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Early Modern Aesthetics: *Antony and Cleopatra* and the Afterlife of Domination

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Abstract. This essay argues that *Antony and Cleopatra*'s pitting of Egypt against Rome is a cipher of aesthetic resistance to modern rationality. The coordinates are Adornian. Antony's and Cleopatra's complex identities elude the disenchanting, nominalist machinery in which diffuse indeterminacy necessitates conceptual imposition. Here, the individuals are essentially dramatized: sensate, embodied selves composed and expressed in relations of passionate recognition. The lovers' deaths, and especially Cleopatra's self-conscious theatre, rewrite the ascetic, dominative, and pseudo-theatrical rationality of Octavian Rome. The protest, the passion and singularity, lives mainly through its expressive emphases – such as hyperbole – and the re-functioning of the very dominative roles and norms being opposed. This reflects the restricted but critical – aesthetic – status of early modern drama, and specifies its opposition to the deepening attack on sensate knowing in its world.

Keywords. Shakespeare, Adorno, aesthetics, modernity, nominalism.

1. Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* envisions a life redeemed from domination¹. Recent work by Hugh Grady (2013) and William Junker (2015) has affirmed Cleopatra's faltering but finally clear-eyed opposition to Octavius Caesar's eternalist idea of sovereignty and spectacle. The argument that follows pushes further towards establishing the aesthetic import of this opposition and the drama that brings it forth. Theodor Adorno's work offers pointers, but the play is no illustration of any pre-form philosophy. Resistance to such a fate is key to its aesthetic character².

¹ Shakespeare (1606). References are given by act, scene, and line numbers in the text.

² Adorno develops no reading of Shakespeare, but there are many local comments. For his relation to *Hamlet*, see Oppitz-Trotman (2016). On Shakespeare and this tradition in aesthetics, see Grady (2009). For reservations about its application to «pre-autonomous» art, cf. Hammermeister ([2002]: 210).

This lens shows how *Antony and Cleopatra* expresses some problematic aspects of «modernity»³. Aesthetics resists some defining rationalizing procedures and the stifled social experience that is their correlate. It attends to two areas of damage: the human body and its sensate, material world. Both have been evacuated of authority and meaningfulness. Aesthetics pushes back on both fronts, opposing or problematizing the identifying concept and physical or moral law, as well as the separation of ethical and objective domains (Bernstein [1992]). Just what is early *modern* about Shakespeare's world in these terms is, no doubt, controversial terrain. The full paraphernalia of modern reason, perhaps most critically economic «rationality» and commodification, is clearly not yet pervasive at this time. Nevertheless, some fateful stress-points, such as abstraction and self-mastery, are apparent, as will be argued here⁴.

Antony and Cleopatra's pitting of Rome against Egypt has long been elaborated and complicated in the criticism. Its significance is layered with various world-historical themes and allusions in the play, as heroism yields to procedure, republic to empire – and Christianity is anticipated («The time of universal peace is near», Octavius proclaims, with historical irony [4.6.5])⁵. In the following, the tensions between Roman norms and

³ The concept of «modernity» is vexed – as to its content, chronological application, and normative-cum-descriptive character. This is its interest, and no overall definition is assumed here. The analysis behind this essay's approach to modern *rationality* is Horkheimer and Adorno (1944), who find disenchantment in pre-historical myth, a myth to which contemporary reason reverts. They argue, of course, for more reason, not less. Likewise, this essay defends the «critical, utopian» elements of the modern aesthetic, against modernity (Grady [2013]: 173-174).

⁴ On the larger ascetic and conceptual problematic, see Weber (1905) and Gauchet (1985). For the increased, proto-economic, severity of the distinction of gift from exchange, interest from disinterest, in early modern culture, and the resistance offered by an early modern devotional poet, see Mapp (2013).

⁵ Cf. 1 Thessalonians 5.3.

the experiences associated with Cleopatra and Egypt are considered anew, from the standpoint of the aesthetic resistance to domination outlined above. Cleopatra seems destined for stuffing and mounting in Caesar's imperial display-case, as law and measure master beauty and sublimity, the sensate body, the expansive individual. Yet she, and the play, refuses this banishment to cognitive and political vacancy. When she sets her theatre against Octavius' version, the stakes, I suggest, are those of disenchanting modernity.

The larger view implied here sees the religious controversies of Shakespeare's age as centrally involved in rationalizing, so-called «secularizing», currents⁶. In particular, the developments have an anti-expressive logic that Shakespeare everywhere explores, if indirectly. Briskly put, reformed religion underlines the believer's faith at the expense of works, which are no longer seen as efficacious in salvation. Salvation is not to be earned in any way; for God is utterly free, and faith itself is his gift. This fundamental human concern is thus removed from, and only riskily traceable in, worldly appearances and actions. This tenet, and problem, is one ingredient in the developing priority of intentions over consequences in legal and moral reasoning, and in separating law from context and the agent from whatever is made of what he or she does. Equally, the larger operations of God's radical, unpredictable freedom are hard to discern. Yet it is imperative to try. Hence the persistence in the period of rival Providential interpretations of the historical and natural world alongside increasingly disenchanting explorations⁷.

⁶ For accounts complicating linear, progressive, and linked ideas of secularization and individual autonomy, see Cummings (2013), Gillespie (2009), Taylor (2007). On Weber's narrative and concept of «disenchantment», see Das and Davis (2017) and Crawford (2017). Mapp (2021) develops many of these themes in detail.

⁷ On Providence, see Walsham (1999); on natural science, Funkenstein (1986) and Gaukroger (2006). These developments also feed into the spread and development of scepticism, philosophical and vernacular, that reaches an apogee in Descartes's radical, «methodological» doubt. The classic text on Shakespeare's proleptic relationship

In this culture, «idolatry» becomes a master-term of abuse, the key to the charge of «superstition». The charge bespeaks a critical suspicion: that spiritual import and agency have been wrongly ascribed to activities or objects, such as Catholic rituals or imagery. It alleges subjective projection and material fixation⁸. This attitude is of course central to Puritan objections to the early modern playhouse itself as a nest of sinful sensory allurements (Pollard [2004]). And not just places or artefacts or rituals, but one's affective and ideational life are all open to such iconoclastic «critique». The rationale is crucial in determining the modern ideas of matter and sensation. Purged of cognitive authority, they become data for abstract conceptual subsumption. «Idoloclasm» is thus a fateful feature of the conceptual set-up that the artwork, in aesthetic perspective, questions through its emphasis on the medium and sensate experience.

Asceticism is vital to the suspicious project of extirpating attachments to sensory objects and somatic interests, all which are increasingly deauthorized (see McGrath [2020]). Weber helps identify the ambivalence of this affirmation of the individual, which seems both autonomous and pathologically unclear to itself, always needing to check that its justifications have been picked clean of distortive motivation (Weber [1905]: 104). Self-denial cannot save your soul, but the subjection of one's entire existence to rational organization and its worldly rewards gives the best hope, overall, of being able to infer that one actually does enjoy God's blessing (Weber [1905]: 79). This is the *self-dominative* angle, the questionable secularization, and the pervasive suspicion, that Adorno's analyses draw on and develop, and which are already at work in the early modern period.

Antony and Cleopatra both indexes and resists these developments in its culture. Central in what

with Cartesian scepticism is Cavell (2003); see also Hamlin (2005). Popkin (2003) relates the larger theological and philosophical development of scepticism.

⁸ The centrality of this topic to modern critique, and especially ideas of *ideology*, is examined in Jarvis (2001).

follows are the play's representations of ascetic and passionate life and the views taken of Antony's perilous involvement with Cleopatra's «magic» (3.10.18) – and the role in this of the «rationalizing» concept that would dominate the lovers. The analysis traces what is «antitheatrical» in such domination, in its assault on appearances, expression, consequence, on affective and intersubjective recognition.

Issues of singularity and identity are the specific focus here, with the topic of nominalism framing the reading. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, passionate experiences of singularity fascinate and disturb Roman rational norms. Antony is caught between a legislated identity and what is from Roman perspective a reprehensible excess (1.1.2). He nonetheless comes to promise an alternative norm. Cleopatra provokes singular identifications and is a sort of aesthetic riddle: *eros* united with knowing and ethical life. Most important is Cleopatra's dream of Antony after he is gone. She affirms «an Antony» (5.2.98): a new concept and value, not just a named person. This possibility, she insists, is no dream.

Antony and Cleopatra thus adumbrates a protest against imperial «peace». It does so largely negatively, through complex repetitions and explorations of the conditions under which the lovers must live. This protest also enciphers the predicament – and critical opportunities – of early modern theatre itself.

2. Theodor Adorno refers to «Shakespeare's nominalistic breakthrough into mortal and infinitely rich individuality» ([1970a]: 317; [1970b]: 213). «Nominalistic» means that characters do not instantiate concepts, do not participate in, nor fully yield up their secrets to, any given, moralized rational structures, in their world or ours. Genre norms and even the concept of character come under pressure. This is because concepts themselves are just names, not cosmic infrastructure.

Hans Blumenberg describes nominalism's theological birth and its role in modern developments. It is a corollary of God's omnipotence:

[God's power] renders meaningless the interpretation of the individual as the repetition of the universal. [...] But these very riches of creative abundance put human reason in the embarrassing position of having to set its economy of classificatory concepts over against the authentic reality as an auxiliary construct that is just as indispensable as it is inappropriate – in the position, that is, of being unable from the very beginning to interpret its theoretical mastery of reality as anything but self-assertion. (Blumenberg [1966]: 153)

God is not constrained by the «rational» demands of creation, nor ever tied by promises or past actions. What he commands is good, just because he commands it (Pfau [2013]: 161-162). Concepts are our labels, not parts of God's mind. So human freedom is also fundamentally reconceived, for individuals do not participate in any universal or final end. The roles and hierarchies of classical rationalism are jettisoned in favour of universal equality in individuation, while the emphasis on free willing protects the conscience from the obligations of law (Siedentop [2015]: 306-320)⁹.

The impenetrably remote God leaves us exposed to an unbuffered death. Adorno mentions «mortal» riches in the phrase cited. With the privileging of the individual comes an obliterating death – the «absolute price of absolute value», as Adorno argues in *Minima Moralia* (Adorno [1951]: 231). There, Adorno offers a contrast with his contemporary «total» society in which death is meaningless, because individuals are meaningless as individuals. They are abstract workers and consumers, infinitely replaceable, playing out the demonic reduction of living singularity to specimen. *Antony and Cleopatra* protests such a fate. It mourns and affirms the individual against categories that are really rationalizing imposition. Just so, it refuses to boil down to a morality play of the great man lost to excess but instead transforms that schema.

Yet the play also sees how individuality must be neither autarchic nor vanishingly nominalist.

⁹ My understanding has also been informed by Gillespie (2009) and Taylor (2007).

It must bear, and be borne up in, recognitive relations, both institutional and passionate. Antony asserts that he and Cleopatra are «peerless», and he requires the world to acknowledge it, too (1.1.41-42). The binding of uniqueness to recognition (and efforts to command it) is made repeatedly evident in the play through the exertions of characters trying to get the protagonists' measure.

Antony attracts hyperbole. He is Cleopatra's «man of men» (1.5.74); akin to «plated Mars» (1.1.4) for Philo; while Agrippa thinks «A rarer spirit never / Did steer humanity» (5.1.31-32). Cleopatra is missing her lover, while Philo talks of the former soldier he claims is now lost in «dotage» when the play starts (1.1.1); Agrippa's obituary remark might be politeness. Context matters, and the play is obviously interested in assessing forms of hyperbole. So what of the elaborate, superhuman Antony, who towers up in Cleopatra's report of her dream, a Colossus «whose legs bestrid the ocean» (5.2.81)? Antony's critics see in him a cautionary tale of extremes, «the triple pillar of the world transformed / Into a strumpet's fool» (1.1.12-13). Cleopatra, on the other hand, finds her lover's worth in a kind of amplification of his statuary magnificence, perhaps its transfiguration. But what are the elements of Antony that she must transform?

The idea that Antony is not living up to the standard of his own example recurs over and over. Philo again: «sometimes when he is not Antony / He comes too short of that great property / Which still should go with Antony» (1.1.59-61)¹⁰. When he falls short, he is not himself. «Antony» is a norm – a common noun with fixed content – and an essential name, Antony's true identity.

When Antony fights Octavius, the fight is also within. His shameful defeat is read as self-attack: «Experience, manhood, honour, ne'er before / Did violate so itself», Scarus proclaims (3.10.22-23; cf. 25-28). Antony concurs: «I have fled myself [...] My very hairs do mutiny [...] Friends, begone.

¹⁰ Cf. Cleopatra: «Antony / Will be himself» (1.1.44-45); Enobarbus: «I shall entreat him to answer like himself» (2.2.3-4).

[...] Let that be left / Which leaves itself» (3.11.7-20). He has fled himself, his body turns on itself, and his followers must depart. Identity disintegrates with, even *as*, the human bonds it has sustained and depended on. All defining traits disperse: «He's unqualified with very shame» (3.11.43). He is no longer a self at all. Antony's identity is performative in the punishing sense that it is constantly defined in terms of an external criterion. In this theatre, actors must fulfil the script, not interpret or revise it. Antony's performance vitiates his identity, this role; he is defined by his dereliction, self-deletion. Antony thus represents an acute tension between personifying a norm and being a person enmeshed in a narrative (cf. Crawford [2017]: 19ff.).

Yet self-mastery is a Roman norm, a prerequisite and justification of political command. Caesar admiringly apostrophizes the old Antony for his hardihood on campaign (1.4.62-64)¹¹. Antony, we learn, has lived off horses' «stale» (63) and worse. He conceded the barest minimum to nature, and nothing to predilection. His foul sustenance is almost an emblem: contempt for appetite. «And all this», Caesar adds, «was borne so like a soldier that thy cheek / So much as lanked not» (1.4.69-72). In picture-book moralism, fortitude has a becoming aspect, and the lesson is total self-sufficiency.

Antony's faults must therefore be both physical blemishes and disempowering liabilities. After Actium, Octavius instructs Thidias to «Observe how Antony becomes his flaw, / And what thou thinkst his very action speaks / In every power that moves» (3.12.34-36). He wants details of how Antony is taking his disgrace. William Juncker has shown how Caesar's invitations to people to see for themselves actually stipulate what will be seen ([2015]: 174-176). Similarly, Octavius

defines the lesson here: Antony's lack of self-command will manifest in his minutest movements. Honour is command and self-command. This all reflects Octavius' larger political theatre, which is utterly anti-theatrical. Meaning is not constituted through its unfolding and the surprise of expectations, intentions or rules; what appears is simply the roll-out of the pre-established programme. Yet of course this example can only be declared in the wake of Antony's military defeat, which is what gives Octavius' moralism a free hand. Indeed, to be taken as *any* such edifying personification, whether ascetic paragon or ruined sybarite, and thus a punctual unity of essence and appearance, doing and being, is to be power's specimen. Stoic withdrawal and self-possession, in this light, and despite the values asserted, look like compensation or solace for necessary defeat by a world, a power, beyond the self's etiolated domain (cf. Grady [2013]: 175-176).

The self-control is allegedly *rational*. Enobarbus judges that Antony has made «his will / Lord of his reason» (3.13.3-4). His brainless optimism ruins effective manhood: «A diminution in our captain's brain / Restores his heart. When valour preys on reason, / It eats the sword it fights with» (3.13.202-204). Yet these absurd moments when the stricken Antony proposes single combat with Octavius (3.13.25-28) are ones where the truth of rational self-command emerges: it is an unheroic mode enabled by military force, and it is ludicrous in its absence (see Dollimore [1984]: 206-217).

Here is a man viewed as at war with himself, and one who thinks, at points, that he is running away from what he truly is. His indulgences entail self-loss, emasculation, utter defeat, even the crumbling of his mind and body. Yet Antony affirms, through his death and beyond consciousness of his shame, something worth it. The image of Antony as strewn across his disintegrating body and fleeing retainers even gives way to a more positive sense of participation – or at least a conviction of its possibility.

The play inhabits and dramatizes some Roman fixities to multidimensional effect. Take Antony's association with Hercules and Mars. The names

¹¹ Modernity's «inner worldly asceticism» has famously been emphasized by Weber ([1905]: 82). The illegibility and inalterability of the divine decision as to one's salvation issue in new demands for worldly success, from whose instrumentally rationalized form one's blessed status might be inferred. McGrath (2020) strongly reasserts the theme.

appear in the play tangled in their traditions of interpretation (Adelman [1973]). The Herculean references are particularly variegated. Hercules stands for masculine prowess, but he is also reduced to cross-dressing with Omphale and to a madness in which he slaughters his family. He represents self-attack but also triumphs over the Underworld and is taken up to heaven. In the Renaissance, he is the virtuous man who makes the difficult choice; as the serpent killer, and as man and god, he is an archetype of Christ (Bull [2005]: 86-140). The strange scene (4.3) in which Hercules is heard departing Antony's camp is thus highly overdetermined. It seems to signify Antony's loss of Roman manhood or of his men's faith. Or perhaps we witness the Christian ousting of pagan gods (cf. 3.11.58-60)¹². But maybe all allegorical schemata are ditched, and if Herculean heroism is gone, so are the moralizing ancillaries.

The allusions, then, show a protagonist interpreting the mythic name, rather than vice versa. Conventions are expressed, as Walter Benjamin puts it, rather than expression conventionalized ([1925]: 184-185). This is not a drama deploying familiar codes for universal identification and edification.

The astonishing images in which Antony's fall is conceived are another challenge to the didactic notion of defaced statuary. Feeling betrayed by Cleopatra, Antony boils: «The shirt of Nessus is upon me. Teach me, / Alcides, thou mine ancestor, thy rage. / Let me [...] with those hands that grasped the heaviest club / Subdue my worthiest self» (4.12.43-47). His hands are and are not those of Hercules. And it is his «worthiest self» that is to be quelled. David Bevington glosses the phrase: «that part of his noble nature that has striven for glory» (Shakespeare [1606]: 228). This self proves its worth by refusing to live in ignominy. The subduing returns him to coherence, «the worthiest» is confirmed, and Antony will have no facet that is not Roman, although he will be dead. Yet obviously the facets are barely his own. Alienation inheres

in the formulations, and the Herculean scene denotes madness.

A little later, Antony feels that without power and betrayed by love, he is dissolving. He «cannot hold this visible shape» (4.14.17) and, cloud-like, will morph into something else by and by: «That which is now a horse, even with a thought / The rack dislimns and makes it indistinct / As water is in water» (4.14.9-11). There is no self-conflict because there is barely a self. This is not a nominalist fantasy of limitless self-invention but an annihilated state where there is nothing to compensate for or justify the losses. But it is not quite a state of nothingness.

Mardian's false report that Cleopatra has killed herself includes the comment that «her fortunes mingled / With [his] entirely» (4.14.24-25). The lexicon of indistinction now represents a self-expanded, rather than limited, by the claim of another. His grievous loss restores Antony's love. Self-interference must end: «Now all labour / Mars what it does» (4.14.47-48). This is a new understanding of his conflict: no action in this world can realize his deepest interests. The renunciation reflects the desire to re-join his lover: «I will be / A bridegroom in my death and run into't / As to a lover's bed» (4.14.99-101). This is the identity towards which all has led, its «final cause». Note the reason he gives Eros to kill him: «Do it at once, / Or thy precedent services are all / But accidents unpurposed» (4.14.82-84). Only this conclusion will give coherence to all his, their, prior actions.

Antony botches his suicide, fittingly. And it is hard not to feel these complications in his last scene with Cleopatra, despite appearances. Antony re-packages his suicide now he has learned that Cleopatra is not dead. Dying, he reassures her: «Peace! / Not Caesar's valour hath o'erthrown Antony, / But Antony's hath triumphed on itself» (4.15.14-16). His valour has not won out over something else in him, but defeated itself and perhaps, paradoxically, its self-interfering quality. Cleopatra seems to agree: «So it should be, that none but Antony / Should conquer Antony» (17-18), while, in his last words, Antony asks to

¹² Hercules declares disbelief in gods in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, IX, 203-204.

be remembered in his heyday and repeats that he is «a Roman by a Roman / Valiantly vanquished» (59-60). He refers to an inner drama, not the struggle with Octavius, but the ambiguity is troubling. Roman «valiancy», pertaining to both winner and loser, wins out, resolving agon into ideal – as if Antony has finally coincided with his postulated (non-)self. The replaceability of individuals, individuals only in terms of their free acquiescence in that fate, is affirmed. Yet this logic of self-domination is both reclaimed and exposed. These phrases are surely aerated by all that has preceded them, and dying for love is what he is still doing. The «Roman by a Roman» logic echoes the dissolution of «water in water», aligning the schematic, rationalized self with nominalist indeterminacy again, to complex effect.

The drawn-out dying keeps open a space that all the talk of split Romans and Antonies tries to close. The logical torsion, the self-conscious insistence, the repetition of the reflexive motif: all bespeak the sacrifice of, and for, something valuable, something validated through this death, but no longer according to the scheme in which only the inessential dies, like a failing body. The phrases betray a resistance to monadic Romanness. Cleopatra is axial here. She is not, in fact, overlooked: Antony appeals to her memory, her perception, and lays a claim on it, which he takes as their claim. This deeper demand animates this odd re-assertion of Roman honour. Without power, we know, Antony is but little. But as merely power, he was mastered, alienated.

3. Cleopatra's is a different sort of singularity. Changeable and histrionic, she attracts and resists moralizing judgment. She is often admirable, even in Roman opinion, but concepts catch up with her only as paradox or aporia.

«What manner o' thing is your crocodile?» asks Lepidus (2.7.37). Antony offers a mocking reply: «It is shaped, sir, like itself, and it is as broad as it hath breadth. It is just so high as it is, and moves with it[s] own organs. It lives by that which nourisheth it, and the elements once out of it, it transmigrates» (38-41). The crocodile is closed: fully

expressed by being fully withheld. The passage has rightly been taken to exemplify the otherness Egypt represents in the play (as in Klein [2016]). But there are distinctions to make. Cleopatra is no blank. Keeping Antony guessing is part of her conscious tactics (as made clear to Charmian [1.3.9-10]). But she is a being where tactics go a long way down, and so the screen is also the thing itself. Her theatricality is radical.

Antony announces a theme: «Fie, wrangling queen, / Whom everything becomes, to chide, to laugh, / To weep, whose every passion fully strives / To make itself, in thee, fair and admired!» (1.1.50-53). Her every passing passion aspires to beauty and reverence, like independent agents inspired by being in her. The passions, in her, are exemplary: idealized universals and unique, transformed, no longer merely themselves. She is not the mere bearer of universal predicates, but a phenomenon that completes and elevates them.

This paradoxical metaphysics comes clearest in Enobarbus' appreciations of the queen. «I saw her once», he says, «Hop forty paces through the public street, / And having lost her breath, she spoke, and panted, / That she did make defect perfection / And, breathless, power breathe forth» (2.2.238-242). Again, whatever she does is perfect, because she does it. If the report does not escape misogynist framing – her «power» is a suspect charm – a living body is still celebrated. This is even a love-vision of sorts. Enobarbus can explain why Antony will never leave Cleopatra:

*Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety. Other women cloy
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies. For vilest things
Become themselves in her, that the holy priests
Bless her when she is riggish. (2.2.245-251)*

Here, perhaps, the male desire to possess and discard is exacerbated and thwarted. But a peculiar tension appears as «vilest things / Become themselves in her». This explicates the prior paradox about desire and satisfaction. Satiety is not (self-)disgust; desire persists in its fulfilment. The

ascetic idea that perception of true moral ugliness is endlessly deflected is there. But also this: the worst becomes decorous, beautiful. It reaches full expression, even as its quality is changed; the point about the priests asserts sexual allure as supreme value. Cleopatra's presentation of evils is itself good, as if she were a *representation* of them: she is «a wonderful piece of work» (1.2.148). Yet she is also the thing itself, redeeming, not stilling, the passions she inflames.

In Roman logic, a blemish is a blemish (cf. 1.4.21-23). But Cleopatra's affective and somatic expressions are retrieved from familiar taboos. Love trumps law. Contrast Agrippa's praise of Octavia, «[w]hose virtue and whose general graces speak / That which none else can utter» (2.2.138-139). Octavia's virtues are «general», her uniqueness and ineffability consisting in her proximity to the form of virtue. She is statuesque: «She shows a body rather than a life, / A statue than a breather» (3.3.19-21), according to the messenger (who tells Cleopatra what she wants to hear). Octavia, «a piece of virtue» (3.2.28), lays no claim of her own. Cleopatra is no such statue. Nor is she pure crocodilian otherness. What is singular about her is also something reproducible, or animating of other relationships. To see her is to see something of what the lovers see in each other. She can transform the beholder.

4. These figurations resist not only Octavius' dogmatic conceptual «realism» but also the concept that thinks it owes nothing to its objects and experiential situation. Nominalism, *qua* the insistence on indeterminate givenness, is domination's alibi and twin¹³. It serves up «unqualified» material to knock into shape. Just as Cleopatra is other, but not absolutely so, the play explores how the push-back against this model can be experienced, made dramatically available.

Singularity is linked to performance and re-performance. It finds its life in the kinds of

reports, desires and actions it inspires. Cleopatra's comment about her «becomings» (transformations, charms) «kill[ing]» her «when they do not / Eye well to [Antony]» is important (1.3.97-98). The striking functional shifts (*becoming* as noun, *eye* as verb), imply that the perceptual relationship is intricate and two-way (cf. Kermode [2000]: 219). But the main sense is of qualities turning bad unless the lover appreciates them. Antony's challenge to the world for acknowledgement, and his fantasy of drawing crowds in heaven (4.14), also appeals to an audience. Their «peerlessness» will consist, however, in its transformation of such relationships, despite any narcissistic craving for spectators. Antony's and Cleopatra's qualities are accessible through each other and must become communicable to others. Their love is generalizable to all insofar as it is possibly inclusive of all. There are layers of substitution and transference both within and beyond their relationship.

This «theatricality» reveals what gets air-brushed out of the rigid Octavian sort. Events correct your judgement or action, lay bare what they mean (see Speight [2001]). The lessons typically involve the opening up of a human connection where it had been denied or misunderstood. A small example occurs when Antony catches himself mourning Fulvia, whom he has wished dead (1.2.119-124). He does not want her back, and the moment is perhaps even «conditional upon absence», as Dollimore says ([1984]: 207). But this is not hypocrisy. Antony learns what this death means. In this play, after all, there is freedom to change sides and regret the change. The logic speaks in the steady clarification of what the lovers' love entails.

Compare how Roman agency is distributed through patterns of mistrust and emulation. Subordinates threaten their superiors through their very success in executing orders (as Ventidius knows: 3.1). Pompey wishes Menas had assassinated his rivals before consulting him, for now honour dictates that he veto the plan (2.7). This is a clue to how the Stoic, abstractive individual conives with the power to choose the actions one is associated with, irrespective of what one does.

¹³ The terminus of nominalism is inarticulate pointing: «there, there» (Adorno [1958]: 206), as was clear to some early modern thinkers (see Popkin [2003]: 40-41).

Likewise, Cleopatra's impotence is manifested by her futile attempt to shift blame for her dishonest accountancy onto Seleucus: «We answer others' merits in our name» (5.2.177). Deniability depends on the proxy, who also threatens it.

The play anatomizes all this, and the lovers will come to defend the individual through relations other than those of competitive survival with which they are entangled. Love expands individual interests – rather than reinforcing them, or self-sacrificingly overriding them (the Roman alternatives). That point is reached, however, only after a near-total breakdown in the face of doubts and other motives. The lovers are despairing, competitive, jealous and, in Cleopatra's case, capable of manipulation to the point of playing dead. That pretence, nevertheless, and Antony's protracted death, allow them to defuse mistrust by both «dying» first: Antony realizes what is worth dying for; Cleopatra gets the best proof she can of his love. Even so, she will not leave her monument to be with Antony (4.15). And after he is gone, she still weighs the options. Clearly, this is not *Romeo and Juliet*. The lovers nonetheless stumble towards something beyond domination. This freedom is paradoxically indicated through their recasting of available dominating models and representation.

Cleopatra's theatrics are often nettling for this reason. «Sir, you and I must part, but that's not it; / Sir, you and I have loved, but there's not it; / That you know well. Something it is I would – / O, my oblivion is a very Antony, / And I am all forgotten» (1.3.88-92). «Antony» is used as a byword for forgetfulness – his forgetting her – and she pretends that she cannot bring out what she wants to say. Antony's exasperated response is revealing: «But that your royalty / Holds idleness your subject, I should take you / For idleness itself» (92-94). She is not quite a personification of an essence; she *uses* frivolity as she uses him and she should stop. But she objects: «'Tis sweating labour / To bear such idleness so near the heart / As Cleopatra this» (94-96). She talks in the third person not because she is her own puppet but to insist on her candour and coherency. Her so-called idleness either expresses

pains as extreme as those of the child-bed, or is a nerve-wracking effort to shield them from view. It is not playing.

Antony's and Cleopatra's love is not necessarily totally unique, let alone ideal; nor, on the other hand, is it just another relationship like those they have known before. That idea cannot be absolutely ruled out – witness Cleopatra's violent reaction to Charmian's baiting about Julius Caesar (1.5.70-74)¹⁴. And the language the lovers attract stresses love's substitutive character. This, precisely, is its exemplary aspect. Cleopatra can see Antonies all about her, and everything in him. She considers catching fish: «as I draw them up / I'll think them every one an Antony / And say, "Aha! You're caught"» (2.5.13-15). Such play connects to the lovers' role-playing and cross-dressing (22-23). As David Hillman points out, «love-as-an-emotion and love-as-a-performance [are] inextricable from one another» (Hillman [2013]: 330). What is loved, it seems, is something re-distributable, even ludic, not some unshareable core.

Specific, singular worth might seem *only* the property of report, a function of absence (Harris [1994]; cf. Hillman [2013]: 308). Yet this does not mean that love is only projection, that its substitutions owe nothing to its objects. In this light, the play's hyperbole is not always ridiculous, despite the cynicism besieging it (as with the soldiers' pointed mockery of Lepidus' language in 3.2). While it is tangled in self-assertion, it is an emphasis expressing the lover as such. It demands that something be recognized.

The lovers' values transmit to those on whom their relationship depends, as can be seen in Enobarbus' and Charmian's deaths. A more projective phenomenon is figured, negatively, in the jealous aggression shown toward messengers. Things start promisingly: Cleopatra thinks the first messenger is «gilded» by association with Antony (1.5.39), and the messenger who brings news about Antony's remarriage is first greeted in sexual terms: «O, from Italy! / Ram thou thy fruitful

¹⁴ The replaceability and treachery of husbands and wives is a theme (and source of raillery, as in 1.2).

tidings in mine ears, / That long time have been barren» (2.5.23-25). On hearing about Octavia, Cleopatra repeats the transference, only this time negatively: «Hadst thou Narcissus in thy face, to me / Thou wouldst appear most ugly» (98-99). Her physical abuse of this man, too, seems like a terrible compliment. As in Antony's treatment of Thidias, we see self-command and social hierarchy crumbling. But that this jealousy can so inform the world is a striking, inverse figure of the trust, the social and somatic fulfilment, that love promises. Their insecurities, the world against which they must kick, clarify the ideal.

When, before the final defeat, Antony is thanking his followers, he envisages a relationship unlike Roman hierarchy: «I wish I could be made so many men, / And all of you clapped up together in / An Antony, that I might do you service / So good as you have done». The novelty of the conceit is indicated in their reply: «The gods forbid!» (4.2.17-20). There is self-regard – Antony splits into a team of servants to himself. But this Antony is the epitome of these men; not exactly himself, but what they share, their noblest part (cf. 4.8.5-7). He acknowledges the relations on which Roman honour depends, and redefines it, albeit from the vantage point of impossibility, a wish. This is no mere image of disposable, indifferent persons, as is risked in his final words (discussed above); the name and value of «Antony» is reclaimed even as it is shared.

His death has a different levelling effect for Cleopatra. «Young boys and girls / Are level now with men; the odds is gone, / And there is nothing left remarkable / Beneath the visiting moon» (4.15.67-70). Differences of rank or worth, gender and generation, perhaps any meaningful distinction, are gone. Yet Cleopatra modulates this nominalist nihilism. She rejects the titles with which Iras addresses her: «No more but e'en a woman, and commanded / By such poor passion as the maid that milks / And does the meanest chares» (4.15.78-80). She feels solidarity and she then takes notable care to comfort her women (87-90). The comfort is suicide: «Let's do't after the high Roman fashion» (92). Like Antony, she asserts a

Roman value. Yet it is also freely adopted, adapted. As for Antony, the forced Stoic position combines with the desire to unite with, or at least affirm, what has been lost. She has «immortal longings» (5.2.275) – a desire for immortal remembrance of their love, perhaps, whatever happens to her (cf. Garrison [2019]: 66).

5. Thinking Cleopatra dead, Antony pictures the afterlife for which he is impatient: «Where souls do couch on flowers, we'll hand in hand, / And with our sprightly port make the ghosts gaze. / Dido and her Aeneas shall want troops, / And all the haunt be ours» (4.14.51-54). Aeneas cast Dido away in favour of his political destiny, but here the lovers are back together. Dido gets «her» Aeneas – her man, now true to himself. Antony, careless of whether Rome was founded or not, mends their relationship. But he and Cleopatra will transcend it. In the Elysian theatre, they will be the main attraction, albeit one otherwise undescribed here.

Cleopatra has no comparable vision of the afterlife. Nonetheless, she too re-envisioned available patterns. Her theatricalizing of the dead Antony and of her suicide distances itself from the worldly values it reclaims.

Cleopatra's suicide blocks Octavius' plan for her live exhibition in Rome. She particularly dreads seeing herself parodied: «I shall see / Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / I'th' posture of a whore» (5.2.218-220). She heads off this humiliation. But can she control her future representation? The anxiety is exacerbated by the audacious self-reference that points to the youth playing the queen. But the moment simultaneously reveals that this (Shakespearean) theatre is not exactly the one Cleopatra fears. It deepens and ironizes her fear of the deletion of her worth, rather than actually deleting it. It even makes her, suddenly, as real as this actor – this one, who is not her. Indicating dramatic illusion does not leave nothing. Nor does theatre fail its subject if it cannot perfectly recreate it. Instead, its subject's pressures and possibilities are felt in their re-figuration. Cleopatra stands for a theatre, a memory, distinct from obliteration.

Her love vision clarifies this. It is *like* a vision of worldly sovereignty and proposes a different future through a picture of the past. It is not soliloquy, but addresses Dolabella, with a challenge:

*I dreamt there was an emperor Antony,
O, such another sleep, that I might see
But such another man! [...]*
*His face was as the heav'ns, and therein stuck
A sun and moon, which kept their course and lighted
The little O, the earth. [...]*
*His legs bestrid the ocean; his reared arm
Crested the world; his voice was propertied
As all the tunèd 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 showed his back above
The element they lived in. In his livery
Walked crowns and crownets; realms and islands
were
As plates dropped from his pocket. [...]*
*Think you there was or might be such a man
As this I dreamt of? (5.2.75-93)*

Cleopatra's imagination is a complex optic. Perhaps it tells of a literal dream; perhaps of the dream that her past now is. The past tense feels ambivalent, too: this is her dream of how Antony *was*; this *is* Antony as he appeared in her dream. The question whether «there was or might be such a man» implies the dual perspective. Is this the Antony that was destroyed by love, or the one realized in it? Is he an open fiction?

The speech is a stunning inflation of Roman hyperbole: a colossus, but one that is alive, a phenomenon of beneficent nature, part of the cosmic framework as much as imperial imposition. He is more than ever a body, one sustaining passionate friendships and elemental anger. Cleopatra is blending in the terms of her earlier praise of Antony: «O heavenly mingle! Be'st thou sad or merry, / The violence of either thee becomes, / So does it no man else» (1.5.62-64). Antony here redeems passion as attractive rather than aversive, just as she is said to do in the reports she inspires.

No figure of pared-down self-command, in the dream he grows by reaping, being reaped, a figure with both social and natural significance: he is as carelessly magnanimous as he is life-generating. Cleopatra's passion retrieves passion as grandeur. She asserts a «dolphin-like» Antony, immersed in but never lost to the waters, his delights.

Dolabella replies with measured realism to the question whether «there was or might be such a man»: «Gentle madam, no» (5.2.93). He is fiercely rebuked. Cleopatra goes on: «But if there be nor ever were one such, / It's past the size of dreaming. Nature wants stuff / To vie strange forms with fancy; yet t' imagine / An Antony were Nature's piece against fancy, / Condemning shadows quite» (94-99). She defends the dream, even if this individual does not exist and never has existed. The phrasing is compressed. One sense is that the non-existence cannot even be imagined. The chief sense is that if there never were such a person, then he could not be imagined. Or: if there were never such a man, he is nevertheless beyond any dream. Something in reality, actual or potential, informs the image. Nature generally lacks the material to compete with fancy's productions, she says, but this fantastic Antony does not take rise in the fancy. To «imagine / An Antony» is to channel a nature with which fancy cannot compete, exposing it *as* fancy. Antony is this «piece» – a paragon, type, and person (Crystal, Crystal [2002]: 327). (Note the worldly appeal to «size», as if increase in dimension, rather than something less tangible, captures a vital, immeasurable, transformation of quality.) The element that inspires and is inspired by love is real. This is even a mimesis of what does not yet exist, a possibility attested by what has been, when taken in the light which it, in turn, has made possible (see Junker [2015]: 184).

This imagination is a conceiving power knowingly drawing on a nature it has known, as it has known it. Cleopatra says «An Antony» partly to stress her redemptive powers, partly to indicate the idea's ground in what it preserves and transfigures. She assembles him – as she pieced his armour together earlier (4.4.7) – making of Antony a kind. The reality of this love is again tied

both to the beloved and to potential transfer to a re-imagined, rather than dominated, world (cf. Hillman [2013]: 311, 332).

Cleopatra's rationale recalls Enobarbus' earlier description of her: «O'erpicturing that Venus where we see / The fancy outwork nature» (2.2.210-211). She improves on the fancy which, through representations of Venus, improves on nature. But she «o'erpictures» such a Venus, doubles the artistry, because she is the real thing, and the work of fancy can now be «seen» for what it is (positively and negatively). Cleopatra both ousts Venus, and presents her, what she represents or instantiates, more closely.

Cleopatra's death replays this scene Enobarbus was speaking of: «I am again for Cydnus, / To meet Mark Antony» (5.2.227-228). She dresses for the part. To this role is added an apparently antithetical one: «Now from head to foot / I am marble-constant; now the fleeting moon / No planet is of mine» (238-240). She must steady herself for the «noble act» (279). This combination of values speaks again when Cleopatra identifies the pleasure to come with death itself: «The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch» (289). As Junker notes ([2015]: 180), this is no mere replica of the past, for she insists on a union she never enjoyed before: «Husband, I come! / Now to that name my courage prove my title» (5.2.281-282). The performance, right now, is «the repetition, or retrieval, of her past into a present that changes and is changed by it» (Junker [2015]: 181). His merit inspires hers and, as for Antony at the last, death is less the route to fulfilment than fulfilment itself.

Illusion or no, this sets high terms for any reconciliation with death, which are equally terms for reconciliation with the world. This *Liebestod* convicts ascetic life of deathliness. And the terms set are not a reconciliation with domination, but with the enviroing, affective nature that speaks in her vision of Antony and her fervent dying. As love, as mourning, this suicide asserts the hope of a different history.

6. There are moments in *Antony and Cleopatra* where some action is signalled through the bare

word «thus», as when Antony apparently kisses Cleopatra (1.1.39) or embraces Octavius (2.2.29), or when Eros imitates Antony's gait (3.5.14). Something is emphasized, but what it is needs to be inferred. The particular demonstrations, gestural quiddities, are wordless but they are also iterable, and of course they can be highly conventionalized. They are a clue to how claims against Roman processing elude decisive capture or literal exposition but are sustained in expressive indices, whether tiny nuances or hyperbolic rapture.

This is where Adorno's ban on images of utopia, for the sake of utopia, feels relevant. Compare his comment on *Romeo and Juliet*:

The immanence of artworks, their apparently a priori distance from the empirical, would not exist without the prospect of a world transformed by self-conscious praxis. In Romeo and Juliet Shakespeare was not promoting love without familial guardianship; but without the longing for a situation in which love would no longer be mutilated and condemned by patriarchal or any other powers, the presence of the two lost in one another would not have the sweetness – the wordless, imageless utopia – over which, to this day, the centuries have been powerless; the taboo that prohibits knowledge of any positive utopia also reigns over artworks. (Adorno [1970a]: 366-367; [1970b]: 247)¹⁵

From the start, Antony thinks his love apocalyptic. It requires a «new heaven, new earth» (1.1.17; cf. Revelation 21.1). Hyperbole is truth: bliss is wordless, even a mere *thus*, because it is as yet *worldless*. Likewise, Cleopatra's theatre lives chiefly in virtue of its emphases. It can seem that only the poetry saves the lovers from ridiculousness (cf. Kermode [2000]: 230). Yet the extraordinary elevations nonetheless index a critical yearning, and a demand – one borne particularly in its affective and articulatory intensities. These challenge the allegedly critical attitudes that work by suspicion, discrediting them (cf. Felski [2015]).

What, then, of the play's aesthetic character? «For 25 years», says Brian Cummings,

¹⁵ On the complexities of Adorno's image ban, see, for example, Pritchard (2002).

Shakespearean theatre has been imagined in relation to Stephen Greenblatt's idea, developed most formally in Shakespearean Negotiations (1988), that the theatre after the Reformation, like religious belief itself, is a place of mimesis and not sacrament. Shakespeare's theatre is the desacralized ritual shell of dramatic illusion left over once the kernel of belief is removed. (Cummings [2012]: 372)

The autonomization of art from religion and indeed rational authority is underway in the early modern theatre. If drama (compulsorily) enjoys a relative freedom of self-determination it is also now restricted to a disenchanted, «emptied out», sphere (see Greenblatt [1988]: 119). It is severed from the ritual or liturgical calendar and its civic and moralizing uses and established as a largely commercial enterprise (O'Connell [2000]). In fact, it is now in competition with sermons and the newly disenchanted rituals of the church, as Cummings suggests. It has a considerable degree of formal freedom, despite censorship and the general hostility of the City authorities. In this new space, spectators are freed from communal identifications with didactic personifications – fixed character concepts and structures of identification – and able, if they so wish, to judge both plays and characters for themselves, along with any such re-worked «morality play» components (cf. Shell [2010]: 121-122). They are free because they have had to pay to enter the theatre; the new London playhouses are all interior spaces, «walled off from the outside world» (Preiss [2013]: 50-51). A rhetorical education in presenting both sides of a debate – *argumentum in ultramque partem* – further informs these playwrights' off-shore, sceptical and querying, rather than didactic mode. (Rome or Egypt?) Plays now innovate in subject-matter, in genre and manipulation of conventions, and freely argue, through ironic allusion or coat-trailing peritexts, with other plays and playwrights, their practice and norms, from the stage.

The theatre is no longer the adjunct of inclusive and authoritative social rituals and meanings. But Cummings is right to proceed, as he does, to question any straightforward separation

of ritual participation from the spectatorship of the theatre. One reason is that a broader theatricality is under «rational» siege in this culture, as scepticism eats into appearances, and agency becomes almost structurally suspicious, estranged from its expressions and its passionate life. This affects the relation of these plays to their materials. In the case of *Antony and Cleopatra*, and like the sequestered Cleopatra herself, there seems to be an insistence on disposing over its sources, the mythic and generic givens and conventions. The play even risks comedy at sensitive points, such as the winching up of the dying Antony (4.15), and metatheatrical reference. It seems ironic that it is such a self-determining, stipulative artistic power that affords the play its arraignment of the suppressive theatre of Octavius. That result, however, comes equally of immersion in and expression of its medium and materials, in the social experience that lies congealed or sedimented in them but which breathes in their specific re-configuration here; for they are of course not *raw* materials at all. They at least bear the scars of their iconoclastic or sceptical emptying. In experiencing them as such, the play itself is an image, or promise, of reconciled freedom. This aesthetic immersion relies on the reflective, distancing power.

Adorno's full sentence on Shakespeare's nominalism can now be quoted:

Shakespeare's nominalistic breakthrough into mortal and infinitely rich individuality – as content – is as much a function of an antitectonic, quasi-epic succession of short scenes as this episodic technique is under the control of content: a metaphysical experience that explodes the meaning-giving order of the old unities. ([1970a]: 317; [1970b]: 213)

Nominalism manifests technically as discontinuous structure. Relationships of causality, time, and space are radically discomposed¹⁶. Scope and mood are fluid. *Antony and Cleopatra's* geographi-

¹⁶ This drastically simplifies Adorno's explorations of nominalism, genre, and art. See especially the section on universal and particular in *Aesthetic Theory* (Adorno [1970b]: 199-225).

cal reach and 42 scenes would seem to exemplify this point that coordination by the «old unities», and genres, is suspect. There is no single size and shape for notable actions, still less a stable third-person perspective from which to consider (or identify with) them. Distinct, yet interpenetrating and differentiated, worlds confront each other and themselves. A wealth of characters, whose mediations are many and far-flung, is presented. Messengers do not pool all relevant knowledge before us but signify absence, obtruding themselves as stand-ins. Adorno insists, then, that this dramatic technique is crucial in elaborating the irreducible variety and nuance of character – and that the technique itself shares in this idiosyncratic, subjective quality. *Antony and Cleopatra* – through its formal freedom – imitates, and suffers under, a dislocation of agency and significance, just as much as it articulates it. Only in this aesthetic character can it express and underline critical possibilities.

This is partly a drama of unfolding opinions, categories and norms. It displays their inadequacy or modification to context. Antony will not fit the conceptual grid, whatever violence he offers himself. Cleopatra, more clearly still, remains a «knot intricate» (5.2.298) in perceptions of her. And their love is never fully taken up into portably discursive significance or shared recognition; the possibility the lovers die for is available mainly in its antagonism with stultifying norms of self-determination. Antony's dying and, especially, Cleopatra's image of redeemed life, ironize, intensify, and refuse what they protest against¹⁷. Hence Adorno's resonant oxymoron: «metaphysical experience».

The lovers' compelled relinquishment is defining of a form of rationality. Torn free of the law, the past, from role, they are left, however, with more than dumb facticity or fantasy. Reconciliation means redemption from marmoreal, imperial

¹⁷ This re-reads the subjective opacity that Hegel saw in Shakespeare. According to Adorno, the «individual and passion» are sites of social antagonism in *Antony and Cleopatra*, whose central passion is «disgust for power» ([1970a]: 378; [1970b]: 254-255). Antony's surviving on foul sustenance, so praised by Caesar, can thus emblemize revulsion for power, for asceticism itself.

form, not sheer difference from it, and if its imagination is gagged and helpless, it is an indictment of history. The love-work taken up by Cleopatra is not pure creation, or sheer counterfactual. It is, the play wants us to know, the height of artifice, against artifice.

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