Mapping Antony and Cleopatra
Permanence and Mobility
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Editor's Foreword: "Here is my space"

Rosy Colombo

The seeds of the present issue of *Memoria di Shakespeare. A Journal of Shakespearean Studies* were sown in the course of the International IV Centennial Conference, "Shakespeare 2016. The Memory of Rome", a joint venture of Sapienza University of Rome, The University of Rome Tor Vergata, and Roma Tre University, which was held in April 2016. However, the spectrum of its contents and contributors has considerably changed in the meantime, including the choice to re-publish essays by Tony Tanner and Agostino Lombardo as classics of twentieth-century literary criticism on *Antony and Cleopatra*. This issue is dedicated to their memory, and to the memory of another friend of our journal, the late Alessandro Serpieri, for his passionate and innovative role in the field of Shakespearean studies.

The thematic part of this issue of *Memoria di Shakespeare. A Journal of Shakespearian Studies* addresses the memory of ancient Egypt as a dual site of permanence and change in the imagination of Imperial Rome as reworked in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*: here Egypt is viewed anamorphically, and not only perceived in terms of a love-hate relationship between the cultures of Western Europe and the East – in which Egypt, projected as "Other", is part and parcel of Roman history according to a tradition handed down to Renaissance

through Latin and Greek sources[1] – but also as a key player, with Hellenistic culture, in the foundational myth of the Empire itself. As a space of desire, Egypt is crucial in Antony's vision of a political and existential space without bounds – including gender-based and linguistic boundaries – nurtured in the glorious Alexandrian melting pot which extended from Greece to Africa to the Ancient Near East (but its shadow/ghost still abides, after the collapse at Actium battle, in Octavius Caesar's prediction of a "time of universal peace", IV.vi.4)[2] and in the aesthetic heritage originated from the silence of a monumental grave in Egypt:

> Take up her bed,
> And bear her women from the monument;
> She shall be buried by her Antony –
> No grave upon the earth shall clip in it
> A pair so famous. (V.ii.354-57)

The old adage "Graecia capta ferum victorem coepit" (explored in Robert Miola and Maria Valentini's contributions to the issue) could also be said to apply to Egypt, following Keir Elam's reflections on the passage of the Cleopatra myth across the Mediterranean – from Alexandria, to Rome, to London, providing further evidence for Fernand Braudel's statement that the Mediterranean can be defined as a 'movement-space', that is a place characterized not so much by being inhabited by men as by being traversed by History[3].

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1 Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book VIII, vv.675-731. On Virgil's relevance see David Quint, "Epic and Empire", *Comparative Literature*, 41:1 (Winter 1989), pp. 1-32. On Shakespeare's familiarity with Plutarch see *I drammi romani*, in *Nel laboratorio di Shakespeare. Dalle fonti ai drammi*, eds. Alessandro Serpieri, Keir Elam and Claudia Corti, vol. IV, Parma, Pratiche, 1988. On Shakespeare's deconstruction of Plutarch's *Life of Antony* cf., in the current issue, Rosy Colombo, *Cleopatra's 'Roman' Death*, pp. 73-86.

2 All quotations are from *Anthony and Cleopatra*, ed. Michael Neill, The Oxford Shakespeare, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994. On Cleopatra's monumental death see the seminal study by Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1997, rpt. 2005, pp. 305-27. On her metamorphosis into an aesthetic object see, in this issue, the essays by Keir Elam and Rosy Colombo.

3 Cf. Fernand Braudel, *Memorie del Mediterraneo*, Milano, Bompiani, 2004; original title: *Les Mémoires de la Méditerranée*, Paris, Editions de Fallois, 1998.

Nevertheless, if mobility is encoded in the map of Egyptian life and memory inscribed in the legend of Cleopatra, constitutive as it is of her "infinite variety" (II.ii.243)

> Whom everything becomes, to chide, to laugh,
> To weep – how every passion fully strives
> To make itself in thee fair and admired! (I.i.51-53)

from a strictly Egyptian point of view it does not contemplate departure. "Here is my space", says Antony, for whom parting is a duty but also a trauma, while Cleopatra's inclination – as Keir Elam notes – is to stay: she is always represented by Shakespeare as sitting, or lying, in bed, or even on a mattress. She is physically associated with objects that denote static or permanent architectonic structure – like her Mausoleum, in contrast to the Western ideological stigma of nomadism as a hallmark of her inconstant, gypsy-like attitude. Even on the Cydnus (on the move to greet Antony) she appears sitting on the barge, while her flight at Actium, the climax of her variety in assuming the role of Fortune, is a disgrace. It is however consistent with her refusal to part with Egypt – the land to die in, be buried in for eternity.

The drawing by David Hockney[4] on the cover of this issue provides a visual guide into the time/space symbolic map of *Antony and Cleopatra*, both with regard to the text and to its reception history, as it seems to recall Shakespeare's tracing of the different civilizations in which Egypt plays a significant role, due to its contamination with a number of traditions: Graeco-Roman, Judeo-Christian, and African (the latter relating to the heritage of the Pharaohs' tradition and surviving in the dark colour of Cleopatra's skin).

At a first reading, the picture is undoubtedly an ironical interpretation of a conventional Egyptian landscape appealing to the contemporary mass tourist imagination, showing the prospect of a drive across the desert in an open car to experience an Oriental past which is identified with the perfect triangular shape of the pyramids: a true icon of the contemporary travel industry. At a closer

[4] On a (pretty rare) triangular coordinate graph paper supplied by the Keuffel and Esser Co, nn. 358-32.

inspection, however, the image appears to be a representation of totality: the car and the cloud communicate a sense of mobility, therefore of time – in the sense of its passing, with a certain speed, but also of the vanity of earthly things, which are all destined to pass. Time here is not in conflict with the stable proportions of the triangle (and, by metonymy, of the pyramid), and with the eternal cycle of natural life, signified by the evergreen palm, which also suggests the presence of water (perhaps the Nile?) nearby. *Sein und Zeit*, being and becoming, coexist in a physical space in which traces of a mythical Egypt are inscribed onto a geometrical pattern, on triangular coordinate graph paper: "here is my space". A space which, for Antony, is both political and existential, a chance at being re-born as well as achieving a heroic self-representation; it is of course above all an aesthetic space for a contemporary artist such as David Hockney, inspired by ancient and modern symbols of time.

A similar movement pervades the map of the critical appreciations of *Antony and Cleopatra* here presented: critical revision of what has at times appeared as a firm identity of Rome through time within the boundaries of *Romanitas* is interwoven with an interest in the cultural mobility of the play – and with the memory of Shakespeare's Egypt in his early modern deconstruction of Virgil and Plutarch's Roman history at the eve of the Empire, fashioned as a conflict between a civilized West and a barbarian East which was in fact a civil war within the orbit of Roman power; displaced, moreover, into a tragic love story for the sake of Augustan propaganda, according to Virgil's epic, which was ideologically committed to the hegemony of the Roman Empire. Such mobility leads to different places and times: back to Greece (in Robert Miola's essay) and forward to Verona (as in Ramie Targoff's); in flux from Alexandria to Rome and London (Keir Elam), across Virgil's Carthage (Rosy Colombo) and early modern reinventions of the heroes of classical mythology (Maria Valentini). Time stretches before and after in the absolute present of the theatre (Agostino Lombardo). Indeed, it is within the play itself that temporality is orchestrated according to a triple scheme, as Keir Elam argues when commenting on Cleopatra's self-performing prophecy about her greatness being "boyed" in Rome, a scene actually recreated by an adolescent actor on the stage of the London

Globe theatre: "a speech which projects into the future an event that actually took place in the distant historical past and is now being theatrically recreated in the present"[5]. Shakespeare's Roman representation of Egypt as Other is an intrinsic part of the play's memory of Rome; like Cleopatra, it is a seductive image of power and fertility; both doomed to become icons of the Roman Imperial power, with death acting as the agent of their metamorphosis into aesthetic objects, fit for consumption.

The palm at the fore in Hockney's painting has more than one meaning. A standard ingredient in any travel advertisement, it also features as a traditional symbol of festivity and victory. Yet with reference to the epochal war of Mediterranean history, in which categories such as boundaries and excess were at stake (Tony Tanner), the symbol is in itself ambivalent: the aristocratic codes of the Republican forefathers celebrated by Octavius and Antony's fantasies of an Oriental Rome "stirred by Cleopatra" (I.i.45)

> could not stall together
> In the whole world. (V.i.39-40)

On the other hand, the palm which may point to Octavius' military and political victory of 31 BC at Actium (leading to the supremacy of the West in the Mediterranean) may also suggest the symbolic triumph of the Egyptian queen through her monumental death – in fact a challenge of contemporary art to the traditional, classical and Christian, centrality of the logos. In Hockney's picture the symbols of temporality – tomb, cloud, car, palm – coalesce to constitute a map of totality. This is why it is offered on the cover of this issue as a sort of prologue to Shakespeare's treatment of space in Antony and Cleopatra, an explicitly manneristic challenge to the neoclassical, linear perspective of the early Renaissance, which placed the origins of meaning in the authority of one point of view, a fixed one, projected towards infinite space[6].

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[5] As Keir Elam observes on p. 52, Cleopatra imagines herself being represented in Rome as a gipsy in all its senses, namely as an Egyptian puppet, "I'th'posture of a whore" (V.ii.221): the well-known irony of this passage is that as she speaks she is already being represented in early modern London.

[6] Richard Wilson, "'Your crown's awry': The Visual Turn in *Antony and Cleopatra*", in *Free Will: Art and Power on Shakespeare's Stage*, Manchester, Manchester

Such a challenge is launched from the very start of the play, in fact a programmatic exposition of Shakespeare's strategy of representation – and composition – that displaces the geometric perspective of mimetic illusion into an oblique, inclined perception of the scene brought about by anamorphosis. In the first act, two Roman soldiers, Demetrio and Philo, perform a kind of theatre that is based on empirical seeing ("behold and see", I.i.13), which subsequently shifts towards a theatre of knowing, inaugurated by Cleopatra's question about the essence of love in terms of a provocative distance from the Roman syntax of measure, both in terms of quantity ("how much", I.i.14) and limit, within the categories of space and time ("I'll set a bourne how far to be beloved", I.i.16) . A poor perspective, inadequate as far as knowledge is concerned ("There's beggary in the love that can be reckoned", I.i.15), as Antony radically shows when he argues in favour of the primacy of the body ("The nobleness of life / Is to do thus [*embracing Cleopatra*]", I.i.39) and of the pleasures of the imagination ("Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth", I.i.17). Such a challenge includes language: language involving the invention of words (see Tony Tanner's inspiring comments on Plutarch's reference to the lovers' manipulation of Greek, their basic language of communication); but also language fashioned to become a device of defamiliarization, a rhetorical resource used both by Enobarbus, who applies it to his oblique approach to truth, and by Antony, for example when he stimulates the Romans' naive curiosity about Egypt:

> LEPIDUS
> What manner o'thing is your crocodile?
>
> ANTONY
> It is shaped, sir, like itself, and it is as broad as it hath breadth. It is just so high as it is, and moves with its own organs. It lives by that which nourisheth it, and the elements once out of it, it transmigrates.

University Press, 2013. For a useful analysis of anamorphosis in this play, applied to Cleopatra's visual perspective ("Let him forever go – let him not, Charmian! / Though he be painted one way like a Gorgon, / The other way's a Mars", II.v.116-18), see Virginia Mason Vaughan, Antony and Cleopatra*: Language and Writing*, London, The Arden Shakespeare, 2016, particularly the pages on "Shakespeare's Perspective Art", pp. 1-3.

LEPIDUS
What colour is it of?

ANTONY
Of its own colour too.

LEPIDUS
'Tis a strange serpent.

ANTONY
'Tis so, and the tears of it are wet. (II.vii.40-48)

Above all, the use of ironical language is a characteristic weapon of Cleopatra's intelligence, until the very end, as shown by her playful dialogue with the clown about the natural disposition of the serpent:

CLOWN
Give it nothing I pray you, for it is not worth the feeding.

CLEOPATRA
Will it eat me? (V.ii.268-70)

Along with the language of the body, the very act of uttering words is seen by the lovers as a vital space of agency to be conquered:

ANTONY
I am dying, Egypt, dying.
Give me some wine, and let me speak a little.

CLEOPATRA
No, let me speak […].

ANTONY
One word, sweet queen […]. (IV.xvi.43-47)

Of course, as Tony Tanner points out, Antony and Cleopatra do not want to be understood 'literally' – they do not work, or play, or love, or live, by the 'letter'. It is precisely the 'letter', and all fixed

alphabetical restrictions, that they wish to dissolve, using language as a mobile instrument, shifting from hyperbole to irony. Excess belongs mainly to Antony ("we stand up peerless", I.i.42), but it is taken over by Cleopatra to make up for his loss, in her imaginative recreation of his heroic status. Once "withered is the garland of the war" (IV.xvi.66), after "the odds is gone" (IV.xvi.68), she reaches a climax of excess in a visionary sublime vein, telling her dream of "an Emperor Antony", extolled as a mythical divinity:

> I dreamt there was an Emperor Antony –
> […]
> His face was as the heavens, and therein stuck
> A sun and moon […]
> His legs bestrid the Ocean; his reared arm
> Crested the world […]
> For his bounty,
> There was no winter in't – an autumn 'twas
> That grew the more by reaping. (V.ii.76-88)

As Nadia Fusini argues: "It is with words […] that Cleopatra transports Antony from the position of a hero to the condition/status of a god. […] Against Octavius' masculine realism, the history of the Empire, the story of a great protagonist of the greatness of Rome, is rewritten from the point of view of a woman's desire"[7].

As the essays here presented collectively show, it is another Egypt[8], a space between history and myth – suspended between different perspectives of representation – that provides Shakespeare with an occasion to radically question the foundations of temporality and beauty.

This issue, like the preceding one (3/2016), also features a Miscellany section, which collects essays of current interest and broader research on Shakespearean and early modern topics. We are happy to be able to publish here contributions by Paul A. Kottman on Othello *and Giuliano Pascucci on* The Tempest.

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[7] Nadia Fusini, *Il sogno di Cleopatra*, in *Donne fatali. Ofelia, Desdemona, Cleopatra*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2005, p. 76, my translation.

[8] Emanuele M. Ciampini, *Cercando un altro Egitto. Sopravvivenza di un'antica civiltà nella cultura europea*, Milano, Unicopli, 2013.