Wine Women and Song
Anthony and Cleopatra Revisited

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Almost a quarter of a century ago I published a short book entitled *A Reading of Shakespeare's 'Antony and Cleopatra'*.[1] It was very much a product of its time, engaged with questions that would seem entirely irrelevant to the changed priorities of the 1990s. Its emphasis was intentionalist: that is to say, it assumed that the play was an intricate network of theatrical, rhetorical and conceptual strategies executed and transmitted by William Shakespeare, the dramatist, the creator of the theatrical illusion, despite the inevitable likelihood that the text had been imperfectly transmitted, as well as the possibility—obvious to anyone writing in a post-Freudian cultural context—that Shakespeare himself had but scant recognition of the motives behind his writing much of what he wrote. The book's bias was ethical: it assumed that the play concerned itself with the question of conduct, that its interest was engaged by an attempt to make discriminations among its various characters, and that it assumed that human actions must be judged according to one or another moral criterion—even though the subtlety and complexity of the dramatist rejected easy or conventional formulations. And lastly the book assumed that the play engaged with these issues in terms of the literary, philosophical, moral and sexual preoccupations of the early seventeenth century.

Since that time, there have been a number of developments. One was the realization I reached not many years ago that leaving out the 'h' in the hero's name was a piece of eighteenth-century neoclassical pedantry completely contrary to the intellectual and historical preoccupations of Shakespeare's age. But that realization itself was implicitly challenged by the infinitely greater change of attitudes and priorities that had overtaken literary study in the intervening years, attitudes that would have little sympathy

1 A.P. Riemer, *A Reading of Shakespeare's 'Antony and Cleopatra'* (Sydney 1968). Page references are given in parentheses.

for such historically-based orthographic niceties. By far the most significant of those challenges is the consequence of the extraordinary redrawing of the boundaries of literary study that followed in the wake of certain events in 1968, the year that *A Reading of Shakespeare's 'Antony and Cleopatra'* was published.

The political ferment that led to the uprising of students and intellectuals in France in 1968 influenced literary and cultural attitudes in extraordinary and entirely unexpected ways. An abstruse, highly complex set of philosophical preoccupations, often expressed in language of considerable technical difficulty, came to be wedded to political, social and sexual attitudes which would have seemed, at first glance, quite remote from the elegantly playful scepticism of a Derrida or even of a Barthes. An intellectual movement was, in the course of the years that followed the 'troubles' in Paris (which were reflected in turn by the anti-war movement in America and to a lesser extent in Australia in the wake of the conflict in Vietnam), popularized and made the property of students, teachers and critics of literature—whose training had not in many cases been within the rigours of philosophico-linguistic inquiry. The movement spread from the barricades of Paris to the remotest parts of the world. Roland Barthes, perhaps the most accessible and certainly the most urbane of the cult-heroes to have emerged from that world, transmitted its preoccupations into the study of literary texts. The study of literature in turn became politicized and often absorbed into areas of interest which had previously remained the domain of sociology. The emphasis on what became known as 'theory' liberated the discussion of works of literature from the constraints of traditional techniques that had come to seem indistinguishable from the political repression practised by bourgeois society. Marxism (of a very particular sort) found congenial company among various practitioners of linguistic analysis all of whom, to varying extent, traced their interests back to the influence of Saussure.

The main ideological platform for the the redefinition of concepts of literature and the practice of criticism is well known: it has become the common property of most undergraduates in

the humanities. At its centre stands the challenge to authority—political, intellectual and sexual. Just as the students and *savants* of Paris had revolted against what they saw as the ubiquitous 'paternalism' or 'patriarchy' of Gaullist France, the influence of which spread from the political institutions of the nation to the canon of literary and artistic greatness, so in other cultures and in rather different literary and critical circumstances the notions concerning what constitutes the body of literature worthy of study were questioned and redefined. Various terms, which have become commonplace by the last decade of the century, entered into conventional critical vocabulary. Through the fundamentally 'paternalistic' and 'authoritarian' practices of scholastic and cultural institutions, the argument runs, several literary phenomena had become 'marginalized'. The control exerted over the publication, study and discussion of literature by a fundamentally middle-class literary and academic establishment, intent on preserving its privileges of wealth, property and the like, and employing literature to convey its ethical priorities as moral or even theological absolutes, diverted attention from other possibilities of literary or cultural activity which had equal, if indeed not greater, claim for recognition.

The three most notable areas of literary and cultural interest to have been promoted as a consequence of such attacks on 'patriarchal authority' have been popular literature, the literary (though often oral) traditions of underprivileged people like American blacks and Australian aborigines and, above all, women's writing. An historical conjunction between the emergent women's movement and the complex politico-aesthetic priorities of what came to be known, variously and successively, as structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction and the new historicism—terms often interchangeable in the more populist elements of this cultural phenomenon—provided the most important development in academic criticism of recent decades. In harmony with a broader social movement that insisted upon removing what it saw as 'sexist', that is to say misogynistic, prejudices in everyday language, proscribing such terms as 'chairman', 'actress' or the use of the masculine possessive pronoun to qualify words that did not indicate gender, these theoretical and ideological developments forced students and

critics of literature to examine the conceptual assumptions informing those texts which had entered into the canons of greatness as they had been determined by academic and scholarly activity over the span of several centuries.

Anthony and Cleopatra [2] is a play apparently trapped within a paternalistic and authoritarian view of the world. Its subject-matter is the essentially male world of warfare and empire; its main concern is solidly embedded in those notions of power and glory that are inextricably bound to notions of control, possession and mastery. Its view of women seems entirely 'phallocentric'. Enobarbus's tall traveller's tale about the wonders of Egypt neatly places the emphasis on male self-indulgence in which 'wine, women and song' play an essential role:

> MAECENAS We have cause to be glad that matters are so well digested: you stay'd well by't in Egypt.
> ENOBARBUS Aye, sir, we did sleep day out of countenance, and made the night light with drinking.
> MAECENAS Eight wild boars roasted whole at breakfast, and but twelve persons there. Is this true?
> ENOBARBUS This was but as a fly by an eagle: we had much more monstrous manner matter of feast, which worthily deserves noting.
> MAECENAS She's a most triumphant lady, if report be square to her.
> ENOBARBUS When she first met Mark Anthony, she purst up his heart upon the river of Cydnus.
>
> (II.ii.205-17)

As a reaction against such hedonism, the celebrated opening words of the play, Philo's impassioned tirade against Anthony's irresponsibility, read like a catalogue of the familiar misogynistic complaints against the baleful influence of unscrupulous women over impressionable and besotted men:

2 *Anthony and Cleopatra*, ed. A.P. Riemer (Sydney 1985: *The Challis Shakespeare*). All references are to this edition.

> Nay, but this dotage of our General's
> O'erflows the measure: those his goodly eyes,
> That o'er the files and musters of the war
> Have glow'd like plated Mars, now bend, now turn
> The office and devotion of their view
> Upon a tawny front. His captain's heart,
> Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst
> The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper,
> And is become the bellows and the fan
> To cool a Gypsy's lust.
> Look where they come:
> Take but good note, and you shall see in him
> The triple pillar of the world transform'd
> Into a strumpet's fool.
> (I.i.1-13)

The two points of view, contrasted and antithetical though they seem to be, are, it could be argued, opposed manifestations of the same attitude: one that is fearful of women, of the way in which they seem to sap virile energy from the warrior or the statesman, relegating it to a subservient, essentially menial, function for the hero at play.

My 1968 study of the play seems, in retrospect, to avoid or to sidestep issues which, by the 1990s, are impossible to ignore:

> In these opening thirteen lines, therefore, we are presented with a definite proposition: Antony in Egypt is prostituting his greatness. Put so simply, it seems, of course, absurd, but absorbed into Shakespeare's dramatic, poetic and visual presentation it is compelling and effective. Philo's uncompromising attitude—the attitude of Roman opinion—presents Antony's apostasy in terms of vivid contrast, with brilliant, heroic images such as "plated Mars", "The buckles on his breast" and, above all, "The triple pillar of the world" on the one hand, and insults like "tawny front", "Gypsy's lust" and "strumpet's fool" on the other. This way the emphasis is thrown sharply on Antony himself, though, of course, criticism of Cleopatra is strongly implied as well, but the main effect of the opening of the first scene is that, through this Roman's intense commitment to his general, we are presented with a vision of former greatness and present decay. (p.27)

This extract registers what could prove to be the basis of a feminist/deconstructionist reading of *Anthony and Cleopatra*. The particular phrases cited as instances of 'insults' all place Cleopatra within a traditional and obviously misogynistic context of woman as temptress and seductress, a 'daughter of Eve' whose unprincipled and insatiable sexuality brings ruin to the male world of valour and virtue. Similarly, the 'heroic' images cited as terms of approbation are, in the first two instances, military, with an obvious pun on the name of the Roman god of war, and in the third political with notably phallic overtones. The argument contained in *A Reading of Shakespeare's 'Antony and Cleopatra'* seeks on the whole to deny an alignment of the play with the 'phallocentric' priorities implicit in Philo's speech. It achieves, in potential at least, a refutation of the charges against the play that could be brought to it in the light of the critical and theoretical priorities of contemporary literary practice.

Those objections may be stated fairly simply. Cleopatra is presented throughout the play as typically feminine—lacking in moral responsibility, self-centred and self-indulgent, neglectful of her regal duties, treacherous and devious in her dealing with others. She is consistently presented either as predator or what is usually called (inelegantly) as a 'sex-object'. Thus at the moment of his greatest fury at what he regards as Cleopatra's treachery and infidelity, Anthony turns upon her in the following significantly bitter terms:

> I found you as a morsel, cold upon
> Dead Caesar's trencher. Nay, you were a fragment
> Of Gneius Pompey's, besides what hotter hours
> Unregist'red in vulgar fame, you have
> Luxuriously pickt out. For I am sure,
> Though you can guess what Temperance should be
> You know not what it is.
>
> (III.xiii.139-45)

She is seen in terms of food, of delicacies, cold and congealed in this instance because she has contravened a standard of conduct for women which is based upon negative qualities.

Octavia, who stands in absolute contrast to Cleopatra and represents the ideal admired by the male world of the play, is

described as a woman 'of a holy, cold, and still conversation' (II.vi.143-4). Fulvia, Anthony's first wife, who raised an army in the civil turmoil unleashed by Pompey's rebellion and by Anthony's absence from Rome, is consistently described as shrewish, lacking in femininity, contravening the natural order by her assumption of the typically male role of the warrior. Cleopatra remarks that Anthony's 'cheek pays shame/ When shrill-tongu'd Fulvia scolds' (I.i.33-4). Anthony for his part attempts to exonerate himself from complicity in Fulvia's revolt in the following terms:

> As for my wife,
> I would you had her spirit in such another;
> The third o' th' world is yours, which with a snaffle
> You may pace easy, but not such a wife.
> . . . . . .
> So much uncurbable, her garboils (Caesar)
> Made out of her impatience, which not wanted
> Shrewdness of policy, too, I grieving grant,
> Did you too much disquiet, for that you must
> But say I could not help it.
>
> (II.ii.73-83)

The play seems therefore trapped within a basically male sensibility in which women are accorded roles defined by the absence of certain qualities properly the preserve of men. Any woman—whether Cleopatra or Fulvia—who transgresses such limits, appropriating for herself the characteristics of that exclusively male preserve, is censured in particularly harsh terms as wanton or lacking in femininity. The male world, in turn, defines itself by its worship of phallic objects—swords, pillars and poles—with which it subdues and attempts to tame unruly females. The play cannot escape from this ingrained view of the world, just as it cannot abandon its immersion in a monarchic, authoritarian and indeed autocratic view of political affairs. It sees government and political virtue in terms of male strength and determination, the antithesis of which is, of course, the lethargic luxuriance of Egypt and its irresponsible female monarch whose whims at the height of battle cause the downfall of the virile hero. Anthony's great lament in the fourth act significantly brings together phallic male images and the persistent alignment of

Cleopatra with enchantment, witchcraft, treachery and deceit, together with a highly revealing allusion to 'fast and loose', a gambling-game notorious in Shakespeare's age for malpractice:

> Oh Sun, thy uprise shall I see no more,
> Fortune and Anthony part here, even here
> Do we shake hands. All come to this? The hearts
> That panelled me at heels, to whom I gave
> Their wishes, do discandy, melt their sweets
> On blossoming Caesar: and this pine is barkt
> That over-topp'd them all. Betray'd I am.
> Oh this false soul of Egypt, this grave charm,
> Whose eyes beck'd forth my wars and call'd them home,
> Whose bosom was my crownet, my chief end,
> Like a right Gypsy hath at fast and loose
> Beguil'd me to the very heart of loss.
>
> (IV.xii.20-31)

In short *Anthony and Cleopatra* reveals attitudes and priorities which reflect those structures of authority—of prince over subject and man over woman—that are 'privileged' in a society where the powerful and the influential have appropriated the means of production and the dissemination of writing in order to prop up and perpetuate the hierarchies of power and oppression. The play is a 'classic', it has entered the canon of approved texts in order to exclude the street-ballads, the radical pamphlets and the popular tales of the English Renaissance. Its status within the canon is defended in aesthetic terms, by reference to Shakespeare's genius, his wisdom, his poetic fervour, yet all these qualities—or so the argument would run—are merely feints intended to mask the fundamentally political reasons why this play has been privileged over other texts. If women or the agrarian workers of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries had not been marginalized, *Anthony and Cleopatra* could not possibly occupy its exalted position.

Though expressed in very different terms, conventional discussions of *Anthony and Cleopatra* have consistently considered issues of the sort that have proved a constant preoccupation in contemporary literary theory. Since the eighteenth century at least, but probably even earlier, criticism has been exercised by the possibility that the play 'subscribes' (to use a term fashionable in the critical orthodoxy that preceded contemporary orthodoxies) to the values implicit in the various

condemnations of Cleopatra voiced by many of the characters, or to the glorification of the virile world of warfare and power. It has been conventional since the latter half of the nineteenth century to draw a distinction between Shakespeare's treatment of his historical subject and what were usually claimed to be traditional attitudes to the material of the play. Significantly, or perhaps ironically, these allegedly conventional or traditional attitudes were very similar in bias to the cultural authority structures which contemporary criticism sees as encoded within the play.

It is possible to discover accounts of the relationship between Anthony and Cleopatra written during Shakespeare's lifetime, or a few decades earlier, which present those moral, political and sexual simplicities that are implicit in passages like the speech of Philo that begins the play. Such works—Samuel Daniel's *Cleopatra* or the Countess of Pembroke's translation of Garnier's *Antoine*—may be represented as the 'norm', from which Shakespeare's version can be said to diverge. Moreover, all accounts of Anthony's life rely on North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives*; in Plutarch it is possible to discover a more liberal attitude than seems implicit in Daniel or in Mary Sidney's version of Garnier's tragedy. It is possible to argue, therefore, as I argued in *A Reading of Shakespeare's 'Antony and Cleopatra'*, that Shakespeare may have been inspired by Plutarch to escape the ideological constrictions of his age:

> The outstanding influence of the *Lives* on *Antony and Cleopatra* is, therefore, this liberality of attitude, not so much the provision of plot, characters and some of the language—the last of which Shakespeare borrowed from North's translation. Most other accounts of this story make as generous as use of Plutarch as Shakespeare's, yet none penetrated so deeply the fabric of the work itself. Plutarch liberated Shakespeare from the mass of moralistic traditions which had formed around the protagonists and which were reproduced, more or less, in every work on the subject he would have known. These attitudes reappear in *Antony and Cleopatra*, but they undergo a unique transformation. (p.20)

Such attitudes differ from contemporary critical and theoretical positions in two fundamentally important ways: in the emphasis they place on the conscious creative choices exercised by Shakespeare, and in the assumption that *Anthony and Cleopatra*

is constructed in such a way that the various and conflicting attitudes, opinions and judgements of other characters delivered by the *dramatic personae* enter into complex, indeed quasi-contrapuntal, relationships which, by the end of the play, are resolved into a stable, though not necessarily simple set of attitudes, discriminations and assessments.

The fourth scene of the first act of Shakespeare's play offers a 'site' where the essential difference between the two types of critical and theoretical approaches may be viewed. The whole of the first act of the play, with the exception of this episode, is set in Egypt. Act I scene iv is, therefore, a particularly striking inset. Narrative logic seems deliberately to be broken in order to introduce Octavius Caesar, the future Emperor Augustus, Anthony's chief antagonist, not in Act II, which concerns itself with Anthony's meeting with his rival in Rome, but in the first act, where Anthony's Egyptian sojourn is depicted. Caesar's various utterances in this scene provide a compendium of attitudes and prejudices of the sort that contemporary literary theories regard as revealing the paternalistic, phallocentric and authoritarian world of which *Anthony and Cleopatra* is inevitably a part, and which dominates, indeed, the whole play. Anthony's political irresponsibility is presented as effeminate decline, appealing to the strength of an ancient and powerful *topos* of which Hercules as the prisoner of Omphale is the central emblem.

> From Alexandria
> This is the news: he fishes, drinks, and wastes
> The lamps of night in revel; is not more manlike
> Than Cleopatra, nor the Queen of Ptolomy
> More womanly than he.
>
> (I.vi.3-7)

Anthony infringes the rigid social hierarchies and the cult of manliness on which the control of power rests:

> Let's grant it is not
> Amiss to tumble on the bed of Ptolomy
> To give a kingdom for a mirth, to sit
> And keep the turn of tippling with a slave,
> To reel the streets at noon, and stand the buffet

With knaves that smells of sweat. Say this becomes him
(As his composure must be rare indeed
Whom these things cannot blemish) yet must Anthony
No way excuse his foils, when we do bear
So great weight in his lightness. If he fill'd
His vacancy with his voluptuousness,
Full surfeits, and the dryness of his bones
Call on him for't.

(I.iv.17-29)

Anthony's loss of virile virtue is lamented in a much-discussed speech which pushes the cult of military valour to its extreme, incorporating an image that might imply that cannibalism is an admired manifestation of courage and endurance.

Anthony,
Leave thy lascivious vassals! When thou once
Was beaten from Modena, where thou slew'st
Hirtius and Pansa, Consuls, at thy heel
Did Famine follow, whom thou fought'st against
(Though daintily brought up) with patience more
Than savages could suffer. Thou didst drink
The stale of horses, and the gilded puddle
Which beasts would cough at. Thy palate then did deign
The roughest berry on the rudest hedge.
Yea, like the stag, when snow the pasture sheets,
The barks of trees thou brows'd. On the Alps,
It is reported thou didst eat strange flesh,
Which some did die to look on. And all this
(It wounds thine Honour that I speak it now)
Was borne so like a soldier, that thy cheek
So much as lank'd not.

(I.iv.60-76)

The world of courage, military valour, endurance, displaying the male virtues which Cleopatra attempts to control and annul by her charms, her spells, by the bondage in which she keeps Anthony, finds particularly telling expression in those culturally conditioned terms of self-control, of overcoming the natural abhorrence at the 'gilded puddle' or 'strange flesh', which are emblems of the fundamentally authoritarian view of society expressed in Caesar's contempt for the crowd, for the processes

of popular politics. These are presented in highly significant terms of corruption and decay through motion:

> It hath bin taught us from the primal state
> That he which is was wisht until he were;
> And the ebb'd man, ne'er lov'd till ne'er worth love,
> Comes fear'd by being lack'd. This common body,
> Like to a vagabond flag upon the stream,
> Goes to, and back, lackeying the varying tide,
> To rot itself with motion.
>
> (I.iv.44-50)

The authoritarian view of society embedded in this passage may, in addition, be reflected by the particularly intricate grammar and syntax Caesar is made to employ. Insistence upon rules and conventions of grammar is conventionally regarded as the linguistic manifestation of the authority and control which patriarchal elements in a culture attempt to impose on those whom it has deemed to be beyond the pale, that is to say, outside the margin of the dominant group. Shakespeare, or rather the text known as *Anthony and Cleopatra*, cannot escape from the trammels of such structures of authority and power—and that, indeed, is the reason why the play has been allowed to enter the canon of 'greatness'. Nevertheless, the text may be 'deconstructed' to reveal the assumptions hidden beneath its surface.

This is not the appropriate place to attempt a detailed deconstruction of *Anthony and Cleopatra*. Its main outlines may, nevertheless, be indicated with reasonable economy. The chief emphasis would have to fall on the play's punitive attitude towards Cleopatra. Her essentially feminine strengths—denying, indeed often mocking the male world of ambition, power and mastery—are denigrated by means of the traditional rhetorical devices of dispraise and calumny. She is a Gypsy, she is black, she is sexually insatiable, she is conniving and devious. Octavia, a passive colourless creature, dominated by the male world to such an extent that she becomes a commodity in II.ii., is held up as a model of womanhood because of the play's fundamental fear of loss of control and mastery to females. The manner in which its rhetorical fabric slips so easily into phallic images, even at moments of great pathos, is an indication of its immersion in a

fundamentally misogynistic world. In this way, Cleopatra's lament at the death of Anthony may be revealed to be nothing other than her castrating triumph over him:

> Oh see, my women:
> The crown o' th' earth doth melt. My lord?
> Oh wither'd is the Garland of the War,
> The soldier's pole is fall'n; young boys and girls
> Are level now with men.
>
> (IV.xv.72-6)

The essential maleness of virtue and excellence is registered in this episode by a curious piece of number-symbolism which holds odd numbers to be masculine because of their stability, unlike even (feminine) numbers, which are unstable because they are incapable of being divided into two equal halves:

> The odds is gone,
> And there is nothing left remarkable
> Beneath the visiting Moon.
>
> (IV.xv.76-8)

After the disappearance of the supreme male principle only the moon, emblem of female inconstancy, remains to send visitations of plague and pestilence on the enervated world. But even while Cleopatra celebrates her dead lover, as in the famous series of speeches in V.ii., we recognize that she is capable of doing this only because she has vanquished him.

Such a reading of a text like *Anthony and Cleopatra* cannot—or is not prepared to—consider the implications of dramatic structure. *Anthony and Cleopatra* is play; it is therefore a narrative in which various characters come into conflict in the course of a story, a narrative, that is to say a plot that extends in time. The end of the play resolves the fortunes of the characters within that narrative—Anthony and Cleopatra die, Caesar remains as the master of the world. Moreover, it has been assumed throughout the history of literary criticism that a work of literature also resolves the moral, political, psychological and philosophical issues implicit within it. Failure to achieve such resolution, or resolving issues in a contingent or insufficiently thorough manner, has often been the measure of a lack of literary success. A 'great' work of literature, like *King Lear*, *Paradise*

Lost or *Middlemarch*, resolves its complex and contradictory issues in an intricate and often radically disconcerting manner. Lesser works are content to remain within their predictable themes and concerns and within the comfortable orthodoxies of their age and of the culture which has produced them.

That notion of resolution, which implies both resolution in terms of plot and in terms of themes and implications, is of course very closely allied to the concept of 'closure' which has become one of the keystones of contemporary literary theory. According to modern theory, texts which attempt to achieve a measure of 'closure' (an attempt always destined to fail because of the basic anarchy of texts) are much less compelling, much less worthy of attention than those texts that demonstrate marked lack of closure—texts that refuse to resolve, to 'wrap up' their issues by means of the authoritarian control of a godlike author. *Anthony and Cleopatra*, in common with most of Shakespeare's plays, is a text displaying very clear evidence of attempted closure, not merely in the matter of narrative but also—and more ominously—where moral, political and psychological issues are involved. In order that the strictures of modern theoretical attitudes towards such literature may stand, it would be necessary to demonstrate that the resolution or closure confirms the patriarchal, autocratic and conservative values that are evident in many places throughout the play—as for instance, in Caesar's speeches in I.iv.

Conventional critical attitudes to the play have not urged such an interpretation—at least not since the early nineteenth century. It is possible, admittedly, to discover the odd, eccentric critical view that sees the play very much from the perspective of Caesar, maintaining that Shakespeare condemns Cleopatra (while registering her fascination and magnificence) and presents Anthony's apostasy as 'dotage', with all the traditional overtones of that term. Such, however, is a view held by few of the play's traditional critics. Most assume that Caesar's priorities, while certainly far from negligible, represent only a part of the play's complex and ambivalent presentation of the large-scale issues implicit in its subject-matter.

It has been a critical commonplace for many years to see a

dichotomy between Rome and Egypt as the centre of the play's structural framework. Rome and its leader, the young Octavius Caesar, soon to emerge as the 'sole sir o' th' world', are conventionally regarded as representing those male virtues which may easily be identified by a 'deconstruction' (no matter how simple) of the plays's linguistic texture. Egypt, on the other hand, especially as its values are incorporated in the figure of Cleopatra, is the antithesis of such patriarchal virtues, promoting instead the values of emotion and sensibility over power and a 'male' dedication to military and political duty in a way very similar to the notions of femininity in modern social polemics. Rome is the world of steel and death; Egypt, where the beds are soft, denies the strict priorities of Rome in favour of the life-fulfilling values of sexuality, pleasure and indulgences of the senses—a world of wine, women and song without envy, without the overpowering sense of guilt that accompanies Rome's indulgences in pleasure and sexuality. Each comments on the other; neither represents Shakespeare's (or the play's) 'attitude'. What *Anthony and Cleopatra* has to say about the great historical personages represented within it, or about the significance of their actions, does not reside in any *part* of the play—that is to say, the attitudes of any of the characters or within the texture of images, but in the whole play—and when attending to that whole event, character, language and structure must equally be considered.

It is in its inability to address the question of the totality of a text, especially a play which by its very nature extends in time, a structure which possesses the Aristotelian characteristics of a beginning, a middle and an end, that modern literary theory displays its most serious shortcoming. It cannot entertain the possibility that the play's effect resides in its reticulation of many voices, strands of meaning and visual images, all of which are woven together in order to achieve a synthesis of these elements within its design. That modern theory cannot consider such a possibility is intimately connected with the profound distrust it demonstrates towards any suggestion that literature (a word it has abandoned of course, in favour of the apparently neutral term 'text') is in any way didactic. Texts cannot control their readers, even though the structures of power within a society attempt to

use texts as a means of control. The possibility that a text may instruct must be strenuously denied on ideological grounds.

Didacticism in the narrow sense of that term has played little part in conventional poetics since the eighteenth century. But critical theories are implicitly didactic once they maintain (as many do) that a great work of literature somehow alters the reader's perception of the world or of human affairs. It is precisely on such grounds that *Anthony and Cleopatra* has become a canonical text, receiving from time to time the supreme accolade (as some will be quick to point out) of being selected as a set text for public examinations. It effects such an alteration through its consistent reassessment of the commonplace attitudes of the sort that Caesar expresses in his tirades against Anthony. The centre of the play resides, therefore, in that elusive but highly significant phenomenon known variously as Shakespeare's genius, his sensibility, the intelligence of the play and several other periphrases. To identify and to demonstrate these qualities has been chief concern of traditional criticism—against which modern theories have at times stridently revolted.

A Reading of Shakespeare's 'Antony and Cleopatra', which was written when conventional critical practices had not yet received the strong challenge they were to face less than a decade later, sought to discover the play's resolution of its issues in an area somewhat different from those stressed by earlier critics. I would not deny that there was an element of literary or academic politics in this—every work of criticism must strive, overtly or implicitly, to displace other critical discussions. Nevertheless, the account it offered of the play's attitude towards its characters and their world was not fundamentally out of harmony with critical conventions or practices—nor is it a reading of the play that I would want to disown in substance. Its argument may be summarized as follows. While the play inclines towards that view of the world which is represented by the convenient shorthand of 'Egypt', finding little that is admirable in Caesar's chilling view of human affairs (despite Shakespeare's understanding of the political justification for such a view), the most appealing values it discovers are those where the chief characters, the great lovers of historical legend, forget their greatness, the significance of their station, and lead what may be

termed the instinctive life. The study established, therefore, not merely the contrast between Rome and Egypt, which had become, as already mentioned, a commonplace in most critical accounts of the play, but another contrast as well—between natural instincts and assumed, artificial images of greatness and excellence.

It is possible to demonstrate, indeed, the manner in which the play subjects to sceptical scrutiny the gestures and aspirations of the great ones of the world. The gnarled syntax and spiky imagery of Caesar's tirades in I.iv. display Shakespeare's employment of sophisticated rhetorical devices to distance the audience from the character's attitudes and aspirations. Anthony's gestures towards nobility, while magnificent in many instances, are nevertheless studied and perhaps excessively elaborate, thereby indicating a degree of strain in his attempts to achieve such grandeur. Cleopatra herself, in the last scene of the play, is transformed from a self-conscious tragedy queen

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

to a person capable of recognizing the inevitability, indeed the desirability, of death in much more compelling terms—albeit with a denial of her femininity:

> My resolution's plac'd, and I have nothing
> Of woman in me. Now, from head to foot
> I am marble constant; now the fleeting Moon
> No planet is of mine.
>
> (V.ii.277-80)

The celebration of the instinctive life reaches its most telling expression in Enobarbus's series of speeches—tall traveller's tales perhaps—in II.ii., in the course of which he paints a highly-coloured picture of Cleopatra's first meeting with Anthony

aboard a barge on the river Cydnus, where she received her guest in a gorgeously decorated pavilion 'O'er-picturing that Venus where we see/ The fancy outwork Nature' (II.ii.231-2). Yet Enobarbus stresses the contrary aspect of Cleopatra's fascination:

> I saw her once
> Hop forty paces through the public street,
> And having lost her breath, she spoke and panted,
> That she did make defect perfection,
> And breathless pour breath forth.
>
> (II.ii.264-7)

The play's many strands come together therefore, tentatively and provisionally it is true, to view the world of power and ambition, as well as the potential for chaos and disintegration in Cleopatra's realm (as indicated by the bawdy exchanges of the ladies-in-waiting in I.ii.), from the perspective of the ephemeral moment of instinctive life, much as Yeats was to celebrate centuries later in 'Long-legged Fly'. The absolute antithesis to the mastery of the world Caesar achieves at the end of the play, yet something of equally great constancy, are those moments where Anthony and Cleopatra relax the striving for glory or sexual domination that fires them, allowing the instinctive urge that makes Cleopatra hop forty paces through the public street to govern their actions and emotions. One notable instance is the brief, perhaps insignificant episode in IV.iv. where, on the eve of the battle both know will be lost, Cleopatra and Anthony achieve a playful simplicity that transcends the strivings after greatness—in a way, perhaps, making their world well lost.

I see no compelling reason, a quarter of a century after writing that account of *Anthony and Cleopatra*, to dissent from the interpretation of the play it contains. *Anthony and Cleopatra* is more than a text that reflects passively and helplessly the prejudices and conventions of its age. It is informed by an intelligence—we may call it Shakepeare's if we wish—that organizes, selects, contrasts and compares the myriad elements that constitute the fabric of the play, transcending the commonplace attitudes of its age—beyond which modern theory cannot allow a 'text' such as this to stray. It 'teaches', not in a rigidly didactic manner but with a suppleness that is perhaps

unique to Shakespeare, affording a fresh way of looking at a familiar and often-told story, informing it with a humanity that relegates the 'phallocentric' obsessions of the Caesars of the world to their proper and inferior place.

I would nevertheless not nowadays discuss the play within such rigorously ethical confines. That, perhaps, is the legacy of the developments in literary theories in the last two or three decades. Yet the view of *Anthony and Cleopatra* to which I now incline would find little sympathy among proponents of 'theory'. That view, in the present case, will have to be put briefly. The continuing interest in this play—in other words, what makes it valuable and exhilarating even where it has become, perhaps, overfamiliar—is Shakespeare's ingenuity, his agility, his celebration of the 'infinite variety' of language. What remains, after the moral, political and sexual issues contained in it have come to seem relatively irrelevant or at best secondary, is the play's intimate, often touching presentation of a story, its engagement with its central characters—registering the swift changes of mood as the lovers strive to conquer fate, history and their own shortcomings. And despite its tragic subject-matter and the striving of some characters after a heroic stature, *Anthony and Cleopatra* seems to me now a curiously joyous play, a celebration, in the face of death, of the good life—the life of wine, women and song as the old, discredited and hopelessly sexist phrase would have it.