

ENGL 129: Tragedy
Professor Margaret Homans

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Daniel Pollack

Whither Hast Thou, Fortune, Led?

by Daniel Pollack

“O, whither hast thou led me, Egypt?” – Mark Antony, *Antony and Cleopatra*, III.xi.51

Shortly after suffering a brutal military defeat at the hands of Octavius Caesar, Antony, in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, delivers a speech immediately striking in its theatricality.

Addressing Cleopatra, he says:

O, whither hast thou led me, Egypt? See
How I convey my shame out of thine eyes
By looking back what I have left behind
'Stroyed in dishonor... (III.xi.51-4)

From the very onset, Antony’s tone is distinctly melodramatic, as communicated by the opening interjection “O,” which establishes an immediate sense of longing, grief, and regret. The words “shame” and “dishonor” reveal Antony’s profound humiliation, and his interruption of iambic pentameter by the trochaic foot, “’Stroyed in,” places metrical stress on the former syllable, “’Stroyed,” thereby emphasizing his destruction. The opening rhetorical question, clarified by the sentence that follows, suggests Antony’s belief that Egypt has led him to ruin, and his use of the word “whither,” apparently in reference to this ruin, elevates his sense of destruction to the sensory world, as if ruin were a physical place to which one could go.

Throughout the speech, Antony clarifies what he means by this ruin through a series of contrasts. In the opening lines, Antony establishes a clear division between his current state of

“shame” and some former state of honor that he has “left behind” (III.xi.52-4). He later elaborates on this contrast:

Now I must
To the young man send humble treaties, dodge
And palter in the shifts of lowness, who
With half the bulk o’ th’ world played as I pleased,
Making and marring fortunes... (III.xi.61-65)

The juxtaposition of his current “dishonor” (III.xi.54) against his former glory here establishes a stark contrast, which magnifies the gravity of his fall. As before, Antony’s diction reflects intense humiliation, with the words “humble” and “lowness” expressing feelings of inferiority and bitter resentment of his present condition. In contrast, the expression “half the bulk o’ th’ world” evokes Antony’s former power as a triumvir, who shared political authority, chiefly with Caesar, over much of the known world. Indeed, Antony’s use of the expression echoes Cleopatra’s earlier metaphor for Antony as the “demi-Atlas of this Earth” (I.v.23). The playfulness of the alliterations “played as I pleased” and “making and marring fortunes” intimate a sense of casual ease with which Antony once ruled half the world, thereby elevating his former grandeur and intensifying the contrast with his current state. Moreover, the interruption of iambic pentameter by the trochees, “played as,” and “making,” calls special attention to the alliteration, as the beginning of the words “played,” “pleased,” “making,” and “marring,” consequently all receive metrical stress.

Antony’s condescending epithet of Caesar as “the young man” (III.xi.62) reflects the difference in age between the two men, thus establishing yet another contrast that amplifies Antony’s sense of ruin. Similar disparaging references to Caesar’s immaturity appear elsewhere

in the play, as Antony refers to him as “boy Caesar” (III.xiii.17), “this novice” (IV.xii.14), “the young Roman boy” (IV.xii.48), and “blossoming Caesar” (IV.xii.23), who “wears the rose / Of youth” (III.xiii.20-1). The negative connotations of the words “boy” and “novice” suggest that Antony regards himself as naturally superior to Caesar on the basis of age and maturity. This contempt provides a second reading of the clause “who / With half the bulk o’ th’ world played as I pleased / Making and marring fortunes” (III.xi.63-65), which appears intentionally ambiguous, modifying both “the young man,” (i.e., Caesar) and “I,” (i.e., Antony). Because Antony regards Caesar as inferior to him, the prospect that “the young man” has risen to the status Antony once enjoyed, and has done so at his expense, seems to particularly disturb him.

Yet Antony’s speech here does more than dramatize his ruin, and the word “whither” in the opening line, “O, whither hast thou led me, Egypt?” (III.xi.51), functions as more than a poetic mechanism to link the reality of his ruin with that of the sensory world. The spatial implications of the expressions “whither hast thou led me” and “what I have left behind” (III.xi.53) call attention to the physical spaces of Egypt and Rome, the latter of which he “left behind” for the former. Consequently, the opening of Antony’s speech may suggest that Antony left behind honor in Rome for “dishonor” (III.xi.54) in Egypt. Indeed, Antony directly implicates Egypt in his fall to ruin by asking Cleopatra, “whither hast thou led me, Egypt?” Here, Antony’s use of the appositive, “Egypt,” while speaking to Cleopatra suggests that his question is as much a metonymic address to Cleopatra as Queen of Egypt as an apostrophic address to Egypt itself. Ostensibly, therefore, he attributes to Egypt some poisonous influence that led to his degradation. Indeed, addressing Pompey earlier, upon his return to Rome, he states, “The beds i’ th’ East are soft; and thanks to you, / That called me timelier than my purpose hither; / For I have gained by’t” (II.vi.50-2). The word, “soft,” here connotes weakness and excessive luxury associated

with Egypt (i.e., “th’ East”), as Antony invokes the word upon thanking Pompey for prompting his return to Rome. The unity of Egypt and Cleopatra, then, indicated by his question, “whither hast thou led me, Egypt” (III.xi.53), and echoed later by his statement, “I am dying, Egypt, dying” (IV.xv.42), suggests that he links both Egypt and its Queen to the self-destruction he laments. Of course, this association is not a new development, but rather a reiteration of a viewpoint stated earlier. Immediately after learning of Fulvia’s death, for example, he states: “I must from this enchanting queen break off: / Ten thousand harms, more than the ills I know, / My idleness doth hatch” (I.ii.127-9). The negative connotations of the words “harms,” “ills,” and “idleness” suggest that he views Egypt and Cleopatra as agents of moral depravity. Yet his description of Cleopatra as “enchanting” indicates that she holds a certain power over him that he may not so readily escape.

Indeed, as Antony’s dialogue with Cleopatra continues, we see that he no longer merely links Egypt with his decline as before, but rather, he characterizes Cleopatra as wholly responsible for his ruin. In response to Cleopatra’s plea, “Forgive my fearful sails!” (III.xi.55), Antony states, “My heart was to thy rudder tied by th’ strings, / And thou shouldst tow me after” (III.xi.57-8). His metaphor of Cleopatra as the rudder that would steer his heart suggests his belief that she holds absolute control over him. The romantic implications of this maritime imagery echo Enobarbus’s earlier description of Cleopatra’s barge: “The oars were silver, / ... and made / The water which they beat to follow faster, / As amorous of their strokes” (II.ii.204-7). Unlike the water, however, which is merely “amorous” of Cleopatra’s oars, Antony paints his heart as “tied” “to [her] rudder” that she should “tow [him] after,” suggesting that he is condemned to follow, irrespective of his will. Enobarbus later returns to this nautical diction when Cleopatra feigns to desert Antony for Caesar, as he states, “Sir, sir, thou art so leaky / That

we must leave thee to thy sinking, for / Thy dearest quit thee” (III.xiii.63-5). Here, Enobarbus, like Antony himself, uses the metaphor of ships to describe his master’s powerlessness against Cleopatra’s will. Without Cleopatra to tow his heart, Enobarbus suggests, “leaky” Antony would surely “sink.”

Antony further emphasizes Cleopatra’s power over him through language that transmutes her into non-human form. The mixed metaphor produced, for example, by Antony’s use of the phrases “my heart” and “thy rudder” establishes a perceived ontological divide between the two lovers; whereas Antony, according to the metaphor, represents a human being, Cleopatra represents a ship, to whose rudder his heart was tied (III.xi.57). Here, Antony’s choice to equate Cleopatra with a ship perhaps intensifies his claim of powerlessness, as it compares her to non-human machinery, perhaps more powerful than he. Indeed, in the very next sentence, Antony elevates her power over him from the level of human to divine authority, as he states: “Thy beck might from the bidding of the gods / Command me” (III.xi.60-1).

Indeed, Antony even appears to view Cleopatra, rather than Caesar, as his conqueror. He clearly rejects the notion that Caesar has conquered him, given his later statement, “Not Caesar’s valor hath o’erthrown Antony” (IV.xv.15), along with the demeaning epithets that betray his feelings of superiority over him. Antony does, however, accuse Cleopatra of conquering him when he states, “You did know / How much you were my conqueror” (III.xi.65-6). He accompanies this revelation with a subtle change in tone, as he ceases referring to her with the familiar “thou,” “thy,” and “thine” (III.xi.51-2, 56-60), instead addressing her with the more formal “you” (III.xi.65).

Consciously or subconsciously, Antony, up until this point in this speech, seems to externalize all blame and project it upon Cleopatra, perhaps to exonerate himself of

responsibility for his fall. Yet in a striking shift in tone, Antony ceases castigating Cleopatra in favor of consoling her. “Fall not a tear...” he says, “one of them rates / All that is won and lost” (III.xi.69-70). The anastrophe, “fall not,” which introduces the reversal in tone and perspective, inverts both standard meter and syntax, hence reflecting the dramatic change in content. Antony’s use of thesis-antithesis to evoke “all that is won and lost” refers to his present realization that while he may have lost that which he “left behind” in Rome (III.xi.53), equally has he gained.

Following this astonishing reversal, Antony enters a state of metrical and rhetorical disorientation:

...Give me a kiss;

Even this repays me. – We sent our schoolmaster.

Is a come back? – Love, I am full of lead. –

Some wine, within there, and our viands! Fortune knows

We scorn her most when most she offers blows. (III.xii.70-4)

The disruption of iambic pentameter, along with the caesurae and rapid pivots in thought indicated by dashes, reflect a state of confusion during which Antony betrays much of the Egyptian half of his “well-divided disposition” (I.v.53), that half which was primarily concealed in his earlier diatribe against the Egypt and Cleopatra that brought him so much woe. Indeed, the trochaic metrical stress on the word “Love” in reference to Cleopatra, emphasizes Antony’s positive view of Egypt and its Queen, here, in contrast to his earlier disgust. Likewise, in the line that follows, the metrical stress on the words “wine” and “viands,” symbols of luxury, suggest that Antony’s regret has vanished, replaced by a desire to indulge in the sumptuousness of Egyptian life. Such unrestrained indulgence, in fact, is reminiscent of Antony’s speech in the

opening scene, as he denounces Rome and praises Epicurean pleasures: “Let Rome in Tiber melt and the wide arch / Of the ranged empire fall! There’s not a minute of our lives should stretch / Without some pleasure now. What sport tonight?” (I.i.33-4, 46-7).

Emerging decisively from this disoriented state, Antony concludes, “Fortune knows / We scorn her most when most she offers blows” (III.xi.73-4). The metrical and rhetorical perfection of the statement, as reflected in the unambiguous iambic pentameter, the anadiplosis of the word “most,” and the rhyme between “knows” and “blows,” the first and only couplet in Antony’s speech, offers a strong resolution to his preceding state of confusion: his personification of Fortune as responsible for the “blows” he suffered relieves Cleopatra of his former blame and attributes his ruin to fate instead. Antony, having reassumed his Egyptian disposition, can no longer cast blame upon Cleopatra as he had earlier. Tracing the progression of Antony’s thoughts from Roman to Egyptian, Antony’s speech, then, presents a microcosm of the fundamental dualities that motivate the action of the play. Antony, to whom these tensions are irreconcilable, may only find resolution in vindicating himself and his love from all moral judgments and asking not “whither hast thou led me, Egypt,” but rather “whither hast thou, Fortune, led.”

WORKS CITED

Shakespeare, William. *Antony and Cleopatra*. Ed. A. R. Braunmuller. New York: Penguin, 1999.
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