

Antony: Two Things

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Unlike Coriolanus, whose 'Nature' is 'not to be other than one thing', Antony is two incommensurate things or personas: he is a Roman political/military leader and an Egyptian lover. While Shakespeare seems to prefer characters with multiple aspects to their personalities, he does understand that these multiple aspects need to be acknowledged, carefully navigated, and, if possible, integrated. For example, in *Coriolanus* he shows us that Coriolanus sabotages his own success as a Roman Consul when he fails to view himself, and thus behave, as anything other than a warrior. In my opinion Coriolanus fails because his definition of integrity is flawed: he thinks that integrity means being 'one thing' always, in every context, regardless of the different demands of each. Shakespeare, however, suggests that true integrity is the ability to manage the various faces of the self and make sure that they all function to strengthen the character as a whole. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare teaches us a different lesson about integrity: he shows us the dangers involved when a person fails either to integrate two contrary aspects of his character, or to commit to one and let go of the other. I will discuss this interpretation of Antony's character by referring to Antony's behaviour and interactions with Cleopatra in Egypt; Antony's interactions with his Roman colleagues; and the metaphors and symbols that Shakespeare uses to convey his message to us.

At the start of the play, when Antony is enjoying himself in the 'luxury, elegance and excitement' of Cleopatra's court (Khan 1997, viii), he claims that 'the nobleness of life/Is to do thus' (1.1.37-38) as he embraces Cleopatra. He hyperbolically states that he does not care if Rome were to 'in Tiber melt'. In his current frame of mind, he is very much an Egyptian lover. He is a person who defines nobility very differently from his Roman colleagues. This Antony sees the Egyptian way of life as truly noble, and he embraces a world in which he and Cleopatra can rule their kingdom as 'a mutual pair' who 'stand up peerless' (1.1.38,41). This Antony also acknowledges the importance of living intensely, and of acting upon one's inner

desires without shame. This Antony is not judgemental, and he does not see the lifestyle of the Egyptians as Other and therefore inferior. This Antony is inclusive and open-minded: he allows himself to explore the more feminine aspects of his own character (2.5.22-23), while simultaneously allowing Cleopatra to be the brave, strong, outspoken woman and regent that she is, and his equal. Antony, in his role as an Egyptian lover, does not conform to the oppressive binaries through which his fellow Roman men insist on viewing the world. Moreover, in the context of his relationship with Cleopatra, Antony is free to be himself and to grow into ‘the greatest prince o’th’ world’ (4.15.56), whom she believes him to be. She sees all the aspects of Antony’s character as complementary rather than contradictory, and describes his complex behaviour as a ‘well-divided disposition’ and a ‘heavenly mingle’ (1.5.62), which increases his strength and allure. In her mind, a world bereft of Antony has ‘nothing left remarkable’ (4.15.69) in it, since she sees him as ‘nature’s [master]piece’ (5.2.98). Through Cleopatra’s expressions of her love for Antony, Shakespeare is showing us that Antony should choose Egypt and his Egyptian self over his Roman political ambitions and duties. This is because in the Egyptian environment, his passionate nature, his ‘bounty’ (4.7.33) and ‘Jove’-like strength (4.7.30) are nurtured and allowed to flourish. In Rome, and in his oppressive, competitive relationship with Caesar, they are stifled and rejected. The only thing Cleopatra wants from Antony, other than for him to be his whole self, is for him to be ‘[hers] and true’ (1.3.28): in other words, to choose her as his legitimate, equal partner in love and politics by marrying her. Shakespeare’s play shows us that this was too much for her to ask of a Roman triumvir approximately two thousand years ago, although I believe that Shakespeare wishes that this had not been the case.

Antony, the Roman triumvir, does after all conform to restrictive Roman binaries. In the first scene of the play, Philo introduces these binaries to us when he explains how disappointed he is in Egyptian Antony, whom he, and his fellow Roman soldiers and leaders, consider to be ‘not Antony’ (1.2.58). They have formed a preferred and beloved caricature of their Roman leader in their minds. I call this Roman image of Antony a caricature because it only includes certain preferred characteristics in an exaggerated form, and ignores all of the other, more nuanced aspects of Antony’s character that do not fit this typically masculine mould. This caricatured image of Antony possesses a ‘captain’s heart’, so brave and manly, that it ‘burst[s] the buckles on his breast’ (1.1.6-8). Roman Antony is a god-like warrior, whose eyes glow ‘like plated Mars’, and he is also ‘the triple pillar of the world’, a skilled and powerful politician. This is a portrait of Antony as they saw him before he embarked on his relationship with Cleopatra, and this Antony can do no wrong. Caesar develops this portrait when he describes his ‘great competitor’ (1.4.3) who bears all difficulty ‘so like a soldier’ (1.4.71). They are describing an Antony who is the polar opposite of the ‘amorous surfeiter’ (2.1.34) who is now living in Egypt as Cleopatra’s lover. When Antony is in his Roman frame of mind, or, as Cleopatra puts it, when ‘a Roman thought hath struck him’ (1.2.84), he seemingly becomes a different person. This Antony is strictly a Roman person who now sees Cleopatra as an enchantress (1.2.131) who is ‘cunning past man’s thought’ (1.2.148), as if she is the ‘strumpet’ and the ‘gypsy’ (1.1.10-13) of Philo’s misogynistic rhetoric, who wilfully restrains him in her ‘Egyptian fetters’ (1.2.118) and causes ‘ten thousand harms’ (1.2.132) to his Roman position. The nobility and passion of Egyptian Antony become ‘dotage’ (1.2.119) to

Roman Antony, just as ‘the present [Egyptian] pleasure ... does become the opposite of itself’ (1.2.127-129) when he takes on his Roman role. The Roman frame of mind in general oversimplifies everything into one of two opposite categories. An action or a person can only ever be Roman or Other; Western or Eastern; Masculine or Feminine; Strong or Weak; Superior or Inferior; Public or Private, Stoic or Epicurean. When a man adopts this perspective there is no room for nuance or complexity in the identity and behaviour of another, or, for that matter, himself. What Egyptian Antony finds alluring and admirable in Cleopatra’s character, Roman Antony finds abhorrent, threatening and destructive. The Roman view cannot conceive of a woman as a strong, public leader. According to their binary lens, a woman is either a chaste virgin goddess or a deplorable whore. It does not matter which of these labels they apply to her; both are equally restrictive and simplistic, and possess no power in the political world. The influence of both of these caricatures must always be limited to the private sphere: the bedroom and/or the home. For a woman such as Cleopatra to dare, through her leadership position and theatrical personality, to participate in the public and political sphere, is an abomination in Roman eyes, and a threat to their perceived masculine strength. In the dynamic between binary opposites, one party is always superior, the other inferior. For example, the strong, active, honourable man is always superior to the weak, passive, morally frail woman. Hence, if the usually passive and obedient woman behaves in a dominant, aggressive, powerful way in her relationship with the man, the Roman lens perceives her behaviour as deviant and as having an emasculating effect on the man. It is for this reason that Caesar claims that Egyptian Antony is ‘not more manlike/Than Cleopatra, nor the queen .../ More womanly than he’ (1.4.5-7). Caesar finds everything about Egyptian Antony disgusting and shameful, and he sees his relationship with the queen of Egypt as nothing more than ‘tippling with a slave’ (1.4.19). This is because Egyptian Antony’s complexity, inclusiveness and open mindedness challenge Caesar’s assumptions about his own identity and dominance as a Roman man. One would expect an Antony with integrity to defend his lover and his love against such demeaning labels and accusations. Unfortunately, however, when he is in his Roman role, he plays into these labels and even embellishes them.

When Antony returns to Rome to repair his frayed relationship with Caesar, not only does he seem to avoid the subject of his relationship with Cleopatra altogether, he actually behaves, in the company of Roman men, as if his relationship with her does not even exist. He tries his best, through flimsy casuistry, to explain away his neglect of his triumviral duties while in Egypt. He disingenuously implies that his behaviour in Egypt has no effect on or relevance to his Roman responsibilities. He deflects blame for the civil unrest that his absence caused in Rome onto his ‘shrill-tongued’ (1.1.33) late wife Fulvia and ‘her garboils’ (2.2.72), even though he knows very well that his infidelity to her is what caused her to incite civil unrest in Rome in the first place (2.2.101). When Agrippa suggests a marriage between Antony and Octavia as ‘an unslipping knot’ (2.2.133) to cement his and Caesar’s renewed partnership, Antony does not even flinch before he agrees. He knows very well that this marriage, although political, essentially constitutes a betrayal of his love for, and promises to, Cleopatra, the woman to whom he has pledged his ‘full heart’ (1.3.44). He has also assured her that all his political actions are motivated by his commitment to remain her ‘soldier, [her] servant, making peace or war as [she] affects’ (1.3.71-72). In the context of these promises Antony has made to

Cleopatra, his decision to marry Octavia demonstrates the complete lack of integrity/integration between Antony's Roman and Egyptian selves. An honest, integrated Antony would admit that his love for and commitments to Cleopatra constitute a very large 'impediment' to 'this good purpose' (2.2.152-3) of marrying Octavia to cement his Roman partnership. Whether Antony consciously lies to Cleopatra when he makes these commitments to her, or whether he simply cannot access his Egyptian self when he is in his Roman frame of mind, remains in question. No matter the reason, Roman Antony does not put his money where Egyptian Antony's mouth is, and thus he sets himself up to betray and sabotage either his Roman or his Egyptian self. If his 'full heart' really is 'in use with' Cleopatra in Egypt, then his marriage to Octavia is nothing more than a sham, and he is blatantly lying when he claims, after he marries Octavia, that henceforth everything he does 'shall be done by the rule' (2.3.7); and if he truly cannot 'Dream of impediment' (2.2.153) to his marriage to Octavia (even one as formidable as his love for Cleopatra), then all of his promises to Cleopatra mean nothing. While in Rome, Antony's refusal to acknowledge or even consider his Egyptian commitments enables the Romans to continue to see Cleopatra as nothing more than a 'slave', a 'whore' (3.6.68) and a 'ribaudred nag' (3.10.10) who tempts and corrupts their dear Roman leader. According to this narrative, Antony remains their darling war hero, their ideal of masculine strength, and all of his faults and irresponsible behaviour are blamed on Cleopatra. Although it is disingenuous of Antony to allow this perception of Cleopatra to continue among his Roman friends, it shows us that a large part of him still identifies with this Roman caricature, however simplistic and limited it may be.

At the battle of Actium Cleopatra's mere presence is construed by Roman soldiers 'as influence, her influence [construed] as emasculating domination' (Khan, 117). We see this clearly when Antony makes the very bad decision to fight Caesar by sea. While it is Antony's decision to do so against all advice to the contrary, his soldiers claim that their 'leader's led' (3.7.69) by Cleopatra, and that they are 'women's men' (3.7.70). They show sympathy for Antony as 'the noble ruin of her magic' (3.10.19), and the blame for his 'ruin' rests squarely on her shoulders, for it could only be the 'magic' of 'this enchanting queen' (1.2.131) that could lead such a 'noble' man astray. They blame her for influencing him to make this decision, which Shakespeare shows us very clearly is not the case: when Canidius asks Antony why he wants to fight Caesar by sea, he replies that it is because Caesar 'dares us to't'. His reason is quite simply a very primitive show of bravado, an instinctive fight response to a brazen dare from Caesar. He may as well be a silverback gorilla beating his chest. When Antony himself is forced to confront his own failures after the battle of Actium, even he turns on Cleopatra, and accuses her of betraying him, of selling him to 'the Roman boy' (4.13.48). He abusively calls her 'this foul Egyptian', a 'Triple-turn'd whore' (4.12.10-13), using all the favourite epithets of the typical misogynistic Roman man. How is it possible for Antony to execrate the woman he claims to love so deeply in this manner? His profoundly disturbing and contradictory behaviour towards her can only be explained through an understanding of Antony's two divided selves: Roman and Egyptian. When Roman Antony, a warrior in decline, an 'old [lion] dying' (3.13.100), feels weak as a result of his own poor decisions, he resorts to simplistic Roman stereotypes in order to prop up his damaged ego, attempting to renew his masculine strength by crudely whipping Cleopatra with his invective, in the same way that

he whips Thidias in an impotent display of aggression towards Caesar. Cleopatra sees his behaviour for what it is: the irrational tantrum of Antony's wounded and dying Roman identity struggling to repair itself through these very primitive means. She 'stay[s] his time' (3.13.160) until he is her Egyptian 'Antony again' (3.13.192), and she can once again become what she actually is to him: 'The armourer of [his] heart' (4.4.7), the source of all his true courage and strength.

His second fit of rage aimed at her for her supposed betrayal (after the battle of Alexandria) is much more vicious and splenetic. He calls her 'the witch' and vows that she 'shall die' (4.13.47). He swings like a pendulum between the extremes of loving and despising her, depending on his Roman self-image at the time. Regardless of his behaviour towards Cleopatra, his Roman strength is waning, if indeed it ever was as great as he and other Romans believe. All descriptions of Antony as 'plated Mars', who bears all hardships 'so like a soldier', are images of him before the play begins. There is very little evidence from his actions in the play that he is at all such a formidable and heroic man of valour. Yet it is an image and an identity to which Antony and his Roman colleagues insist on clinging. After losing to Caesar at Actium, Antony reminisces about his past heroism at the battle of Philippi, when, fighting on Caesar's side, he 'the mad Brutus ended' (3.11.38) while Caesar apparently did not even take his sword out of its scabbard (3.11.35). We know he is exaggerating his past heroism here, because history tells us that Brutus committed suicide, and was not killed by Antony. The more Antony feels his Roman persona of 'authority [melt] from [him]' (3.13.95), the more hysterical and irrational his behaviour becomes. Roman Antony belittles Cleopatra, calling her 'a morsel ... a fragment' (3.13.121-122), because the Roman method of reasserting one's strength is to weaken another, and thus feel stronger through competition and comparison. The Roman ideal of masculine strength is, after all, measured by the height of the heap of one's vanquished enemies' bodies. Whether the 'body' is the physical dead body of an enemy or the verbally abused heart of Cleopatra, does not matter. The weapon may be different; the intended outcome is the same: for Roman Antony to feel stronger in comparison to the one he has just subdued. Shakespeare is deeply critical of this method of asserting one's strength, and shows us his disapproval of it through the devastating failure and death of Antony, the 'so-called' war hero.

How, then, does Antony's blaming Cleopatra for leading him astray (3.11.51) fit in to this picture of his divided self? Is it Roman warrior Antony or Egyptian Antony who tries to blame Cleopatra for his failure at Actium? He asks her 'whither hast though led me, Egypt?' (3.11.51), and tells her that she knows she is his 'conqueror' (3.11.66), and always has been. This sentiment seems to reflect his soldiers' disapproval and anger when they explain his bad decision to fight at sea by concluding that their 'leader's led' by a woman. How can a strong Roman man 'follow that [which he] blush[es] to look on' (3.11.12) – a woman – as if she is not only his leader, but also his 'conqueror'? We have already seen in Act 1 that strong Roman Antony does whatever he pleases, and chooses to act regardless of Cleopatra's influence. The voice at the root of this reproach seems to be more sorrowful than angry. It seems to stem from the territory somewhere between Antony's Roman and Egyptian selves: the part of Antony that loves and needs Cleopatra, but mourns the loss of his perceived Roman strength

as a result of that love. This part of Antony is struggling to come to terms with the destruction of his Roman image; ‘plated Mars’ who endures every challenge ‘so like a soldier’ or ‘like a man of steel’ (4.4.33). This part of Antony acknowledges his love and need for Cleopatra; it acknowledges her strength and power as a leader and a ‘conqueror’, but it cannot see his own responsibility in failing to navigate his priorities effectively. This part of Antony is completely at a loss, and completely weak, because it has neither the ‘experience, manhood and honour’ (3.10.23) of the Roman warrior hero, nor the emotional ‘noble, courageous, high unmatched’ strength of Egyptian Antony, whom he has not yet fully accepted. It is the voice of Roman Antony in his dying throes, in a state of transition. The reason this part of Antony – the part which, if anything, I would argue, is the real Antony – possesses neither type of strength is because he has failed (or refused) to commit fully to either, and therefore lost his grip on both. Canidius insists that the battle would have gone well for Antony if he had ‘been what he knew – himself’ (3.10.27) which in a significant way, is probably true; although, to a different extent from Canidius’s intended meaning. When Canidius refers to Antony ‘himself’ he means Antony’s Roman identity, the Roman image of Antony as a god-like war hero. He is right in the sense that, if Antony had been able to commit himself fully to his Roman identity, and see Cleopatra as nothing more than a superficial but worthless source of temporary pleasure, then he probably would have done well in the battle, because then he would not have allowed her to bear ‘a charge’ in the war, nor would he have cared enough about her to flee after her. However, it is true also if we understand Egyptian Antony as Antony’s true self. If Antony had been able to commit fully to ‘the nobleness of life’ in Egypt and his love for Cleopatra, he would not have felt the need to measure himself by Roman standards of strength: to marry Octavia; to provoke Caesar by spurning her; and most disastrously, to engage in a battle with Caesar ‘by sea’ which the soothsayer has already warned him he is ‘sure to lose’ (2.3.25). In another sense Canidius could not be more wrong. Unfortunately, Antony ‘himself’ is a very divided man, stuck in the territory somewhere between two very strong and incompatible identities. It is because Antony ‘himself’ is so divided and unwilling to commit to one of his identities, that he loses, not just the battle, but everything.

Although Enobarbus loves Antony and dies from grief at his own betrayal, he does not know Antony as well as he may think. If he did, he would know that the relationship between Antony and Cleopatra is much more significant than ‘the itch of ... affection’ (3.13.7). Enobarbus cannot be considered an objective commentator, as his perspective is too limited by Roman binaries. The soothsayer encourages Antony to ‘stay not by [Caesar’s] side’ not only in person, but in political position: in every sense. The soothsayer actually wishes that he and Antony had never left Egypt (2.3.11-12), because he seems to know that Antony belongs there, as it is only there that real, whole Antony can flourish. When he describes Antony’s ‘daemon’ as ‘noble, courageous, high unmatched’ he is describing Antony’s Egyptian identity as it could be, if only he would commit to Cleopatra. His statement seems to indicate that Antony’s Egyptian self is very strong, valuable and noble, but in a way that Romans cannot comprehend. Probably because a portion of Antony still is Roman, and clings to Roman stereotypes, he misunderstands this warning. He assumes that the soothsayer means the words ‘noble’ and ‘courageous’ in their Roman sense, and so sees this statement as an affirmation of his Roman identity, which he would then need to defend against Caesar’s

‘natural luck’ (2.3.25) through Roman methods: competition and battle. But this is not what the soothsayer’s warning means. The soothsayer’s description of Antony’s noble and courageous spirit is an appeal for him to commit himself fully to his Egyptian identity, which is noble and courageous in the sense that it is complex and ahead of its time, belonging in a ‘new heaven, new earth’ (1.1.17). Antony’s Egyptian self is courageous because he dares to love a strong, powerful woman; because he shows male Roman society a new, more fulfilling way to relate to women and Others. Egyptian Antony is ahead of his time, because he is unlimited by the destructive perspective and rituals of the Roman world. In Egypt, the best aspects of Antony’s character can flourish. Cleopatra loves Antony for all of his qualities. Her perspective is inclusive and embracing, and it creates a forgiving environment in which Antony is free to explore and integrate all the aspects of his character, and in so doing, reach a state of real greatness, wholeness and maturity. Her description of him after his death suggests that, in a committed relationship with her, he could have become ‘the greatest prince o’ th’ world’ (4.15.56), which he had the potential to be. From the perspective of her love, he is ‘nature’s [master]piece’ (5.2.98) whose ‘face was the heavens’ (5.2.78), whose ‘legs bestrid the ocean’ and whose ‘arm crested the world’ (5.2.81-2): a man whose strength and significance are larger than life and therefore truly like ‘a Jove’ (4.7.30). She makes room in her love for all of Antony’s Roman and Egyptian strengths, and complements his strength with hers. This is why the soothsayer urges Antony to ‘hie [himself] to Egypt again’; because only there – with Cleopatra – can his ‘high unmatched’ spirit grow to its fullest extent.

What should we make of the opposite ways in which Antony reacts to Enobarbus’s actual betrayal and Cleopatra’s perceived betrayal? When Antony thinks Cleopatra has betrayed him he flies into a rage, not once, but twice, and execrates her most viciously for selling him ‘to the young Roman boy’ (4.13.48). He does this at the mere possibility of her betrayal without any evidence to prove her guilt. However, when Enobarbus’s betrayal is ‘most certain’ (4.5.11) he responds with magnanimity, blaming his own poor ‘fortunes’ for having ‘corrupted [an] honest [man]’ (4.5.16-17), and then sends all of his treasure after him, in a magnanimous act of kindness to a man who least deserves it. The explanation for the drastic inconsistency in his approach to these two types of betrayal can be found, once again, in Antony’s divided identity. At this point in the play Roman Antony is in his dying throes, but not yet quite dead. His vicious attacks on Cleopatra are evidence of his intense need for her, and his inability to come to terms with that need. The prospect of going on without her loyalty causes him to react with fury, and, ‘to be furious’, Enobarbus tells us, ‘is to be frightened out of fear’ (3.13.201). Antony is so afraid of the prospect of Cleopatra’s betrayal, and feels so weak at the thought, that he can only react with insults and verbal attacks, like a cornered animal, or, as Maecenas puts it, someone who is ‘hunted even to falling’ (4.1.8-9). Enobarbus’s loyalty is clearly not as central to Antony’s happiness and strength as Cleopatra’s is, otherwise he would not have the bounty and ‘Jove’-like strength to respond to his betrayal with so much kindness. This is more evidence of the fact that Antony’s Roman identity ‘melts from [him]’, and that his Egyptian self becomes more central and significant as the play progresses.

The battle of Actium is a literal battle between Antony and Caesar, but, on a deeper level, it is also a battle between Rome and Egypt for ownership of Antony's soul. In the end, when Antony flies after Cleopatra, Egypt wins. It is as if Cleopatra's flight from battle puts Antony in a position in which he has to choose which relationship is the one that matters more to him: manly games with Caesar; or passion with Cleopatra. Finally, we know for sure that Antony loves Cleopatra and Egypt more than he loves his Roman authority and duty. But Roman Antony, though wounded and dying, will not go quietly. He frantically resists his oblivion, rages against the dying of his Roman light, and struggles in the crisis of identity which now faces him. He describes his Roman identity, in its last moments, as a 'cloud ... dislimn[ed]' by the breeze, visualised as a 'rack' (4.14.2,10) an instrument of torture. It is a powerful image of the disintegration of his Roman self 'as water is in water' (4.14.11) – an image which is ethereal and intensely visceral at the same time. The word 'dislimn' is especially meaningful, in that it refers to Antony feeling his identity disintegrating in the same way that a cloud's defining lines become indistinct in the breeze. However, this word is also reminiscent of the way in which a human body is excruciatingly pulled apart, dis-limbed, by a rack. He wallows in his anguish until he hears the false news that Cleopatra is dead, at which point he realises three things about himself. First, he realises that his life is not worth living without her, as he immediately says that his 'long day's task is done and [he] must sleep' (4.14.35-36). Secondly, this is the moment at which his Roman identity finally dies. His first words are 'unarm, Eros' (4.14.35), a symbolic act of casting off his Roman virtue, Roman strength, Roman ideology. He confirms this reading when he says he is at last, 'No more a soldier' (4.14.43), free of the restrictions that that identity has always placed on him. Lastly, he realises that Cleopatra is the woman who should always have been his wife, a realisation upon which he acts when he decides to 'be a bridegroom in [his] death' (4.14.101). Even though his obvious reason for suicide is for 'none but Antony [to] conquer Antony' (4.15.17-18) and, in 'the high Roman fashion' (4.15.91), to escape being 'subdued to penetrative shame' (4.14.75-76) by Caesar, it becomes much more than just an escape from Caesar's tyranny. Antony's death becomes a way for him to transcend to a 'new heaven, new earth' where he can be fully united with Cleopatra as her 'husband' (5.2.286). Ironically, only through death is Antony able to 'live out' his true, Egyptian identity.

Shakespeare has used alternating water and land images throughout the play for a very specific reason, I think. The first one occurs when Caesar refers to Antony, his fellow triumvir, as 'the ebb'd man', the political leader in their triad who is losing power and on his way out. While the word 'ebb'd' is meant to describe Antony's declining political and military power, it also clearly associates him with the to and fro motion of the sea as it laps repeatedly against the shore. I believe Shakespeare has done this to foreshadow the way in which Antony will vacillate between Rome and Egypt throughout the play. Caesar then complains that the 'common body', or general public, is so fickle in its support for either him or Antony that it, like a drifting reed, 'goes to and back ... to rot itself with motion' (1.4.45-47). Through this image, Shakespeare is showing us that a person (or group of people) who fails to commit to one of two opposing sides will end up weakened and 'rot[ted]' by his own indecision. The word 'ebb'd', which describes to motion of water as it retreats from the land, is chosen specifically to prepare us for Antony's repeated failure to commit either to his

Roman authority or his Egyptian love, and the subsequent ‘rot[ting]’ of his strength. Later in Act Two, Enobarbus and Menas have a conversation in which they poke fun at each other about the preferred battleground of each:

Menas: ... you and I have known sir.
Enobarbus: At sea, I think.
Menas: We have sir.
Enobarbus: You have done well by water.
Menas: And you by land.
Enobarbus: ... it cannot be denied what I have done by land.
Menas: Nor what I have done by water.
Enobarbus: ... you have been a great thief by sea.
Menas: And you by land. (2.6.83-94)

The rhythm of this repartee is not only meant to remind us very vividly of the motion of water as it laps against the land. It is also there to mimic the way in which Antony is unable to be relied upon by either Rome or Egypt for his full commitment. Cleopatra wishes for Antony to ‘be [hers] and true’, but when Fulvia dies he takes another Roman wife instead of marrying her. However, when Menas, upon hearing the news of Antony’s marriage to Octavia, remarks that ‘Caesar and he [must be] for ever knit together’ (2.6.113), Enobarbus reminds him that ‘the band that seems to tie their friendship together’ ((2.6.118-119) will end up breaking them apart, because Antony ‘will to his Egyptian dish again’ (2.6.124). Antony, just like the water and its motion, cannot commit to either relationship.

Another key to understanding the importance of the water/land symbolism is the way in which Cleopatra is repeatedly associated with the land. Antony calls her ‘great Egypt’ (1.5.45) and his ‘serpent of old Nile’ (1.5.26), which are both names that link her to the land she rules, not only in terms of her authority, but also in terms of her femininity and fertility. The serpent is a complex image signifying many things, one of which is the cycle of growth and healing by means of the shedding of the old skin. The Nile itself is also a symbol of the inextricable unity of growth and decay, seen when Antony describes the way in which the ‘seedsman ... scatters his grain’ upon the ‘slime and ooze’ which will then ‘shortly come to harvest’ (2.7.21-23). What the Romans see as ‘decay’ or decadence in Antony’s Egyptian self is actually ‘growth’ from the soothsayer, who, I believe, is the mouthpiece of Shakespeare in this play. There can be no denying that Antony is thinking of Cleopatra as the fecund land upon which he, ‘the seedsman’ has scattered his ‘grain’, after which she has ‘shortly come to harvest’ in the form of their children. These connotations become especially clear when we look at how Agrippa refers to the way in which Julius Caesar ‘ploughed [Cleopatra], and she cropp’d’ (2.2.238). Cleopatra is undeniably associated with the ‘land’ in these images, which lends another level of meaning to Antony’s ‘water’ image. By associating Antony with the water, and Cleopatra with the land, Shakespeare seems to be suggesting that he approves of their relationship, and that they have great potential to be fruitful as a ‘mutual pair’ – not only in the sexual sense, of course, but in the spiritual and political senses as well. Antony only needs to commit to Cleopatra, which, he proves, he cannot, or will not do, when he makes the poor

decision to fight Caesar ‘by sea’ (3.7.40). I believe that Shakespeare is showing us, through this poor military decision, that Antony (the water) should choose, and commit to, Cleopatra (the land) where he is strongest; where he has ‘absolute soldiership’ (3.7.42) and can actually be successful. His insistence on fighting ‘by sea’ shows his inability to let go of the rivalry through which he bolsters his dying Roman ego, even though this rivalry is holding him back from achieving complete fulfilment.

In a sense, the main character of the play is neither Antony nor Cleopatra, but the relationship between them; Antony’s true identity can only be understood through his relationship with Cleopatra. Shakespeare ends his play of paradoxes with one final, masterful paradox. Alone, Antony is divided; two things. Only once he commits himself completely to his love Cleopatra does he become whole, integrated, complete. His true identity can only be understood in terms of their relationship and their love for each other. Even Caesar, the most Roman Roman of all, is compelled to acknowledge that Antony is, against all the claims to his identity made by Roman men throughout the play, ‘her Antony’. When he allows Cleopatra to be buried by ‘her Antony’, he is admitting to her ownership of their story, and Antony’s identity. Alone she can be demeaned as a ‘nag’ and a ‘strumpet’, and he can be dismissed as a ‘doting mallard’. Together, they are a ‘peerless’, ‘mutual’ ‘pair so famous’ that even death cannot contain or subdue them. Cleopatra turns their deaths, through her ‘immortal longings’, into a kind of deification by means of which they transcend into a higher, supernatural realm where they are ‘fire and air’, married in a harmonious union in our memories and imaginations. Their other elements, earth and water, are given to Caesar’s ‘baser life’ (5.2.289), and the known Roman world is left barren without them.

To end where we began: in *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare gives us one great hero who is destroyed because of his failure to be ‘other than one thing’. In *Antony and Cleopatra* he gives us another great hero who is destroyed by his inability to choose one of his two defining ‘things’. What I love about Shakespeare’s stories is that he does not judge his characters or admonish them for their failures. He rather seems to revel in their complexity, and, likewise, invites us to rejoice in the paradox that is human being. Through Antony and Cleopatra’s relationship, Shakespeare allows his audience to imagine a world in which masculinity and femininity are perceived as powerful complementary forces working together in all spheres of human society. The world he imagines is by no means perfect, just as its progenitors are imperfect. Their imperfection and complexity are precisely the qualities that make the new order they envision seem so attractive and possible to those of us who, even 400 years later, are still struggling within the confines of our own limiting ideologies.

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