







mentioned, his role as a captive to love evokes her figure (“the bellows and the fan / To cool a gypsy’s lust”, I.i.9-10). These associations have led John Danby to assert that the play is “Shakespeare’s study of Mars and Venus – the presiding deities of Baroque society, painted for us again and again on the canvasses of his time”<sup>12</sup>. 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”, ll. 200-1), 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.v.17-18). The reference here is clearly to the adulterous relationship between Venus and Mars<sup>13</sup>, thus the eunuch here moves the parallel from the warrior to the lover, and Mars is no longer just the strongest of the gods but also the adulterer. Similarly Venus is subject to varied and at times contradictory interpretations; Christopher Wortham, in his study of the emblem tradition in relation to Shakespeare’s use of classical mythology, quotes a contemporary of Shakespeare, the poet and translator Richard Linche who, in his *The Fountaine of Ancient Fiction* (1599) which describes ancient gods, says, in the same passage, that Venus is “the goddesse of wantonness and amorous delights” who inspires in men “libidinous desires, and lustful appetites” but is also “the mother of love”<sup>14</sup>. The relationship of Mars with Venus had been described by Shakespeare himself in *Venus and Adonis* (1593). 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 batter’d 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,

---

<sup>12</sup> John F. Danby, *Poets on Fortune’s Hill*, London, Faber and Faber, 1952, p. 150.

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Christopher Wortham, “Temperance and the End of Time: Emblematic *Antony and Cleopatra*”, *Comparative Drama*, 29:1 (Spring 1995), p. 9.

Making my arms his field, his tent my bed. (ll. 102-8)<sup>15</sup>

As Janet Adelman, amongst others, reminds us, “the union of these divine adulterers was one of the ruling mythological commonplaces of the English Renaissance”<sup>16</sup> 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 girls, she remembers how having “drunk him to his bed” she dressed him up in her clothes whilst she wore “his sword Philippan” (II.v.21-23), where the phallic sword, memory and symbol of his military glory and virility, is turned to an erotic toy. 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 a 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.ii.117-18) and Enobarbus had hoped that in confronting Octavius Antony would “speak as loud as Mars” (II.ii.6). There is however yet another dominant Renaissance interpretation which, as Raymond B. Waddington states, “regarded the legend of Mars and Venus as embodying the significant concept of *concordia discors*”<sup>17</sup>. 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

---

<sup>15</sup> William Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, in *Shakespeare Complete Works*, London-New York, The Arden Shakespeare, 1998, p. 51.

<sup>16</sup> Janet Adelman, *The Common Liar: An Essay on Antony and Cleopatra*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1973, p. 83.

<sup>17</sup> Raymond B. Waddington, “*Antony and Cleopatra: ‘What Venus did with Mars’*”, *Shakespeare Studies*, 2 (1966), p. 221.

virtuous Octavia and the voluptuous Cleopatra and many others<sup>18</sup>) which may be necessary for harmony to ensue. More recent criticism, particularly, has insisted that a 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 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" (IV.xv.86) in order to save her honour. In this sense the play as a whole could be seen as an exposition of *concordia discors*<sup>19</sup>. The iconographic tradition confirms this view and, as Panofsky concludes in commenting on a painting by Titian, "in identifying a distinguished couple with Mars and Venus, Titian compares their union, not to the furtive passion of the Homeric lovers but to the auspicious fusion of two cosmic forces begetting harmony"<sup>20</sup>. Wortham 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"<sup>21</sup> concluding that two different outcomes are possible, a mystical union

---

<sup>18</sup> These basic oppositions are present in Virgil's *Aeneid*, particularly when he describes the battle of Actium; in spite of it being a civil war, the sides between Antony and Augustus are sharply drawn and a binary opposition is set out between west and east, where the west is associated with 'maleness', control, permanence as opposed to eastern 'femaleness', chaos, flux, a pattern which would be repeated in Renaissance epics and is prevalent in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Cf. David Quint, "Epic and Empire", *Comparative Literature*, 41:1 (Winter 1989), pp. 1-32. See also Quint's introduction to his edition of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Longman Cultural Edition, New York, Pearson Education, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Waddington, p. 223.

<sup>20</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1939, rpt. Icon Editions, New York, Harper and Row Publishers, 1962, p. 164.

<sup>21</sup> Wortham, p. 7.

or a bloody catastrophe, and in the end self-destruction 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 and that they too convey diverse associations.

North's Plutarch links Antony both to Bacchus and to Hercules but, unlike Shakespeare, sets 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 qualities of the feast rather than with Antony himself<sup>22</sup>. Hercules is said to be Antony's ancestor and Cleopatra refers to him as "Herculean Roman" (I.iii.84). Thus North's translation of Plutarch:

Now it had been a speech of old time that the family of the Antonii were descendend from one Anton, the son of Hercules, wherof the family took name. This opinion did Antonius seek to confirm in all his doings, not only resembling him in the likeness of his body [...] but also in the wearing of his garments.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly the legends associated with Hercules in the Renaissance point to different aspects: he is the symbol of strength and virtue but also able to exhibit great folly. Eugene Waith in his *The Herculean Hero* traces the history of this demigod concluding that "the stories of Hercules continue to suggest terrifying excesses as well as superb self-mastery" and that "the meaning of Hercules in the Renaissance approaches a paradox when it includes both justifiable pride and reason subduing passion"<sup>24</sup>. When he was faced with the choice

---

<sup>22</sup> Harold Fisch, however, recalls 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", Fisch, p. 60.

<sup>23</sup> Plutarch, p. 177.

<sup>24</sup> Eugene M. Waith, *The Herculean Hero in Marlowe, Chapman, Shakespeare and Dryden*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1962, pp. 40-41. On the function of the Hercules myth in *Antony and Cleopatra*, see Anna Anzi's precious study *La ragione e l'appetito. Il*

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. These two aspects are most prominent in Shakespeare's play and Antony can appear as Hercules' analogue but also as his antitype. Ernest Schanzer in dealing with the question of Antony's decision points to the choice of Hercules and to that of Aeneas (which I 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 Officiis* (I. 32) and its inclusion in a number of emblem books"<sup>25</sup>. Xenophon's version of it in his *Memorabilia* (available only in Latin) is closest to Shakespeare's possible allusion to it when presenting Antony's choice – at least from the Roman point of view – between "the path of *virtus* and of *voluptas*"<sup>26</sup>. 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. The analogy is clearly with the Roman general's need to decide between his duties towards Rome and his eastern pleasures 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 for his "Egyptian dish" (II.vi.123). The second association is with Hercules' temporary subjection to a woman and his loss of manliness. 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" (I.iv.5-6). This Roman view is confirmed by the aforementioned reference of Cleopatra to their game of cross-dressing, a performance evoking Hercules' submission to Omphale, the queen of Lidia<sup>27</sup>. The unmanned hero fallen to effeminate subjection enriches the Hercules myth and, though

---

*mito di Ercole in Antonio e Cleopatra di William Shakespeare*, Milano, Madis Edizioni, 1987.

<sup>25</sup> Schanzer, pp. 155-56.

<sup>26</sup> Schanzer, p. 156.

<sup>27</sup> 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.



Omphale is not mentioned in the play, echoes of the story are traceable in Cleopatra's recounting of the episode<sup>28</sup>. 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.<sup>29</sup>

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 of one of the conventional readings of this play: that failure to restrain one's passion can lead even the strongest men to a state of helplessness merging the theme of female mastery 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 concluding that "'tis the god Hercules, whom Antony love'd / Now leaves him" (IV.iii.15-16). Here Shakespeare departs from Plutarch who describes Bacchus forsaking Antony rather than Hercules, and the hero's abandonment will prove to be a bad omen, anticipating Enobarbus' defection and Antony's defeat. Antony is likened to or associated with Hercules by others and 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:

The shirt of Nessus is upon me, teach me,  
Alcides, thou mine ancestor, thy rage.  
Let me lodge Lichas on the horns o' the moon,

---

<sup>28</sup> MacKenzie sees the attraction of a possible Cleopatra/Omphale association but claims that an equation of the two is not possible since references to slavery and emasculation are prominent in the whole play and Omphale is never mentioned. See MacKenzie, p. 315. I believe the echo is present and reinforced by Plutarch's reference to it in the above quotation.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Waddington, p. 211.

And with those hands that grasp'd the heaviest club,  
Subdue my worthiest self. The witch shall die. (IV.xii.43-47)<sup>30</sup>

Here the intended Herculean characteristic is rage, famously embodied in Seneca's *Hercules Furens*, "the characteristic response of the Herculean hero to an attack on his honour", as Waith notes, adding that "both Hercules and Antony want more than anything to recover some part of their lost honour in order to make themselves worthy of a hero's death"<sup>31</sup>. This is the least general of the mythical allusions in the play and, according to Root, is evidence of Shakespeare's first-hand knowledge of the myth. Root claims:

[...] an allusion to the death of Hercules with mention of the poisoned shirt of Nessus and the fate of the page Lichas, lodged by his master on the horns of the moon, is possible only to one who had read a detailed account of the fable, such as that given by Ovid or Seneca.<sup>32</sup>

Doubts on Shakespeare's direct knowledge of classical mythology are often variously expressed by critics, but this instance is proof of his familiarity with the sources of the Hercules myth. It 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. This rage, in fact, ends, both in Hercules' case and in Antony's, with the news of Deianira and Cleopatra's suicides but with a difference: whereas Hercules sees it as the outcome of a prophecy and, fortified, gets ready to meet a heroic death forgetting her, Antony ludicrously interprets the false news of Cleopatra's suicide as a heroic gesture to imitate yet "there is Herculean fortitude in his suicide; there is also the final assertion of love"<sup>33</sup>. Mackenzie on the other hand, sees the whole 'Nessus tirade' as working against the "equation with a dying Hercules" but rather

---

<sup>30</sup> The reference is to the legend according to which Hercules shot the centaur Nessus with a poisoned arrow; Nessus gave Hercules' wife, Deianira, 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; Lichas, the innocent bearer of the shirt, was flung up into the sky by his infuriated master.

<sup>31</sup> Waith, p. 119.

<sup>32</sup> Root, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Waith, p. 120.

as representing excessive theatricality which Antony has learned from Cleopatra herself<sup>34</sup>. There is no doubt that theatricality and acting are exhibited throughout the play<sup>35</sup>, but whether the tirade is staged or not, its full impact, I believe, comes from its precise reference to the Hercules myth and would have done for a Jacobean audience. According to Ted Hughes, after Hercules' abandonment 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"<sup>36</sup>. The myth pattern expands beyond the Greek and Roman sphere to include other spaces and times and embrace Oriental culture<sup>37</sup>.

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"<sup>38</sup>. 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, possibly, from Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* translated by Adlington<sup>39</sup>. Traditionally Isis is the Egyptian mother goddess, sister and consort of Osiris. She is associated with

---

<sup>34</sup> Cf. MacKenzie, p. 314.

<sup>35</sup> Numerous critics have dealt with the 'theatrical' aspect of the play, with the protagonists' constant 'acting'; see, amongst others, Michael Neill's exhaustive introduction to his edition of *The Tragedy of Anthony and Cleopatra*, Oxford World Classics, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994.

<sup>36</sup> Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, London, Faber and Faber, 1992, p. 316.

<sup>37</sup> See Gilberto Sacerdoti, *Nuovo Cielo, Nuova Terra*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1990, who provides an original reading of the play through the mediation of Giordano Bruno, but also gives insight into the strong presence of Egyptian culture. On this subject see also Harold Bloom, *Cleopatra: I Am Fire and Air*, New York, Scribner, 2017 and Rosy Colombo and Alessandro Roccati, "Back from the Dead. An Encounter with Domitius Enobarbus", *Memoria di Shakespeare. A Journal of Shakespearean Studies*, 3 (2016), pp. 135-48, <https://ojs.uniroma1.it/index.php/MemShakespeare/article/view/14173>, which offers a fictional conversation with the ghost of Enobarbus in which the Roman Empire is fashioned within Egyptian culture.

<sup>38</sup> Fisch, p. 61.

<sup>39</sup> Fisch, p. 61.

the moon and the sea and absorbs qualities of other goddesses including the gift of bringing life to the dead. Osiris is cut to pieces by his rival Seth, and Isis, distraught, searches for her lost husband and recovering his fragments brings him back to life: Osiris becomes immortal and reigns in the underworld. Isis, like Cleopatra, is also connected with the Nile waters whose rise and fall guarantee the continuity of life. The name of Isis is invoked directly mostly in the 'Egyptian' scenes where Charmian refers to Cleopatra as: "sweet Isis" (I.ii.61), "O Isis" (III.iii.15) or when Cleopatra herself invokes the goddess, "By Isis, I will give thee bloody teeth" (I.v.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 herself appearing "in the habiliments of the goddess Isis" (III.vi.17)<sup>40</sup>. Once again the parallel is suggested by Plutarch:

Now, for Cleopatra, she did not only wear at that time, but at all other times else when she went abroad, the apparel of the goddess Isis, and so gave audience unto all her subjects as a new Isis.<sup>41</sup>

As Barbara Bono observes "this coronation of the earthly Isis and her Bacchic consort provokes full-scale Roman opposition. The Romans attempt to literalize the myth, to turn it into a merely human action that can be destroyed"<sup>42</sup>. Further identifications occur where the Egyptian queen is likened to the moon, such as when Antony, after having witnessed Caesar's man Thidias kissing Cleopatra's hand and imagining her betrayal, exclaims: "Alack, our terrene moon / Is now eclips'd, and it portends alone / The fall of Antony" (III.xiii.153-55), or when Cleopatra, planning to take leave from life, cries out that "now the fleeting moon / No planet is of mine" (V.ii.238-39), a line which Waddington sees in the same light as Antony's abandonment by Hercules. Both episodes, Waddington argues, signal "the casting

---

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Adelman, note 68, p. 209.

<sup>41</sup> Plutarch, p. 243.

<sup>42</sup> Barbara J. Bono, *Literary Transvaluation. From Vergilian Epic to Shakespearian Tragedy*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1984, p. 207.

off of the false and the assumption of the true mythical identity” which, in Cleopatra’s case, is that of Venus<sup>43</sup>, whereas Bono believes that Cleopatra’s decision to die “is not a denial of her identification with Isis, but a transcendent redefinition” and the “myth of Isis and Osiris becomes the highest interpretation of the dramatic actions they have performed”<sup>44</sup>. Opinions about an unmentioned analogy of Antony with Osiris vary: according to Fisch, who highlights the connections in the latter part of the play between Antony and the sun god, Antony, like Osiris, can be seen as gaining his immortality in the memories and the reported dream of his Egyptian lover; in fact the union of god and goddess as eternally united after death is a commonplace interpretation of the play’s final act. On the other hand, Michael Llyod, in a study uniquely dedicated to the subject of Cleopatra as Isis, points to a direct identification of Cleopatra with 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”<sup>45</sup>. 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<sup>46</sup>. As with the other myth patterns seen so far, we are given competing mythological significances; just as Hercules was both a moral and military paradigm and an effeminate slave, and Mars the archetypal or emasculated soldier, so Isis can function as an analogue or an antitype. It seems to me that Shakespeare relies on the controversial aspects of the legends themselves and their possible applications in order to present a play in which a known historical period with renowned historical characters is subject to differing, and often equally defensible, interpretations which are justified according to perspective. I agree with Janet Adelman’s reading of the play when she claims that in *Antony and Cleopatra* “both the presentation of character and the dramatic structure work to frustrate

---

<sup>43</sup> Waddington, p. 216.

<sup>44</sup> Bono, pp. 212-13.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Lloyd, “Cleopatra as Isis”, *Shakespeare Survey*, 12 (1959), p. 94.

<sup>46</sup> Adelman, note 68, p. 209.

our reasonable desire for certainty” and “although the play continually raises questions about motives, it simply does not give any clear answers to them”; as most critics have noted the play lacks monologues which would give insight into the main characters “true” purposes and feelings and we are simply “not told the motives of the protagonists at the most critical points in the action”<sup>47</sup>. The allusion to these various multifaceted myths, in my view, emphasizes a deliberate choice of ambiguity and challenges the adoption of a single point of view. 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 which hark back to classical sources. 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.xiv.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*<sup>48</sup>. The image recalled by Antony, however, does not correspond to Virgil’s, in Book VI of the *Aeneid*<sup>49</sup>.

---

<sup>47</sup> Adelman, pp.15-16.

<sup>48</sup> Schanzer writes: “Apart from their similarity as *exempla* of the hero’s choice between Love and Empire, the two stories have so many other points in common that a number of commentators on Book IV of the *Aeneid* have suspected Virgil to be glancing at Cleopatra’s relations with Antony and Julius Caesar”, Schanzer, p. 160.

<sup>49</sup> 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

When Aeneas later visits the underworld and sees Dido, she turns away from him rather than joining him but Shakespeare instead opts for an image of posthumous love. For a Renaissance audience the myth represented an archetypal conflict between public and private values, 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 – is a new threat to the consolidation of the empire. 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 provides Shakespeare with a structure that can be traced and subverted, and contributes to the multilayered perceptions of the play.

Harold Fisch, after his excursion of mythological analogies in the play, concludes that towards the end of the play the entrance of the clown and the subsequent conversation with Cleopatra signals more than "a comic deflation of the whole mythical hyperbole on which the play is based: it brings a Biblical realism vigorously to bear on the dream world of paganism". He sees Cleopatra as becoming Eve, no longer the goddess of love and nature, but the "erring female who leads men into sin and consequently forfeits the gift of immortality"<sup>50</sup>. The closed myth world of tragedy, for him, is exploded and world history has taken its place. Mackenzie, writing some twenty years later on the same subject, considers classic mythology discredited in favour of an emerging new myth in which the "participants are distinguished by qualities other than military prowess or moral righteousness". For him Antony has failed to live up to the myths of Hercules and Mars and yet, through the language of Cleopatra, he is lifted into a realm of "imagined excellencies" and in this sense he is turned into a god. What emerges is a "love myth

---

him of his duties and the hero Aeneas gave up love for empire. As a result Dido killed herself.

<sup>50</sup> Fisch, p. 64.

which challenges the Roman military ethos”<sup>51</sup>. Both critics propose the emergence of a new myth and there is no doubt that at the end of the play 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” (V.ii.358) gains its own position alongside the mythical figures it has evoked. But what exactly constitutes the Shakespearian myth which surfaces from the play?

Antony and Cleopatra reached the Shakespearian stage as somehow already ‘myths’; their historical, literary and theatrical controversial pasts had created an image, albeit a controversial one, familiar to a Shakespearean audience. Throughout the play the mythological references provided yet another framework against which to measure the largeness or the inadequacy of the protagonists and the myths themselves are subject to multiple interpretations. Shakespeare’s play does not offer answers to the fundamental ambivalence with which his characters are encumbered yet it broadens the ideological horizons of conventional interpretation exemplified by Philo’s opening remarks; the mythical expansion of the historical characters is one with the extension of the classic tragic form which so particularly characterizes this play.

---

<sup>51</sup> Cf. MacKenzie, pp. 323-27.