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Shakespeare and the Mediterranean • 3

Antony and Cleopatra

Edited by Cristiano Ragni

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Shakespeare and the Mediterranean

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Amelia Platt recently graduated from the University of Cambridge with a degree in English. Her undergraduate final year dissertation explored the figure of the detective in 'Golden Age' crime fiction, focusing on the works of Ngaio Marsh and Dorothy L. Sayers. It explored how the detectives featured in these texts experience a 'crisis of authority' relating to their detecting, thus compromising the justice they seek to administer. She is due to begin a Masters in English Literary Studies at the University of York in September, where she hopes to continue her analysis of crime fiction.

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Introduction

Cristiano Ragni

1.

In Act 3 of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, the political and personal tensions between Antony and Octavius Caesar reach a critical juncture. Torn between his duties as a Roman leader and his love for Cleopatra, Antony faces mounting pressure as the triumvirate's alliance fractures. Octavius Caesar's strategic acumen and shrewd diplomacy highlight Antony's inner conflict and the deteriorating bond between Rome and Egypt. In 3.7, the clash between the two eventually becomes unavoidable:

> Antony Is it not strange, Canidius,
> That from Tarentum and Brundusium
> He [Octavius] could so quickly cut the Ionian Sea
> And take in Toryne? You have heard on 't, sweet?
> Cleopatra Celerity is never more admired
> Than by the negligent.
> Antony A good rebuke,
> Which might have well becomed the best of men,
> To taunt at slackness. Canidius, *we will fight*
> *With him by sea.*
> Cleopatra *By sea, what else?*
> (20-8; emphasis added)[1]

Both Antony and Cleopatra, as these lines demonstrate, are irresistibly drawn to the sea and agree to fight the Romans on the

1 All references to *Antony and Cleopatra* are from Shakespeare 1995 and will appear parenthetically in the text.

water. Attempts by members of their retinue to dissuade them from such an incomprehensible decision are to no avail: at Actium, as History teaches us, a naval battle will indeed take place, although with disastrous consequences for Egypt. "It is important", as Agostino Lombardo has noticed, "that Cleopatra, and she alone, supports Antony in his crazy decision: this is what makes them a world apart . . . and also unites them in their refusal to obey [that] reason . . ." (1971; trans. mine) which instead guides their enemy. This scene is not only functional to illustrate the opposition between Egypt and Rome on which the play is built,[2] but is also one of the many possible examples confirming how much the dimension of the sea is intrinsic to the dynamics involving the characters and the events that affect them. The sea in question is, of course, the Mediterranean, whose centrality in Shakespeare's – and, more generally, early modern Europe's – imaginary is well-documented.

From Fernand Braudel (1949) to Peregrin Horden and Nicholas Purcell (2000; 2020), from Peter Burke (2002) and David Abulaifa (2003) to Filippo DeVivo (2015), just to name a few, scholars have variously underscored the indispensable role played by the Mediterranean Sea in the early modern age as a crucial hub of economic, cultural, and political activity, facilitating extensive trade networks that connected Europe, North Africa, and the Near East, and enabling the exchange of goods, peoples, ideas, and technologies. The Mediterranean's strategic position allowed for the rise of powerful maritime empires, such as the Ottoman one and the Venetian Republic, which dominated trade routes and exerted significant influence over their territories. Consequently, the sea also served as a battleground for religious and political conflicts, including the Crusades and the struggle between Christian and Muslim powers. The bustling ports along the shores of this exceptional "arena of interaction, of encounters, and exchanges" (Burke 2002, 136), such as Venice, Constantinople, and Alexandria, stood out at the time as melting pots of diverse

2 For this, which is one of dominant themes of *Antony and Cleopatra*, see, among others, Granville-Barker 1925; Charney 1961; Schanzer 1963; Kott 1966; Thomas 1989; Sacerdoti 2007; Thomas Crane 2009; and Cantor 2017.

cultures; a multifaceted mosaic reproducing the vision, to put it in Braudel's famous words, of "ten, twenty or a hundred Mediterraneans" (2001, 14).

In Shakespeare's output, the Mediterranean Sea serves as a significant geographical and symbolic element, providing a rich backdrop for most of his narratives. "His Mediterranean scenarios", as Silvia Bigliazzi has put it in her Introduction to the first volume of the series, "span from Venice to Aleppo, from Athens to Alexandria, from Parthia to Algiers, encompassing Romans, Goths, Moors, Egyptians and Greeks, and raising questions of race, ethnicity, class, gender, civilisation and barbarism" (2022, 15). Oscillating as he does between re-evocations of the classical world and expressions of contemporary anxieties, Shakespeare "engages in a process of estrangement of the Mediterranean" – this is Geraldo de Sousa's well-known argument – "to suggest that this region, so familiar to his imagination, abuts strange, unknown worlds" (2018, 142). Simultaneously presented as *mare nostrum* and *mare illorum* (Pechter 2004), Shakespeare's Mediterranean thus stands outs as the natural setting for tackling the complexities of human experience and the tumultuous events that unfold in his stories.[3]

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the Mediterranean Sea plays a particularly vital role. Maybe more than in other works, as prominent scholars as Caroline Spurgeon, Wolfgang H. Clemen, and George Wilson Knight have famously noted, Shakespeare seems to have identified sea-related images – and, by extension, water-imagery – as being peculiar to this story. Integral to the idea of "vastness" that is one of the "dominating note[s] in the play" (Spurgeon 1935, 350), "the sea is . . . constantly present to the mind" (Clemen 1951, 159), evoked as "something more free and unfettered than earth (i.e. Rome)'s solidity" (Wilson Kinght 1931, 235). Changeable, slippery, and unfathomable, the sea does indeed stand out as the perfect element to give shape to what has been defined as the play's 'sense of instability', which dominates both its more explicitly political

3 Shakespeare and the Mediterranean is a well-frequented topic. Besides the forementioned studies, see also Vitkus 2003, Clayton, Brock, and Forés 2004, Cantor 2006, Stewart 2007, and Mentz 2009. For the latest contributions, see Bigliazzi and Stelzer 2022 and Ciambella 2023.

dimension and the intricate, personal dynamics between the two eponymous characters.[4]

The Mediterranean Sea's vast expanse serves as a conduit for the action and movement within the play, illustrating the geopolitical significance of maritime dominance. In this sense, Shakespeare's deft reuse of his classical sources allows him to turn this Roman play into an echo chamber of contemporary anxieties regarding not only England's emergence as a global power, but also the Ottoman threat in the Eastern Mediterranean (Barbour 2003; Cantor 2014). Throughout *Antony and Cleopatra*, the strategic importance of the Mediterranean is evident in the political manoeuvrings and alliances formed. Both Octavius Caesar and the dyad Mark Antony-Cleopatra understand the critical importance of securing the Mediterranean for their own political agendas. For Octavius Caesar, gaining control over the Mediterranean Sea and defeating Antony is not just a military victory, but a consolidation of his power and a step toward becoming the unchallenged ruler of Rome. To succeed in this endeavour, however, the 'solid' Roman leader needs to face two enemies, Antony and Cleopatra, who are continuously associated with and said to partake of the ungraspably 'liquid' nature of that same sea. From the very beginning of the play, the passion entangling the general who "bestrid[es] the ocean" (5.2.82) and his Egyptian "Thetis" (3.7.60) is described as a "dotage" which "overflows the measure" (1.1.1-2), to set whose "bourn" a "new heaven" and a "new earth" must be found (16-17). Besides the fascinating echoes of Giordano Bruno's philosophy identified by Gilberto Sacerdoti in these lines (2009),[5] what is especially striking is the association

4 On the water imagery in *Antony and Cleopatra*, see Granville-Barker 1925; Charney 1961; Lombardo 1971; Loomba 1989; Gillies 1994; Wilders 1995; and Dollimore 2010.

5 Gilberto Sacerdoti connects *Antony and Cleopatra*'s recurring idea of 'overflowing the measure' and Antony's mention of a "new heaven" and a "new earth" to the cosmological 'earthquake' that shook Europe between the sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries, suggesting that the play is influenced by Giordano Bruno's 1584 *Dialoghi filosofici*, where he had envisioned a new and profoundly antichristian infinite universe with a central core of boundless heat and creative energy that perpetually overflows, regenerating itself and producing the infinite diversity of life.

between Antony and Cleopatra's love with famous images from St John's Book of Revelation: it is indeed their apocalyptic and 'overflowing' passion that threatens to dissolve the Roman world, as Janet Aldeman has brilliantly put it, into the "dangerous and fecund waters" of the Mediterranean Sea (1992, 189). If Antony and Cleopatra's 'apocalyptic' project eventually fails, Rome's success too is not perceived as definitive (Loomba 1989; Thomas 1989; Cantor 2017). In the light of the forementioned 'sense of instability', the beginning of the Roman Empire itself bears subtle traces of impending failure: not only in 5.2 does Octavius Caesar himself acknowledge the menace that Cleopatra's dead body continues to exert, exclaiming that ". . . she looks like sleep, / As she would catch another Antony / In her strong toil of grace" (345-7); but most importantly, as Paul Cantor notices, at Shakespeare's time "Roman as a term of distinction means primarily Republican Roman and . . . [therefore] with the death of the Republic, true Romanness . . . begins to die also" (1976, 27). The Mediterranean thus becomes a battleground where the destiny of empires is decided, reflecting the broader themes of ambition, power, and the inevitable rise and fall of great leaders and ideals.

Being repeatedly associated to both Antony and Cleopatra, the Mediterranean Sea mirrors their emotional and psychological states and strategic machinations, and their fates are unsurprisingly intertwined with its waters. Cleopatra, in particular, embodies the sea's enigmatic and multifaceted character. Her moods and behaviours are as changeable as the sea, and her "infinite variety" (2.2.247) stands out as a formidable and unpredictable force. Antony's oscillation between Rome and Egypt, between duty and desire, also reflects the restless and uncertain tides of the Mediterranean Sea. It is maybe inevitable, then, that the fortune of such inconstant leaders should sink in the waters of that same sea when, in 3.10, inconstancy-incarnate Cleopatra flees the battle without warning and Antony turns his own ship to follow her lover's flight:

> Scarus She once being loofed,
> The noble ruin of her magic, *Antony,*
> *Claps on his sea-wing and*, like a doting mallard,
> Leaving the fight in height, *flies after her.*

I never saw an action of such shame.
(3.10.18-22, emphasis added)

Images related to the sea's vastness and changeability are continuously used by Shakespeare to evoke the complexity of the characters' inner lives, their ambitions, and their vulnerabilities. The interplay between the characters and the sea reflects their struggles to navigate the treacherous waters of power, love, and, ultimately, their own destiny.

Vast though it is, in *Antony and Cleopatra* the Mediterranean Sea is also surprisingly small, separating but at the same time uniting the two opposing – if porous – worlds of Rome and Egypt. It is always remarkable to note how quickly characters move across the sea in this play:

MESSENGER Thy biddings have been done, and *every hour,*
Most noble Caesar, shalt thou have report
How 'tis abroad . . .
(1.4.34-6; emphasis added)

says a Messenger to Octavius Caesar in Rome, and other similar emissaries constantly sail back and forth between Rome and Alexandria bringing news as to what happens on the opposite shores of the Mediterranean. So near everything seems to be that Jan Kott has famously defined the play as "a tragedy about the smallness of the world" (1966, 172): "The world is small, because one cannot escape it. The world is small, because it can be won" (173). The tragedy for Antony and Cleopatra originates from the fact that the world they want to win appears increasingly disconnected from reality; an imaginary "little O" where they can rule together as god-like sovereigns – Cleopatra "o'erpicturing Venus" (2.2.207) "in the habiliments of the goddess Isis" (3.7.17) and Antony as a Herculean Mars (Caporicci 2016). This fantasy, building on classical Mediterranean mythology, culminates in 5.2 where, despite the defeat, Cleopatra, apparelled like a reigning "queen" (226), continues to dream of Antony as a Roman-Egyptian emperor:

CLEOPATRA I dreamt there was an Emperor Antony.
O such another sleep, that I might see

> But such another man!
> . . .
> His face was as the heavens, and therein stuck
> A sun and moon, which kept their course, and lighted
> The little O, the earth.
> . . .
> His legs bestrid the ocean, his rear'd arm
> Crested the world . . .
> (76-83)

These words clearly expose "the dissonance between the world of the play as it is and as Cleopatra would like it to be" (Lovascio 2020, 5), and are tinged with a particularly cruel irony since they are uttered after she has learnt of Antony's suicide and therefore knows that they are destined to remain but a dream on another "little [wooden] O".

"No grave upon the earth", Octavius Caesar eventually exclaims before Antony's and Cleopatra's dead bodies, "shall clip in it / A pair so famous" (5.2.358-9), and then commands "high order" (364) be seen in their public funeral. For the Roman Empire to be established, Antony and Cleopatra's Mediterranean fantasy must be stifled in a stone monument. And yet, as mentioned above, at the end of this play the audience is left with the idea that, as Ania Loomba has maintained, any order is precarious (1989, 124-30) and that the "wide arch / of the rang'd empire" might eventually "melt", as Antony had hoped (1.1.34-5). As Shakespeare and his audience knew, after all, that destiny was to come about precisely with the expansion of Rome's Mediterranean trades and its opening up to other peoples. If that political line had certainly implied the end of the empire, however, it had also given origin to the beginning of a *translatio culturae* that was not only much alive in the early modern age, but continues to this day.

2.

The Mediterranean Sea in *Antony and Cleopatra* is a geographical and symbolic setting, encapsulating the strategic importance of maritime control and the fluidity of political and personal relations.

Understanding the broadly-meant 'Mediterraneity' of the play is thus integral to understanding its "infinite variety" (2.2.247), to borrow Shakespeare's words, which entails the playwright's transformation of his classical sources with his unique poetic and dramatic style, but also the exploration of the complexities of love, loyalty, or the inexorable march of History. These aspects are all brilliantly discussed in Stanley Wells and Paul Edmondson's "Prologue", which opens the collection. The two scholars start considering Shakespeare's debt to Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives* and underscore the multiple ways in which he enhances the classical anecdotes with dramatic flair and thus emphasises the complex psychology of the tragedy's eponymous characters. Within the fluid Mediterranean setting serving as a useful metaphor for the vast and unpredictable nature of the human experience, Wells and Edmondson show how Shakespeare complicates the legendary status of Antony and Cleopatra: he draws, they argue, a complex canvas of human identities that oscillates between transcendence and vulnerability enhanced by the continuous interplay between their public personas and private interactions.

The volume's Part 1 ("Performance and (Self-)Representation in *Antony and Cleopatra*") comprises three essays by Pasquale Pagano, Sina Will, and Rita de Carvalho Rodrigues, respectively. Reading the play together with the *Sermon Against Whoredom and Uncleaness*, Pagano discusses the thematic connections between the two works, suggesting that Shakespeare may have been influenced by Protestant views on marriage and adultery in his depiction of Antony and Cleopatra's adulterous passion. Antony's transformation under Cleopatra's influence reflects a departure from his ethical and spiritual obligations, which is symbolised by the Mediterranean Sea as an easy backdrop of moral transgression: "By placing her on the opposite bank of the Mediterranean", Pagano argues, "Shakespeare allows Cleopatra to threaten and subvert the social and moral standards of Roman/Western society . . . thus transforming the Sea into a 'stinking puddle' from which the sin of whoredom, the cause and origin of many other evils, overflows" (79). At the same time, the gradual shift from initial condemnation of the couple to later sympathising with Antony, voiced by an exceptional observer as Enobarbus, highlights the tension between

moral judgment and admiration that runs through the play, which, as Pagano shows, ultimately appears to celebrate love's resilience against societal constraints.

Sina Will analyses the various references to classical mythology in the play instead and shows that they "not only serve the purpose of creating an ancient Mediterranean setting but also highlight the different ways in which the characters may approach the representation of personal identity" (106). While initially appearing to reinforce rigid self-images, a closer examination reveals that these references expose the shortcomings of using mythological figures as models for characters with human complexities and flaws. Particularly for Antony, Will contends, these references do not solidify his self-mythologisation but rather highlight his contradictory nature, humanising him in the process. In contrast, Cleopatra presents a different approach to effective self-representation: in act 5, her peculiar depiction of both herself and Antony highlights the potential of an imaginative language that does not seek to directly imitate or challenge classical Greek and Roman narratives. Instead, it aims to establish itself as a unique paradigm for future recollection.

Rita de Carvalho Rodrigues's essay explores the reasons behind the surprisingly infrequent mention of Cleopatra's name in the play and maintains that the issue seems to be connected to her identity as an Egyptian and an enemy rather than her gender, as has been sometimes argued. Building on Paul Cantor's idea of the Mediterranean Sea as the privileged site of a clash of civilisations, de Carvalho Rodrigues's analysis also considers the power and connotations of Cleopatra's name, suggesting that its avoidance may reflect the threat she poses to Roman male characters: ". . . her name means something. It represents her essence; it plays a big part in constructing her identity and, therefore, is undeniably charged with all the negative energy the men in the play associate her with" (118). Through a deft use of digital tools, de Carvalho Rodrigues thus brings to the surface the underlying conflicts and issues in the play as reflected in its own language.

Part 2 ("Shakespeare and His Contemporaries") comprises three essays which address the 'Mediterraneity' of *Antony and Cleopatra* by comparing it with a selection of narratives dedicated to the same

classical topics by some of Shakespeare's contemporaries. Both Jason Lawrence's and Amelia Platt's essays are welcome contributions to the scholarly debate that has been emphasising the similarities between Shakespeare's tragedy and earlier English closet dramas, such as Mary Sidney Herbert's *The Tragedie of Antonie* and Samuel Daniel's *The Tragedie of Cleopatra*, setting them against the backdrop of their shared historical source, Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives*. By specifically comparing how these works deal with the issue of motherhood, Lawrence demonstrates that Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra, which downplays her role as a mother, aligns closely with Plutarch's portrayal, much more than the earlier English playwrights' representations. These differences, Platt goes on to contend, are linked to Cleopatra's racial identity and the specific Mediterranean setting of the play: while Sidney and Daniel portray Cleopatra according to conventional Western standards of beauty, Shakespeare emphasises her 'otherness' and her connections with the Egyptian goddess Isis. In so doing, as Platt concludes, Cleopatra's peculiar motherhood is defined not so much in relation to individual children, as in terms of national identity, symbolically 'giving birth' to the myth of Egypt.

Lisa Hopkins's essay starts with the analysis of the influence played by the memory of Pompey the Great in *Antony and Cleopatra*, where his son Sextus is portrayed as the master of the Mediterranean Sea: Young Pompey is clearly meant to evoke his father, and he is also strongly associated with his ship. Building on the widespread early modern imagery of ships as symbolic objects representing ideas of statecraft and survival in adversity, Hopkins compares Young Pompey's invitation of the triumvirate aboard his galley in *Antony and Cleopatra* with a similar scene in *The Tragedie of Caesar and Pompey* (1607) and demonstrates that Shakespeare uses Pompey's galley symbolically, representing both a ship of faith and a ship of state, with Young Pompey exemplifying the loss of both power and prestige: "Ultimately the way Pompey sails his ship through the Mediterranean becomes a metaphor for the way we – and our rulers – all sail our own ships and try to keep them afloat in hazardous waters" (200).

In the last section ("The Actor's Point of View"), Dame Janet Suzman, a compelling interpreter of Cleopatra in Trevor Nunn's

1972 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company, expresses her views on what it means and what it takes to bring the Egyptian queen on the stage. Besides provocatively questioning the ability of Elizabethan boy actors to authentically embody Cleopatra's maturity and psychological depth, and thus arguing that these features seem to require a more experienced interpreter, Suzman's essay calls for a re-evaluation of how we perceive and interpret gender roles in theatre and the challenges faced by actors in portraying characters outside their own lived experiences.

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