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THE LOVE PLAY
OF
ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

A Critical Study of Shakespeare's Play

by

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For Betty Lou

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I

LOVE AND LIMITATIONS: THE PLAY AND ITS CRITICS

"I'll set a bourn how far to be below'd",¹ cries Cleopatra, and the critics have complied by limiting their love for her play with Antony. Caution invades even Coleridge's famous praise of the play as "of all perhaps of Shakespeare's plays the most wonderful".² While the intensity of the critics' involvement may be glimpsed in their adjectives, so may a lack of intellectual commitment: "the most magnificent of Shakespeare's plays",³ "very noble",⁴ and "the most spacious of the plays".⁵ And there is that inevitable "perhaps". Even G. Wilson Knight, never one to spare an unqualified superlative, dubs *Antony and Cleopatra*, "probably the subtlest and greatest play in Shakespeare, or, at least paragoned only by *The Tempest*".⁶ From beneath the exuberance of

¹ William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. M. R. Ridley (London, Methuen, 1954), I, i, 16. All quotations from *Antony and Cleopatra* in this work are from this New Arden Edition. All other Shakespearean quotations are from his *Complete Plays and Poems* edited by William Allan Neilson and Charles Jarvis Hill (New York, The Riverside Press, 1942). This new Cambridge Edition adheres to the standard lineation of The Globe Edition.

² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1930), I, 86.

³ G. B. Harrison, *Shakespeare's Tragedies* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 203.

⁴ William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* (London, C. H. Reynell, 1817), p. 95.

⁵ Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, second series (London, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1930), p. 111.

⁶ G. Wilson Knight, *The Imperial Theme. Further Interpretations of Shakespeare's Tragedies Including the Roman Plays* (London, Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 199.

the adjectives, moreover, there emerges the critic's apology for having himself become a slave to Passion. While Reason governs his judgment of the rest of the canon, it has no power here. *Antony and Cleopatra* is different. Its appeal is emotional, he says, and stems from its lyrical power, a power somehow separated from its content. Coleridge stands in awe at the *Felicitur audax* of its style,⁷ and Chambers marvels at Shakespeare's "height of poetic expression".⁸ But a reasonable awareness of its lack of drama or profundity characteristically accompanies the praise of its style. Thus Claudel thought the poetry superb, but the play itself not a very good one.⁹ Often these limitations are forcefully implied: "virtuosic", "dazzlingly original",¹⁰ or "brilliant *tour de force*", "perhaps Shakespeare's high-water-mark of sheer technical brilliance".¹¹

This dazzle obscures the flaws of the play, some critics contend; others, that it lacks "the art that conceals art".¹² So overpowering is this brilliance in one critic's view that "*Antony and Cleopatra* is liable to exaltation at the expense of its tragic implications . . .".¹³ Another acknowledges that while it is "a great achievement in drama and in poetry" and "authentically Shakespeare too", it is the product of "a Shakespeare . . . whose inward eye is dimming".¹⁴ Although "his hand has lost none of its cunning", he continues, and "his imagination ranges widely as ever over space and time", it "dwells more on surfaces and no longer

⁷ Coleridge, I, 86.

⁸ E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare. A Study of Facts and Problems* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1930), I, 86.

⁹ Paul Claudel, cited in Robert Speaight, *Nature in Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York, Crowell-Collier, 1962), p. 131.

¹⁰ Lord David Cecil, "*Antony and Cleopatra*", The Fourth W. P. Ker Memorial Lecture delivered in the University of Glasgow, 4 May 1943 (Glasgow, Jackson, Son and Company, 1944), p. 11.

¹¹ Ridley (New Arden), p. 1.

¹² Longinus, "On Literary Excellence", trans. Allan H. Gilbert in *Literary Criticism Plato to Dryden* (New York, American Book Company, 1940), pp. 170-171.

¹³ W. B. C. Watkins, *Shakespeare and Spenser* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Walker-de Berry, 1961), p. 31.

¹⁴ H. B. Charlton, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (Cambridge, University Press, 1961), p. 15.

thrusts to the utter depths". The play, in his critical judgment, is "more remarkable for the artistry than for the genius of the artist displayed".¹⁵ Granville-Barker asserts that "we have a play of action, then, not of spiritual insight".¹⁶ G. B. Harrison agrees that *Antony and Cleopatra* is "not a deep tragedy", and adds, "indeed Shakespeare never intended it to be".¹⁷ Traversi sees the whole problem of the play as involved with this "interpretation of the author's true intention", for

sooner or later, indeed the critic finds himself faced by two interpretations of Shakespeare's intention in this play, each of them strongly defended and each of them arguing from elements demonstrably present in the text, whose only disadvantage is that they appear to be mutually exclusive. Is *Antony and Cleopatra*, to put the matter in other terms, a tragedy of lyrical inspiration, justifying love by presenting it as triumphant over death, or is it rather a remorseless exposure of human frailties, a presentation of spiritual possibilities dissipated through a senseless surrender to passion?¹⁸

Whatever the answer, Traversi proposes that we search for it in the Intentional Fallacy.

Many other critics, however, attribute the ambiguity of the play more to its "loose" structure than to its author's lack of clear intention. The possibility of conscious structural ambiguity¹⁹ is ignored. H. B. Charlton points to the "wide diversity between the ultra-romantic structure of *Antony and Cleopatra* and the classical formality of *Coriolanus*".²⁰ Although the reasons may vary, the judgment that the play is "the most faultily constructed of all the tragedies"²¹ has rarely been questioned.

More devastating are those critics who, like Lord David Cecil, assert that the play "is not dramatic at all, in the sense that *Othello* is dramatic". "Nor", he adds, "is *Antony and Cleopatra*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, p. 111.

¹⁷ Harrison, *Shakespeare's Tragedies*, p. 226.

¹⁸ D. A. Traversi, *An Approach to Shakespeare* (New York, Doubleday and Company, 1956), p. 235.

¹⁹ See discussion of "question structure", Chapter V.

²⁰ Charlton, p. 15.

²¹ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy. Lectures on "Hamlet", "Othello", "King Lear", "Macbeth"* (London, Macmillan, 1905), p. 260.

tragic, as *King Lear* is tragic".²² Bradley offers support in his contention that the play lacks action as well as spiritual insight: "People converse, discuss, accuse one another, excuse themselves, mock, describe, drink together, arrange a marriage, meet and part; but they do not kill, do not even tremble and weep."²³ Despite the verbs Bradley is forced to use in his description of the first three acts of the play alone, he sees little he would call action. "Almost nothing", he notes. With Ridley as with Bradley, we learn more of his definition of drama than of the play. "The story of Antony's relation to Cleopatra", he says, "is not essentially dramatic at all; there is no progress, merely an oscillation. Under various influences – loyalty to Octavia, loyalty to Rome, and, by far the strongest, love of being a great fighting general and leading his adoring troops – Antony swings like a compass needle, but comes to rest always pointing to the inevitable north."²⁴ Although Ridley's comment is undoubtedly without pun, by it we should be led to believe that North's progressive narrative is more dramatic than Shakespeare's oscillating play. Even after admitting that "it would be inept to consider *Antony and Cleopatra* simply as a poem", Norman Holmes Pearson lends his support to the idea that it is more poem than play. Here, he observes, "words become supreme . . . almost at the expense of action, [and] we approach the realm of the closet drama rather than the theatre". We are "very close", he cautions, "to that line which divides poetic drama from a dramatic poem", a fact he charges to "the intensely, almost metaphysically contrived verbal texture of *Antony and Cleopatra*".²⁵ Lord Devid Cecil aptly describes the prevailing critical attitude toward the play:

²² Lord David Cecil, pp. 8-9. Cf. Hardin Craig, *An Interpretation of Shakespeare* (New York, The Dryden Press, 1948), p. 268: "Nowhere does Shakespeare grasp more fully the real nature of tragedy than in the story of Antony . . .".

²³ A. C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London, Macmillan, 1934), p. 284.

²⁴ Ridley (New Arden), p. ix.

²⁵ Norman Holmes Pearson, "Antony and Cleopatra" in *Shakespeare: Of An Age and For All Time*, The Yale Shakespeare Festival Lectures, ed. Charles Tyler Prouty (New Haven, Connecticut, The Shoe String Press, 1954), p. 128.

In spite of all the praise that has been lavished on it, its position among Shakespeare's works has remained ambiguous Their authors all speak of it as one of Shakespeare's greatest performances: they all agree that it contains some of his most magnificent work. But, in the midst of their paeans of praise, they suddenly let fall a sentence which shows their feelings about it are divided, that they do not quite know what to make of it.²⁶

This I-love-you-but-I-don't-understand-you sounds in Coleridge's grudging admission that "the highest praise or rather form of praise, of this play, which I can offer in my own mind, is the doubt which its perusal always occasions in me, whether it is not in all exhibitions of a giant power in its strength and vigor of maturity, a formidable rival of *Macbeth*, *Lear*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet*".²⁷ Few other critics have felt even doubt. "Of late", Allardyce Nicoll observes of these few, "various endeavors have been made to elevate *Antony and Cleopatra* to a position equal with that of the four great tragedies, and we have been asked to see in it the very finest expression of Shakespeare's genius." "Despite the wonder" that he says arises from our awareness that "a mature Shakespeare, absolute master of his art, rules majestically over the dialogue", the play has "rarely had for the reader or spectator the same power as that possessed by any of the four great tragedies".²⁸ Most critics, however, even of late, would, like Hazlitt, assign the play a position "though not in the first class of Shakespeare's productions", yet "next to them".²⁹ A. C. Bradley protests, perhaps too much, that

to regard this tragedy as a rival of the famous four, whether on the stage or in the study, is surely an error. The world certainly has not so regarded it; and, though the world's reasons for its verdicts on works of art may be worth little, its mere verdict is worth much. Here, it seems to me, that verdict must be accepted. One may notice that, in calling *Antony and Cleopatra* wonderful or astonishing, we appear to be thinking first of the artist and his activity, while in the

²⁶ Lord David Cecil, p. 7.

²⁷ Coleridge, I, 86.

²⁸ Allardyce Nicoll, *Shakespeare: An Introduction* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 151.

²⁹ Hazlitt, p. 95.

case of the four famous tragedies it is the product of this activity, the thing presented that first engrosses us.³⁰

Still another explanation offered for "what keeps it from being another *Macbeth* is a certain retreat from universalization". Dryden, continues Hazelton Spencer, is able to mold "the old clay" of Cleopatra into "Woman in Love", while Shakespeare retains her as "that identical dusky Egyptian (as he supposed her to be), and none other".³¹ Theodore Spencer finds his reason for the play's falling short of the four great tragedies in a contrast with *Lear*, for "as large as the world of *Antony and Cleopatra* may be", he explains, "it is a very different world from that of *Lear*. It may be immensely imposing, it may be rich, spacious and magnificent – but it is a world of the senses; it is physical. *Lear*'s world is metaphysical; it is the world of the soul."³² The contradiction by which one critic condemns the play for its metaphysical, non-dramatic texture and another derides its purely physical focus characterizes the analyses of the play. That the physical and metaphysical may be intrinsically linked is a possibility eloquently raised in the play itself. The physical emphasis disturbs Dryden as well, who steers "the middle course" in *All for Love*, for "'tis true, some actions, tho' natural, are not fit to be represented; and broad obscenities in words ought in good manners to be avoided: expressions therefore are a modest clothing of our thoughts, as breeches and petticoats are of our bodies".³³ The implications of Dryden's statement are, of course, that some of the actions of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, though natural, are not fit to be represented in a play that, unlike his,

³⁰ Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, p. 280.

³¹ Hazelton Spencer, *The Art and Life of William Shakespeare* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940), p. 341. One can only wonder at Hazelton Spencer's contention that Shakespeare retains Cleopatra as "that dusky Egyptian . . . and none other".

³² Theodore Spencer, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man* (New York, Macmillan, 1961), p. 169.

³³ John Dryden, Preface to "All for Love or The World Well Lost: A Tragedy Written in Imitation of Shakespere's Style" in *Selected Dramas*, ed. George R. Noyes (New York, Scott, Foresman and Company, 1910), p. 230.

presents "no middle flight".³⁴ The limitations of Shaw's love for the play may be readily seen in the rhetorical question that forms the title of his preface to *Caesar and Cleopatra*: "Better than Shakespeare?"³⁵ *Antony and Cleopatra*, then, "one of the most neglected works in the canon",³⁶ has also been "treated the least kindly of Shakespeare's great tragedies".³⁷

The charge of neglect of the text must extend to evasive criticism as well as to the generalized emotional reactions we have already noted. Indeed infinite variety characterizes the techniques by which the critics have ingeniously avoided the work itself. Occasionally the criticism reveals only the period in which it was written or the personality of its author. Many late nineteenth-century German critics, for example, focus on North's translation of Plutarch rather than on the significance of Shakespeare's adherence to or divergence from his primary source. The same emphasis is true of comparisons and contrasts with Dryden's "tragedy written in imitation of Shakespeare's style".³⁸ If less common, studies of Horace's influence on the play,³⁹ or that of the Book of Revelation,⁴⁰ or of Cleopatra as Venus,⁴¹

³⁴ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York, The Odyssey Press, 1935), I, 14.

³⁵ George Bernard Shaw, "Three Plays for Puritans", in *Collected Plays* (New York, Herbert S. Stone and Company, 1901), p. xxviii.

³⁶ Dolora G. Cunningham, "The Characterization of Shakespeare's Cleopatra", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, VI (1955), 9.

³⁷ S. L. Bethell, *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition* (New York, Staples Press, 1944), p. 116.

³⁸ Dryden, see footnote 33, p. 16 above. Cf. F. R. Leavis, "Antony and Cleopatra and *All for Love*: A Critical Exercise", *Scrutiny*, V (1936-37), 158: "Dryden and Shakespeare seem to be doing things so different in kind as to make a serious and sustained comparison obviously impossible . . .".

³⁹ See Perry D. Westbrook, for example, "Horace's Influence on Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*", *PMLA*, LXII (June, 1947), 392-398.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Ethel Seaton, "Antony and Cleopatra and the Book of Revelation", *Review of English Studies*, XXII (July, 1946), 219-224.

⁴¹ See, for example, Mara Ruta Maizitis, "A Reading of *Troilus and The Roman Plays*" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation: Yale University, 1959), p. 142: "Yet once Cleopatra is thus established as Venus (and it takes the unexpected reaction of Enobarbus to do this), it is easy to see her capturing the Roman God of War ('those his goodly eyes,/ That o'er the files and musters of the war/ Have glow'd like plated Mars,' I, i, 2-4), and turning

Isis,⁴² Dido, or Omphale⁴³ have proven equally evasive. Neither has Elizabethan background remained in its proper place. Too often the play has been its foil. Analyses such as Daniel Stempel's are too frequent:

Here our knowledge of Elizabethan mores can come to our aid. . . . Woman was a creature of weak reason and strong passions, carnal in nature and governed by lust. She could be trusted only when guided by the wisdom of her natural superior, man. . . . She is not so much a tragic slave of passion in herself as a symbol of Antony's slavery to desire. She is the tempter and the temptation; she destroys the balance of Antony's nature by arousing his physical desire to the point where it defeats his reason. . . . The misogyny of Octavius is founded on right reason. His one general statement on the nature of woman [III, xii, 29-31] echoes the sentiments of Shakespeare's contemporaries. . . . Lust and physical gratification are constant themes. This is in keeping with the general premise, familiar to all in Shakespeare's time, that eroticism is the primary motivation of women. There are also, however, more specific and less obvious trends of imagery which stem directly from Renaissance misogyny. These images are all associated with Cleopatra and fall into three classes: references to magic and witchcraft, to poisons, and to serpents. It is clear that these are actually a single group united by the common theme of witchcraft in its broadest (and worst) connotations.⁴⁴

Here the background takes the foreground. Never is the tone of a specific passage considered. Never is dramatic sympathy mentioned.⁴⁵ Surely no sensitive spectator ever agrees exclusively with Octavius' "right reason". The fact that Antony's faults are pre-

him into a Mars in chains, for the whole Roman world to watch, comment on, and ultimately envy. Venus, however, has other guises: and Cleopatra uttering her lament over the body of her lover reminds us, rather, of Venus bending over the wounded Adonis."

Cf. J. W. Lever, "Venus and the Second Chance", *Shakespeare Survey*, XV (1962), 81-88.

⁴² See, for example, Michael Lloyd, "Cleopatra as Isis", *Shakespeare Survey*, XII (1959), 88-94.

⁴³ For a discussion of Cleopatra as both Dido and Hercules' Omphale, see Ernest Schanzer, *The Problem Plays of Shakespeare: A Study of "Julius Caesar", "Measure for Measure", and "Antony and Cleopatra"* (New York, Schocken Books, 1963), pp. 155 ff.

⁴⁴ Daniel Stempel, "The Transmigration of the Crocodile", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, VII (1956), 63-66 *passim*.

⁴⁵ See discussion, Chapter II.