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Antony and Cleopatra, Myths and Myth

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The article discusses Shakespeare's massive use of mythological allusions in one of his greatest tragedies – Antony and Cleopatra, whose eponymous protagonists seem to re-enact the myths of Hercules and Isis, only to become mythological, archetypal, legendary figures in their own right. References to Thomas North's Plutarch, to Cicero, Chaucer, Marlowe and other authors substantiate Shakespeare's conscious and elaborate use of mythology in this fascinating play.

Key words: Antony, Cleopatra, mythology, myth, Hercules, Isis

Antony and Cleopatra contains a large number of mythological allusions (39 according to Root – *Classical Mythology in Shakespeare,* 1903) whereas a play like *Julius Caesar*, which deals with very similar historical matter, contains virtually none. However it is not the number of allusions which is remarkable but rather their use. Venus, Isis, Mars, Hercules and others appear as almost analogues of the protagonists, as though the two lovers may replace them in their realm. The insistence on the analogy between human and mythological is one of the aspects which has, amongst other things, led some critics to view this play as the first of the *Romances*. But the relation between this Roman play and myth goes further: both Antony and Cleopatra appear on stage as characters that are, in some way, already "myths", but not univocal ones. Cleopatra for instance was presented by Boccaccio as greedy, cruel and

lustful and only thirty years later by Chaucer as exemplar of chastity and steadfastness and the character of Antony is ambiguous from its very sources – Plutarch himself mentions his fondness for revelry – yet his nobility and ability in battle is also part of his historical legacy (two aspects clearly displayed in the play).

An Elizabethan audience would have been familiar with these controversial mythical aspects of the lovers and I believe that Shakespeare places them in this play as carrying their ambiguous past which is constantly set against their actions. But, as Janet Adelman (*The Common Liar*, 1973) amongst others has noted, we are never really given an insight into the two lovers' interiority – they never confess their inner feelings to the audience in monologue and are constantly surrounded by others accentuating the element of theatricality so prominent in the play (ending clearly in Cleopatra staging her own death). This meta-theatrical element derives also from the fact that the protagonists appear as myths in the sense that Roland Barthes gives to the term: myth "transforme l'histoire en nature" (*Mythologies*, 1957), in myth we are faced with an image or an event which communicates the concept *immediately* without reference to motivations. So, the play as a whole displays the quality of myth offering at the same time contrary perspectives of interpretation within itself.

Antony and Cleopatra contains a large number of mythological allusions whereas a play like *Julius Caesar* dealing with very similar historical matter contains virtually none. In fact in the great tragedies references to classical mythology are scant "from the 7 allusions of *Lear* and the 11 of *Timon of Athens*, we jump in Antony to 39 allusions"[1]. However it is not merely the number of these references which is remarkable, but their use: Venus, Isis, Mars, Hercules and others appear almost as analogues of the protagonists, as though the two lovers may replace them in their realm. But the

[1] Cf. R. K. Root. 1903. *Classical Mythology in Shakespeare*. New York, 130.

relation between this Roman play and myth can be extended: both Antony and Cleopatra appear on stage as characters who are, in some way, already "myths", but not univocal ones (and, as we shall see, nor are the classical myths to which they are compared), their historical legacy is all but linear. Cleopatra, for instance, was presented by Boccaccio – and by most others – as greedy, cruel and, especially, lustful and, only thirty years later, by Chaucer as an exemplar of chastity and steadfastness, whilst Antony's character is ambiguous from its very sources – Plutarch himself talked of his fondness for revelry – yet his nobility, generosity and ability in battle are frequently mentioned. Classical and medieval tradition provide a series of descriptions of the two lovers, mainly depicting and deploring the results of a strong man's subjection to a woman and accentuating the extravagance and intemperance of the couple. The playwrights, Jodelle, Garnier and Daniel provided versions of the story in the second half of the sixteenth century[2], which added further material for the construction of the "Antony and Cleopatra myth". In these plays the lovers are given a chance to repent and pity is invoked, human passion fights with fate, monarchs are seen to be destroyed by lust, but the virtues of the protagonists and the concept of dying for love is also present. An Elizabethan audience would have been familiar with these controversial aspects of the two protagonists and Shakespeare presents them in the play as carrying their ambiguous past which is constantly set against their actions.

The first myth association appears in the opening lines of the play: Philo, who represents the Roman view of Antony, immediately compares him with the God of war the "plated Mars", pointing out, though, that the analogy no longer holds since the general has become a "strumpet's fool". When we witness Antony's encounter with Cleopatra, though Venus is not explicitly mentioned, his role as a captive to love evokes her

[2] Cf. F. M. Dickey. 1957. *Not Wisely But Too Well, Shakespeare's Love Tragedies*. San Marino, The Huntington Library, 161, but see Chapters X and XI.

figure. The full connection of Cleopatra with the Goddess of love will occur in Enobarbus' barge speech in the second scene of the second act, (o'er picturing that Venus where we see/The fancy outwork nature, I.1.200-201) but before that the eunuch Mardian, who is trying to entertain the queen during Antony's absence, says "Yet I have fierce affections, and think / What Venus did with Mars" (I.5.17-18)[3]. The reference here is clearly to the adulterous relationship between Venus and Mars: Venus was Vulcan's wife and the lover of Mars. Vulcan pretended to go away and set a trap for the two lovers who were caught under a net which was placed over the bed. Vulcan then called all the Gods to witness the scene. Mars, then, is not only the strongest of the gods but also the adulterer, and his relationship with Venus had been described by Shakespeare himself in *Venus and Adonis*. The "stern and direful god of war", Venus explains to the reluctant Adonis in the poem, had become her "captive" and her "slave" and begged her for her love. She continues:

> Over my altars hath he hung his lance
> His battered shield, his uncontrolled crest,
> And for my sake hath learn'd to sport and dance,
> To toy, to wanton, dally, smile and jest,
> Scorning his churlish drum and ensign red,
> Making my arms his field, his tent my bed. (102-108)

As Janet Adelman, amongst others, reminds us, "the union of these divine adulterers was one of the ruling mythological commonplaces of the English Renaissance"[4] and this image of the potent God unarmed and subjected to the powers of love is present throughout Shakespeare's play where Antony is portrayed as the great general made effeminate and martially weak in the hands of Cleopatra. This vision is particularly noticeable in the description Cleopatra makes when, boasting with her ladies, she remembers how having "drunk him to his

[3] All quotations are from the Arden Shakespeare, edited by M. R. Ridley, Routledge London and New York, 1993.
[4] J. Adelman. 1973. *The Common Liar: an Essay on* Antony and Cleopatra. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 83.

bed" she dressed him up in her clothes whilst she wore "his sword Philippan" (II.5.21-23). This scene calls up yet another important analogue for Antony recurrent in the play, the figure of Hercules, who, like Mars, as we shall see, symbolizes strength and power, but has also been subjugated by a woman. Nevertheless Mars continues to appear in the play as the vigorous God; Cleopatra herself in expressing Antony's duality declares: "Though he be painted one way like a Gorgon, / The other way's a Mars" (II.2.117-18) and Enobarbus had hoped that in confronting Octavius Antony would "speak as loud as Mars" (II.2.6). There is however yet another dominant Renaissance interpretation which, as Raymond Waddington reminds us, "regarded the legend of Mars as Venus as embodying the significant concept of *concordia discors*"[5]. Philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato believed that order in the world is maintained through the mediation of two opposing principles and the whole play can certainly be seen – and is seen by most critics – as an exposition of oppositions (clearly in the conflicting values of Rome and Egypt, in the choice between Roman temperance and Egyptian excesses, in the contrast between the virtuous Octavia and the voluptuous Cleopatra and many others) which may be necessary for harmony to ensue. Modern criticism particularly has insisted that the correct interpretation of the play lies not in the individuation of the "right perspective" but rather in the acceptance that a double or multiple perception of the play must be taken because no clear cut distinctions are possible: the Roman world with its discipline and honour contains its hypocrisies and manipulations and Cleopatra's court is not merely a world of revelry and drunkenness: the queen herself chooses to take her life in the "high Roman fashion". The iconographic tradition confirms the *concordia discors* view and, as Panofsky concludes in commenting on a painting by Titian, "in identifying a distinguished couple with Mars and Venus, Titian compares

[5] R. B. Waddington. 1966. "Antony and Cleopatra: "What Venus did with Mars."" *Shakespeare Studies* 2: 221.

their union, not to the furtive passion of the Homeric lovers but to the auspicious fusion of two cosmic forces begetting harmony"[6]. Christopher Wortham, in his study of the emblem tradition in relation to Shakespeare's use of classical mythology, indicates that Venus is not much approved of among emblematic mythographers and that Philo, in pointing out the decline of Antony/Mars in the hands of a woman, has iconography on his side. Nevertheless he considers it a mistake to take the god and goddess in isolation; the pair must be considered together. Like Waddington he records that the union of Mars and Venus brings forth Harmonia, but unlike him, he believes the play should not be read in these terms: "the subtle power of the myth of Mars and Venus as a point of reference in *Antony and Cleopatra* is to suggest a diversity of justifications for – as well as disapprobations of – the lovers"[7] concluding that two different outcomes are possible, a mystical union or a bloody catastrophe and in the end it is self-destruction which prevails, albeit ennobled. Wortham, among others, feels that the Mars / Venus story is not the dominant mythic correlative for the protagonists and as the play proceeds there is a change in direction with Antony becoming more akin to Hercules and Cleopatra to Isis. However, in order to interpret these further identifications, I believe, we must recall that Hercules and Isis also had partners, unmentioned in the play, but present in the minds of a Jacobean audience.

North's Plutarch, which as we know is the primary source for this play, links Antony both to Bacchus and to Hercules but, unlike Shakespeare, places more emphasis on the association with the former. In the play, in fact, Bacchus appears only in the celebration scene on Pompey's galley and is linked with the occasion and the allusions to the Egyptian

[6] E. Panofsky. 1962. *Studies in Iconology*. New York, 164.
[7] C. Wortham. 1995. "Temperance and the End of Time: Emblematic "Antony and Cleopatra."" *Comparative Drama* 29(1): 7.

qualities of the feast rather than with Antony himself[8]. Hercules is said to be Antony's ancestor and Cleopatra refers to him as "Herculean Roman" (I.3.84). The legends associated with Hercules in the Renaissance again point to different aspects: he is the symbol of strength and virtue, able to exhibit great folly and when he was faced with the choice between pleasure and virtue, he chose virtue; but for a period of time he was transformed into Omphale's servant and, as such, dressed up in women's clothes performing domestic chores. Hercules then can appear as Antony's analogue but also as his antitype. Ernest Schanzer in dealing with the question of Antony's choice points to the choice of Hercules and to that of Aeneas (which we will come to). The story of *Hercules in bivio* was rediscovered by fifteenth century humanists and was popular in the Renaissance "chiefly owing to Cicero's reference to it in the first book of *De Officis* (I. 32) and its inclusion in a number of emblem books"[9]. Hercules coming to a fork in the road is forced to choose between the path of virtue and that of pleasure, each represented by a woman who expounds the advantages of one choice over the other, and the hero chooses virtue. Given the many analogies of Antony with Hercules it is possible to see in the Roman general's need to decide between his duties towards Rome and his eastern pleasures a strong resemblance made all the more concrete in Antony's choice between the virtuous Roman Octavia and the pleasure giving Cleopatra. In this case Antony falls short of his ancestor opting to return to vice. Of the many accusations the Romans launch at Antony one is certainly his loss of virility and fighting skills under Egyptian influence, a kind of effeminacy which has taken him over and contributes to his distraction, he "is not more manlike / Than Cleopatra; nor the queen of Ptolemy / More womanly than he"

[8] Harold Fisch in his Antony and Cleopatra *and the Limits of Mythology* reminds us that Antony "combines in himself aspects of both Mars and Bacchus, the god of war as well as the god of wine, Venus having been at various times consort to both", in *Shakespeare Survey*, 23, 1970, p.60.

[9] E. Schanzer. *The Problem Plays of Shakespeare*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 155-56.

(I.4.5-6). This Roman view seems to be confirmed by the aforementioned words of Cleopatra: "Ere the ninth hour, I drunk him to his bed; / Then put my tires and mantles on him whilst / I wore his sword Philippan" (II.5.21-23) a passage which has been seen as evoking Hercules' submission to Omphale. Omphale was the queen of Lydia and Hercules was made slave there and, according to legend, she wore his lion's skin whilst he wore her dress and weaved linen at her feet. The unmanned hero fallen to effeminate subjection enriches the Hercules myth and, though Omphale is not mentioned in the play, echoes of the story are traceable in Cleopatra's recounting of this cross-dressing. Moreover Plutarch himself, in his *Comparison of Demetrius and Antony* which follows the *Lives,* alludes to the parallel:

> As we see in painted tables, where Omphale secretlie stealeth away Hercules clubbe, and took his Lyons skinne from him. Even so Cleopatra often times unarmed Antonius, and intised him to her, making him lose matters of great importance.[10]

Antony and Hercules can be seen to appear as love victims (Spenser couples them in Book V of his *Faerie Queen*) and the picture serves to remind the audience that failure to restrain one's passion can lead even the strongest men to this state of helplessness. This theme of female mastery is merged with the myth of Mars and Venus. Hercules, however, appears significantly in two other episodes in the play. In the short third scene of the fourth act – a scene with an air of mystery about it whose atmosphere recalls the opening scene of *Hamlet* – before the battle, the soldiers hear music from the air and from under the earth and conclude that "'tis the god Hercules, whom Antony love'd / Now leaves him" (IV.3.15-16). Here Shakespeare departs from Plutarch choosing Hercules over Bacchus, and the hero's abandonment will prove to be a bad omen, anticipating Enobarbus' defection and the battles. Antony is likened to or associated with Hercules by others and

[10] Quoted in R. Waddington, 211.

it is only after the defeat at Actium that he allows himself a direct comparison, but this time it is with the maddened hero. Convinced that Cleopatra has betrayed him he says to Eros that the shirt of Nessus is upon him (IV.12.43). The legend goes that Hercules shot the centaur Nessus with a poisoned arrow; Nessus gave Hercules' wife, Deianeira, a shirt soaked with his poisoned blood to be used as a love charm but in fact when given to Hercules it caused him torture and self destruction, and it is after this episode that he became a God. This is also the moment in the play which signals Antony's final downfall, his loss of certainties, his reaction to the false news of Cleopatra's death and his own bungled suicide. According to Ted Hughes, after Hercules' abandoning of his Roman descendant, what remains is an "Osirian Antony" who must "free himself wholly and finally, from the obsolete Herculean Roman Antony, and emerge as his true self, the universal love God, consort of the Goddess of Complete being"[11].

There are many associations, direct and indirect, between Cleopatra and the goddess Isis. Fisch sees the Venus-Mars theme merging into one he considers of greater significance, that is the Isis and Osiris myth with "Cleopatra functioning as Isis, goddess of nature and fertility, and Antony as Osiris, the dying Sun-god who is resurrected in eternity"[12]. Shakespeare was probably familiar with the legend from Plutarch's *Of Isis and Osiris* published in Holland's translation of the *Moralia* in 1603 and also, maybe, from Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* translated by Adlington. Traditionally Isis is the Egyptian mother Goddess, sister and consort of Osiris who is killed by Seth who tries to take his place. Isis, distraught, searches for his body, finds it and brings it back to Egypt where it is discovered by Seth and cut into pieces. Isis manages to recover the pieces and bring him back to life: Osiris becomes immortal and reigns in the underworld. Isis, like Cleopatra, is

[11] T. Hughes. 1992. *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. London: Faber and Faber, 316.
[12] H. Fisch, 61.

also connected with the Nile waters whose rise and fall guarantees life. The name of Isis is invoked directly mostly in the "Egyptian" scenes where Charmian refers to Cleopatra as: "sweet Isis" (I.2.61), "O Isis" (III.3.15) or when Cleopatra herself invokes the goddess, "By Isis, I will give thee bloody teeth" (I.5.70). As Adelman notes, the name is used mostly in semi-comic scenes which emphasize the exotic strangeness of the Egyptians and then in the "unflattering portrait" of the queen offered by Octavius when he complains to his men that Cleopatra has publicly proclaimed her sons kings and assigned them territories whilst she appeared "in the habiliments of the goddess Isis" (III.6.17)[13]. Further identifications occur where the Egyptian queen is likened to the moon and particularly when she plans to take leave from life by exclaiming that "now the fleeting moon / No planet is of mine" (V.2.238-39). Opinions about an unmentioned analogy of Antony with Osiris vary: Fisch highlights the connections in the latter part of the play between Antony and the sun god as when Cleopatra calls out "O sun, / Burn the great sphere thou mov'st in" (IV.13.9-10) and later "His face was as the heavens, and therein stuck/A sun and moon" (V.2.79-80). Antony, like Osiris, can be seen as gaining his immortality through the words and memories of his Egyptian lover; the union of god and goddess as eternally united after death is a commonplace interpretation of the plays final act. Michael Llyod, in the only study I know of uniquely dedicated to the subject of Cleopatra as Isis, points to a direct identification of Cleopatra as the goddess Isis, but refutes – unlike Hughes and Fisch – a conscious intention to identify Antony with Osiris: "we should expect to find something of the relationship between Antony and Osiris if Shakespeare considered it relevant to the portrait: but he clearly did not […] Osiris commands a field of association (chiefly that which he shares with Isis) which cannot be annexed to Antony"[14]. Lloyd, instead, is in no doubt that the cult of Isis is strongly echoed in

[13] Cf. J. Adelman, n. 68, p.209.
[14] M. Lloyd. 1959. "Cleopatra as Isis." *Shakespeare Survey* 12: 94.

Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra and in fact sees her as a manifestation of the goddess. Adelman, instead, affirms that Cleopatra is not an analogue of Isis; the function of the association serves rather, in her view, to suggest discrepancies as well as likenesses[15]. As with the other myth patterns seen so far, it seems to me that Shakespeare relies on the controversial aspects of the legends in order to present a picture of a known historical period with renowned historical characters in order to expose the differing, and often equally defendable, interpretations which it can take according to perspective. The last act of the play is, in fact, primarily concerned with whose story will reach posterity: this is Cleopatra's fundamental fear and Octavius Caesar's chief concern.

It is Antony himself to propose the last of the principal myth patterns in the play. Persuaded that Cleopatra is now dead, he is now planning to join her with the help of his faithful servant Eros. In one of the rare soliloquies he exclaims:

> Where souls do couch on flowers, we'll hand in hand,
> And with our sprightly port make the ghosts gaze:
> Dido and her Aeneas, shall want troops,
> And all the haunt be ours. (IV.14.51-54)

Shakespeare was probably acquainted with the story at least from three sources: Virgil, Chaucer and Marlowe. Chaucer, in fact, placed Dido with Cleopatra as a love martyr in his *Legend of Good Women* and a series of echoes of Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage* - such as the association of love with eternity but also with effeminacy and Dido's universe of love subsuming all space - are undoubtedly present in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Aeneas, the Trojan hero, had become a favourite amongst the Romans who considered him their ancestor. On his way to Italy he ended up in Carthage and fell in love with Dido where she was queen. But Jupiter sent Mercury to remind him of his duties and the hero Aeneas gave up love for empire. As a result Dido killed herself. The image recalled by Antony, however,

[15] J. Adelman, n. 68, p. 209.

does not correspond to Virgil's, in Book 6 of the *Aeneid*. When Aeneas later visits the underworld and sees Dido, she turns away from him and, after a moment's grieving, Aeneas goes on to the Elysium where he meets his father and other spirits. It is unlikely that Shakespeare would have forgotten this detail and more possible that he chose to keep this famous pair of lovers together. In many ways then, Aeneas functions as Antony's antitype; the Roman general instead, gives up empire for love. For Antony, as Adelman notes, "Elysium is the haunt of lovers, not of heroes and Aeneas' place in the afterlife is with Dido, not with the heroic Romans of the future"[16]. For a Renaissance audience the myth represented an archetypal conflict between public and private values, but, again, a lot depends on the perspective one takes, whether Rome's, the Empire's or Dido's. It is probably the composite story from the sources which informs Shakespeare's play, though the Virgilian influence seems prevalent and a number of themes from the *Aeneid* are easily traceable and find correspondence in Shakespeare's Roman play: the founding of Rome is seen as the victory of law and reason over irrationality and the threat of Dido's passion which keeps Aeneas from his duties is a threat to the values of civilization. In this sense, if Cleopatra is a new Dido, Antony's passion – also "foreign" passion we might add – is a new threat to the consolidation of the empire. Aeneas will marry Lavinia in a passionless union as is that of Antony and Octavia, both a reflection of political necessity winning over the heart. But there are differences: Antony will return to Cleopatra, unlike Aeneas with Dido, and Dido will reject him in the afterlife, whereas Cleopatra's aspiration is to meet Antony there. Further, the most beautiful imagery in Virgil is connected with political issues, where in Shakespeare it is reserved to the world of the lovers, and whereas the prevailing values of the *Aenid* are temporal, Cleopatra seeks transcendence in a world outside space and time. The Virgilian influence then, provides

[16] J. Adelman, p. 69.

Shakespeare with a structure that can be traced and subverted, and the other sources, yet again, invite us to view the myth from other perspectives.

Antony and Cleopatra has most frequently been interpreted through a series of binary oppositions of which the contrast between the values of Rome and those of Alexandria, with its various corollaries, is the most prominent: a world of politics, rationality and austerity against one of pleasure instinct and seduction. The protagonists themselves share this dualistic interpretation, with Cleopatra as the lascivious seductress or the earnest lover, and Antony as a generous and efficient Roman general sincerely in love with his woman, or simply as a victim of his "dotage", no longer the man he was (Antony's glorious past is continuously evoked and set against his unsatisfactory present conduct). These binary oppositions have been deconstructed by recent criticism which has rather emphasized the multiple perspectives present in the play, multiple perspectives which, as we have seen so far, can also be ascribed to the myth patterns suggested in the play. There is, however, in my view, one binary opposition which also calls back to myths, myths which are not directly mentioned but which act as a substrate to the play. In the Rome/Egypt opposition what is also at stake is the contrast between two concepts of time. Time, of course had been the object of philosophical and scientific studies for many centuries, but one distinction which emerged in the representation of time, particularly with reference to Greek drama, is that between time as *Chronos* and time as *Aion*. Panofsky has clearly outlined the route from an ancient conception, of Iranian origin, between time as *Aion*, a divine principle of eternal creativity, essentially unhistorical in whose iconology we do not find those attributes which were to become commonplace, like that of the hourglass or of the scythe suggesting the inexorable passage of time leading to destruction and which are, instead, associated with the representation of time as *Chronos*, (the one we find in the *Sonnets*) the linear and irreversible Time of History. It was

the original similarity between the Greek term *Chronos* and the name of the Roman Saturn, *Kronos*, patron of agriculture and hence furnished with a scythe to suggest the association. *Chronos*, empirical time, divided into past, present and future, is then opposed to the Hellenistic deity *Aion*, which embodies cyclic and eternal time and is often represented as a snake in the form of a hoop eating his own tail.

There have been numerous studies on the concept of time in this play – as in other Shakespeare plays – and the oppositions mentioned before can be reinterpreted through the analysis of the use of the different time conceptions: David Kaula notes "the intimate relationship the sense of time bears to the basic contours of the dramatic action, and its significance as one of the principal media through which the characters reveal their governing attitudes and thereby locate themselves within the moral universe of the play"[17]. Rome, and Octavius, are bearers of the new time, *Chronos*, where everything is speed, efficiency and measurability, the unidirectional time of policy: "the strong necessity of time commands / Our services awhile" (I.3.42) says Antony when forced to leave Cleopatra for Rome. Egypt, and Cleopatra, are associated with "soft hours", with endless and eternal time, represented for instance in the two drowsy scenes in which talk is affected by the assumption of mandragora through which the queen wishes to lose count of time, but also in the final scenes when approaching death is seen as the end of a cycle and the beginning of another. Northrop Frye identifies time as "order" and sees catastrophe as the result of not having respected the natural rhythm of events, so he identifies Octavius with History and Antony as failing for not having respected the natural course of events.[18] *Chronos* and *Aion* then, two unmentioned deities, strongly inform the contrasting visions of the play. Frye also speaks of myth with reference to the couple Antony and Cleopatra

[17] D. Kaula. 1964. "*The Time Sense of* Antony and Cleopatra." *Shakespeare Quarterly* XV: 211-12.
[18] Cf. Northrop Frye. 1967. *Fools of Time*. Toronto: Toronto University Press.

together: the concept of the peerless couple, "mythical", which transcends earthly values and occupies new spaces outside time and space. In this sense myth can be associated with another concept of time, a kind of symbolic time where the two meet, which reveals and transcends. The image, the greatness, the excessiveness of this pair projects them into an Other space, the space of myth, the space of timelessness, and though their human nature and vulnerability has frequently been pointed out, the image that remains of them is one in which "no grave upon the earth shall clip in it / A pair so famous" (V.2.357-58).

Roland Barthes affirms that myth "transforme l'histoire en nature"[19]. The motivations of the event fade away and we find ourselves faced with a fact which directly communicates the concept. We saw at the beginning how Antony and Cleopatra reach the Shakespearian stage as somehow already "myths" in this sense: their historical, literary and theatrical controversial pasts have created an image, possibly a controversial one, familiar to a Shakespearian audience. Through the play the reference to classical mythology provides yet another framework against which to measure the largeness or the inadequacy of the protagonists and, as we saw, the classical myths themselves are subject to multiple interpretations. At the end of the play there is no doubt that another "myth" is formed; in spite of the human failings we have witnessed throughout the play, and the knowledge that Augustus will rule, the pair "so famous" gains its own position alongside the mythical figures it has evoked.

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[19] R. Barthes. 1957. *Mythologies*. Edition du Seuil, 215.

mainly on Shakespeare and twentieth century literature. After one year teaching at Smith College (Northampton, Mass., USA) did a Master's course in "Theory and Practice of Literary Translation" which led to the translation of some of N. Hawthorne's short stories into Italian and then a Ph.D. in English Literature, both at Rome University "Sapienza". The Ph.D. thesis was on the concept of time in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* which was later published as *Marc'Antonio e la necessità del tempo*, (Roma, Bulzoni, 2005). Other publications include studies on *Shakespeare and War*, *Shakespeare and 20th Century European Culture* and on the authorship question in *King Lear*. Apart from Shakespeare, other works include papers on Jonathan Swift, D.H. Lawrence, Whitman and Hawthorne and a translation into Italian of E.M. Forster's *The Machine Stops* with introduction.