heroic in the strictest classical mould, Emperor and Queen, exceptionally masculine man in the traditional male roles of warrior and autocrat, essentially feminine woman in the traditionally female posture of enchantress and succuba. Yet both warrior king and seductive siren are in decline, uncertain of themselves and consequently, though needlessly, of each other. To the extent that the progression is one from absolute power and authority to a condition of ruin and suicide, the play fits into the category of tragedy as generally understood. On the human plane, however, there is a counter-movement, a development towards self-knowledge and fulfilment. For this, the inessential and distracting panoply of imperial pomp and military glory must be stripped off, and the stature of protagonists revealed — as with classical statuary — in heroic nudity. It is a lengthy, violent, humiliating and painful process, imperfectly understood and for long resisted: convention blinds even the unconventional. With hindsight it is clear that no other path was open to Antony, too great to be anything but lord of the world, yet too great also to be concerned with so small a thing as the world. Mars, Hercules, Jove, half the Pantheon is invoked to trick him out fully, as Venus and Isis are on Cleopatra's behalf; their real immortality is the

Vergilian one in Elysium, where they will supplant their prototypes, Dido and Aeneas — the one a powerful North African queen, the other the ancestor of all Romans, fleeing from the ruins of gutted Troy — as the exemplars of true lovers. This then is Shakespeare's solution to the second problem, how to depict the truly heroic man, at once a professional soldier like Othello, a great nobleman like Macbeth, and an honour-dealing king like Henry V, but with a Roman dimension added. Let him be great-souled enough to conquer the world, yet magnanimous enough too not to be possessed by it. Unking'd Richard II collapses into a welter of narcissistic self-pity, yet discovers the poet in himself; but Antony, defeated and dying, is calm with the calm, of eternity. He surveys the past without regret. Not Rome, not Egypt, not the world, certainly not life does he grudge losing. He has lived 'the greatest prince i' the world, the noblest'; he dies by his own hand, in Cleopatra arms: all passion spent. Similarly, she slides into death with his name on her lips, the deadly babe at her breast, in an almost sexual languor. No more than for Samson is there cause for mourning here. All has been well done. Both have travailed, suffered and been cleansed of their baser elements; each in dying looks to other, juster worlds than this, which has never been worthy of them. There, they will reassume that eternity which was always properly theirs, untroubled by mundane concepts of duty and the like, so dear to a glorified civil servant like Octavius Caesar. His changes are still to come, nor will they be all pleasant: but they are set firm beyond change, in an endless Elysian afternoon among the asphodels.
