

Tragic Love as Excess over Duty and Honour in Anthony and Cleopatra

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Abstract:

Hence Cleopatra is depicted as a voluptuous, feminine other that unmans and undoes Anthony and proves to be his fall. And yet, one is brought to admire their peerless love, which indeed, somewhat immortal between the great Anthony and his grand seductress Cleopatra, their endings in death may imply ruin and failure but may also be read as an attempt to conquer fate, that is rather than suffer physical defeat, their suicides are their triumph over physical defeat, conquest and imprisonment. The grand and peerless nature of their love is thus celebrated even as Cleopatra proves to be the ruin of Anthony.

Keywords:

Shakespeare, Love, Duty, Inconstancy, Honour

The fall of Anthony is the fall of a great man and his line of duty to the whims and manipulations of the seductress Cleopatra, it is the sacrifice of worldly honour for love, Anthony's tragedy is that he is led to sacrifice his military prestige and honour as well as the line of duty "as bellows to a fan to cool a gypsy's lust'. (Anthony and Cleopatra 1:1) Anthony attempts to straddle the worlds of duty and love but is unmanned and feminized by the wiles of Cleopatra, who is depicted unflatteringly as a whore with ravenous sexual appetite and barely any consideration of Anthony and his obligations to Rome and empire.

Indeed Cleopatra is depicted as Anthony's ruin, unmanning him and feminizing him while leading him to neglect the call of empire and duty. As she is described in Act 2:

*Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety. Other women cloy
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies, for the vilest things
Become themselves in her, that the holy priests
Bless her when she is riggish (II ii 240-5)*

Cleopatra is thus depicted as a great seductress, who lures into her trap men whose sexual appetite for her prove interminable, she is also depicted as wanton, coy, fickle, coquettish, a seductress of infinite variety whose nature is to beguile men like Anthony from their line of duty. Indeed, Cleopatra devices ways and means

to keep Anthony away from Rome which she views as the greatest threat to their romance. Unlike her charms, mutability, changeability, frivolity and fickleness, Rome is the formal and cold world of rules, formality, regulations that threaten to lure Anthony away from their great romance. As she puts it in Act 1:

*But sir, forgive me
Since my becoming kills me when they do not
Eye well to you. Your honour calls you hence
Therefore be deaf to my unpitied folly
And the gods go with you! (I iii 95-9)*

Indeed Cleopatra proves to be Anthony's ruin again by betraying him on three counts. Firstly, when she leaves the sea battle, second when she entertains Thidas with courtesy, and thirdly when her fleet surrenders to Caesar. Cleopatra was cowardly to abandon Anthony at the first battle. It is her great mutability and frivolity as well as inconstancy to Anthony that proves to be Anthony's undoing and defeat. Having exhausted him as a lover, she proves to be no military ally and her frivolity frequently leads her to desert him on all counts. As such Anthony is unhinged and unmanned by her behavior:

*Here I am Anthony
Yet cannot hold this visible shape, my knave
I made these wars for Egypt, and the Queen
Whose heart I thought I had, for she had
mine*

*Which, whilst it was mine, had annexed
unto't*

A million more, now lost- she Eros, has

*Paced cards with Caesar, and false played
my glory*

Unto an enemy's triumph (IV xiv 13-20)

Anthony is divided by the masculine world of Roman duty and Egypt's feminine love, and it is the mutability, inconstancy and frivolity of Cleopatra that proves to be his undoing. Anthony's tragedy is that he cannot balance the worlds of honour, duty and pleasure and love and is indeed undone by the mutability, inconstancy and frivolity of Cleopatra.

We see the conflict between honour and pleasure in the opening scene:

CLEO You must not stay here longer.
Your demission

*Is come from Caesar. Therefore hear it
Antony.*

*Where's Fulvia's process? Caesar's I
would say! Both!*

*Call in the messengers. As I am Egypt's
Queen*

*Thou blushest, Anthony, and that blood
of thine*

*Is Caesar's homage; else so thy cheeks
pay shame*

*When shrill tongued Fulvia scolds. The
messengers!*

ANT. Let Rome in Tiber melt, and
the wide arc

*Of the ranged empire fall! Here is my
space*

*Kingdoms are clay. Our dungy earth
alike*

Feeds beast as man. The nobleness of life

Is to do thus- when such a mutual pair

*And such a twain can don't, in which I
bind,*

On pain of punishment, the world to weet

We stand up peerless (II 26-40)

In the above passage we see Cleopatra challenging Anthony's dominion by accusing Anthony of being under obligations to Fulvia and Caesar, thus challenging him to rearrange his priorities by placing their love above his call of formal duty. Anthony is indeed provoked by the challenge to declare that Rome and empire as well as the formal call of duty are insignificant compared to their grand, eternal, peerless love which is his first call. As such Anthony shifts his priorities from being a great military commander to being the lover of Cleopatra and is as such as many critics point out, unmanned by Cleopatra and beguiled by her wiles to place love before duty, which will ultimately prove to be his fall.

Anthony's portrayal of Cleopatra as being 'cunning past man's thought'(I. 2. 144)Indeed Anthony may be seen to place excessive blame of his own faults on Cleopatra but he is undeniably bitter about her frivolity and unmaning of him, calling her his "Serpent of Old Nile (I. 5. 25) But

for fear that “You’ll heat my blood. No more! he refuses his request to “play one scene/ Of excellent dissembling and let it look/ Like perfect honour(I. 3. 80 78-80). Indeed Anthony calls Cleopatra other names. Coming upon Thidias kissing her hand, he calls her ‘kite” (3.13.89) which implies that she is a sexual predator and whore. Shortly after he accuses her of having “been a boggler ever” (3.13.113) Indeed Anthony confesses to feeling manipulated and beguiled by Cleopatra. He advances a theory that “The wise gods seal our eyes” (3.13. 113), that is blind and beguile him, so that he can “make us/Adore our errors, laugh at’s while we strut/ to our confusion. (3.13. 114-16)

Hence Cleopatra is depicted as a voluptuous, feminine other that unmans and undoes Anthony and proves to be his fall. And yet, one is brought to admire their peerless love, which indeed, somewhat immortal between the great Anthony and his grand seductress Cleopatra, their endings in death may imply ruin and failure but may also be read as an attempt to conquer fate, that is rather than suffer physical defeat, their suicides are their triumph over physical defeat, conquest and imprisonment. The grand and peerless nature of their love is thus celebrated even as Cleopatra proves to be the ruin of Anthony.

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