

Love and Death in Egypt and Rome

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In the National Etruscan Museum of Villa Giulia in Rome lies one of the most evocative ancient sarcophagi, known as the 'Bride and Bridegroom' of Cerveteri. The sculptures, which date to the second half of the sixth century B.C.E., startle us in their vivacity: the husband and wife seem more likely to rise and cross the gallery than to remain frozen in time for all eternity. The tomb startles us as well in its suggestion of marital intimacy: here are a husband and wife so comfortable in their proximity, so relaxed in their posture, that they seem to exude an erotic contentedness, as if they needed no other afterlife besides the warmth of their shared terracotta bed.

The 'Bride and Bridegroom' from Cerveteri is one of the most compelling of all Etruscan sarcophagi, but it is by no means an unusual example¹. Etruscan couples were regularly buried together and were also regularly depicted in effigies on the lids of their sarcophagus. How the Etruscans understood this joint burial, and what it tells us about their expectations for the afterlife, remains a

¹ There is a nearly identical tomb, also from Cerveteri and dated to the sixth century B.C.E., in the Louvre Museum in Paris, known as 'The Sarcophagus of the Spouses'.

matter of speculation². Did they envision a shared fate for their souls as well as their bodies? Where did they think the afterlife would transpire – at the site of their graves in the necropolis, or in a special land of the dead? Did they hope that the joint effigies on their tombs would influence their chances of a future together, or did they intend the sculptures merely as a form of commemoration?³

There are no clear answers to these questions for the Etruscans, nor does Shakespeare concern himself directly with Etruscan burials in his plays. But there are two occasions when he thinks about couples' shared posthumous fates, and in both cases, he turns to Italy and its past. Indeed, Shakespeare never imagines the joint burial of a couple in his native England – burial in England seems on the whole to be a solitary and lonely affair, perhaps best captured by the melancholic lines addressed to his male lover in Sonnet 71:

No longer mourn for me when I am dead
 Then you shall hear the surly sullen bell
 Give warning to the world that I am fled
 From this vile world, with vilest worms to dwell.⁴

These lines resonate powerfully with Andrew Marvell's account of what happens to English lovers once their opportunities for mortal love have passed. "Thy beauty shall no more be found", Marvell warns his coy mistress:

Thy beauty shall no more be found;
 Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
 My echoing song: then worms shall try
 That long-preserved virginity:
 And your quaint honour turn to dust;

² On Etruscan burial, see J. M. C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.

³ This opening discussion of Etruscan tombs is slightly altered from its appearance in *Posthumous Love: Eros and the Afterlife in Renaissance England*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2018, pp. 1-2.

⁴ William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Stephen Booth, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1977.

And into ashes all my lust.
 The grave's a fine and private place,
 But none I think do there embrace.⁵

Dusty, wormy, solitary graves – this is what it means to die in England.

In this essay I want to discuss, however, not Shakespeare's representation of love after death in England, but about his idea of posthumous love in Italy, in both its ancient and early modern manifestations. It is no coincidence, I would argue, that when the playwright wants to think about an afterlife for love, he shifts his imagination to Catholic Italy, and to pagan Rome and Egypt – we never hear, for example, about the Macbeths' fantasies for a shared afterlife, nor does Lear describe his longings to join the deceased mother of his daughters. But in both *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare expresses a range of possibilities for what might lie for the lovers on the other side of this world. Although the plays were written in the opposite order I want to begin with the Roman, or in this respect more accurately Egyptian play, in which Shakespeare embraces the possibility of a meaningful afterlife for love, before turning to the Italian play, in which any idea of a future for the lovers after death meets with serious resistance. Despite the sources for the plays, which suggest something very different, the idea of immortal love corresponds only to the Roman-Egyptian pair, and not to the Veronese.

In his magisterial survey of funerary sculpture from the ancient world through the Renaissance, Erwin Panofsky identifies two dominant traditions for thinking about burial and the afterlife. On the one hand, there was the "prospective" tradition epitomized by the burials of the ancient Egyptians. These were tombs whose reliefs and sculptures focused on the future of the dead with no eye toward the past. Such prospective tombs not only looked forward to the posthumous future: they also attempted to shape that future, to perform, through their representations of the deceased and the

⁵ Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress", in *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Nigel Smith, London, Pearson Longman, 2003, ll. 25-32.

deceased's possessions, what Panofsky describes as a type of "magic manipulation"⁶.

Panofsky contrasts the "prospective" with the "retrospective" tradition, whose origins he locates in ancient Greece, where the tomb served as a monument, a record of the earthly fame of the deceased. The ancient Roman tombs largely followed the tradition of their Greek predecessors, whereby surviving family members offered loving care to funerary monuments in order to preserve the dead's earthly fame and memory⁷. In Greek and Roman attitudes towards the dead, the emphasis fell on commemoration, rather than on anticipation.

In *Antony and Cleopatra* Shakespeare seems to grasp the distinction between Roman and Egyptian attitudes towards death and the afterlife, and part of Antony's transformation in his play from a Roman to an Egyptian involves his embrace of a prospective, rather than retrospective account of his future with Cleopatra. Upon hearing of Cleopatra's supposed death, Antony announces his plans to meet her anew in the afterlife:

Unarm, Eros. The long day's task is done,
And we must sleep.
[...]
I will o'ertake thee, Cleopatra, and
Weep for my pardon. So it must be, for now
All length is torture. Since the torch is out,
Lie down, and stray no farther.
[...]
Eros! – I come, my queen. – Eros! – Stay for me.
Where souls do couch on flowers we'll hand in hand,

⁶ Erwin Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture: Four Lectures on Its Changing Aspects from Ancient Egypt to Bernini*, ed. H. W. Janson, New York, H. N. Abrams, 1964, p. 16.

⁷ To a greater degree than Panofsky acknowledges, Roman tombs also include prospective features: sarcophagi figuring Elysian banquets and celebrations are relatively common, for example, as are images of gods or cosmic figures connected with one's posthumous life. Consider, for example, the twin mausoleums in the Vatican cemetery with a vivid wall painting of Lucifer and Hesperus, whose depiction was associated with the idea of rebirth after death; or the regular appearance of souls carried to safety in the next world on the backs of dolphins. For further discussion of this, see Jocelyn Toynbee and John Ward Perkins, *The Shrine of St Peter and the Vatican Excavations*, London-New York, Longmans, Green, 1956, p. 79.

And with our sprightly port make the ghosts gaze.
 Dido and her Aeneas shall want troops,
 And all the haunt be ours.
 (IV.xv.35-36, 44-47, 50-54)⁸

This anticipation of being “where souls do couch on flowers” is a reference to the Elysian fields, and the further invocation of Dido and Aeneas conjures up more specifically the *lugentes campi*, or fields of mourning, where the victims of love forever dwell. As Virgil relates in book 6 of the *Aeneid*,

And here, concealed by secret paths, are those
 whom bitter love consumed with brutal waste;
 a myrtle grove encloses them, their pains
 remain with them in death. (6.583-86)⁹

Antony’s allusion to Dido and Aeneas reflects a poignant revision of the circumstances Virgil describes. As readers of the *Aeneid* knew well, Dido is not reunited with Aeneas when they meet each other again during his visit to the underworld and refuses even to answer Aeneas when he finds her walking “with her wound still fresh” (6.594). Antony’s invocation, then, of the only other classical (and similarly imperial) lovers who might rival Cleopatra and himself in fame – the (soon to be Roman) Aeneas and his African queen, Dido – involves a hopeful rewriting of that poem. In his imagining, Dido’s sorrows would be undone by her joyful meeting with the lover who provoked her suicide, rather than assuaged, as Virgil has it, by her former husband, Sychaeus, who “answers her sorrows, gives her love for love” (6.623). Antony has made the tragic scene in the underworld into a moment of public triumph, where the lovers will be forever on display as they were in the streets of Alexandria.

Cleopatra, for her part, fully reciprocates Antony’s wish for an afterlife together, or rather, she possesses the exact same wish herself. It is important that they never discuss their hopes for a

⁸ William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt, New York, W. W. Norton, 2016 (third edition). All references to Shakespeare’s plays are from this edition.

⁹ Virgil, *The Aeneid of Virgil*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1981.

posthumous life together, but that each of them expresses the same desire independently. In other words, the promise to meet in the afterlife is not made to convey the depth of love to the other; it is not part of the love test that Cleopatra sets out in her very first utterance, “If it be love indeed, tell me how much” (I.i.14), but instead reflects what both of them privately desire. This is an interesting departure on Shakespeare’s part from Plutarch’s text, in which only Antony hopes for a posthumous reunion. After the report of Cleopatra’s death, he berates himself for further delay in dispatching with his own life: “Why dost thou longer delay, Antony? Fortune has taken away thy sole remaining excuse for clinging to life”¹⁰. Then, Plutarch relates, Antony “went into his chamber. Here, as he unfastened his breastplate and laid it aside, he said, ‘O Cleopatra, I am not grieved to be bereft of thee, for I shall straightway join thee’”.

Plutarch’s Cleopatra makes no comparable declaration – in fact she anticipates something quite to the contrary:

For though in life nothing could part us from each other, in death we are likely to change places; thou, the Roman, lying buried here, while I, the hapless woman, lie in Italy, and get only so much of thy country as my portion.

Cleopatra’s regret that Antony is likely to be buried in Egypt while she will be buried in Italy, and her desire to “embrac[e] the urn which held [Antony’s] ashes”, shows her to be firmly in what Panofsky would consider the Roman camp: she is concerned only with the mortal remains of her lover, and not with the possibility of a shared, posthumous fate.

In Shakespeare’s hands, Cleopatra is not concerned with Antony’s burial, and indeed claims to have no interest in anything the mortal realm might offer:

Shall I abide

In this dull world, which in thy absence is
No better than a sty? O see, my women,
The crown o’th’ earth doth melt. My lord!

¹⁰ All quotations from the *Life of Antony* refer to Plutarch, *Life of Antony*, ed. C. B. R. Pelling, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

O, withered is the garland of the war.
 The soldier's pole is fall'n. Young boys and girls
 Are level now with men. The odds is gone,
 And there is nothing left remarkable
 Beneath the visiting moon. (IV.xvi.62-70)

As she herself prepares for her own death, she utters first, "I am again for Cydnus / To meet Mark Antony" (V.ii.224-25), reminding us of the location of their first encounter as if Cydnus were itself magically transposed to the afterlife, and then initiates what she hopes will be her complete transformation from matter to spirit:

Give me my robe. Put on my crown. I have
 Immortal longings in me. Now no more
 The juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip.
 Yare, yare, good Iras, quick – methinks I hear
 Antony call. I see him rouse himself
 To praise my noble act; I hear him mock
 The luck of Caesar, which the gods give men
 To excuse their after wrath. Husband, I come!
 Now to that name my courage prove my title.
 I am fire and air; my other elements
 I give to baser life. (V.ii.271-81)

"I have immortal longings in me", "Husband, I come": these are sentiments that Shakespeare found, surprisingly, not in his sources for *Antony and Cleopatra*, but instead – more or less verbatim – in his sources for *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare reserves for his Egyptian Queen the aspirations that he denies his Italian heroine.

The Italian story of Romeo and Giulietta has in all of its versions what Panofsky would term a "prospective" attitude toward the afterlife: it softens the tragic consequences of the young lovers' deaths by granting them a heavenly future together. In the primary source for the tale, Matteo Bandello's mid-sixteenth century novella, Romeo berates himself for not taking his own life immediately upon hearing of Giulietta's death, and imagines that her spirit is already in heaven, growing impatient with his delay: "Marry, she goeth yonder wandering and waiteth for thee to follow

her"¹¹. Giulietta's final words similarly address the imminent reunion of her soul with that of her husband:

Do I not feel that thy spirit goeth wandering hereabout and already
marvelleth, nay, complaineth, that I tarry so long? Seignior mine, I
see thee, I feel thee, I know thee and I know that thou awaitest no
other than my coming.¹²

Similar dialogue characterizes all of the subsequent versions of the story, even in its loosest adaptations. In Luigi Groto's 1578 play, *La Hadriana*, for example, the last words of the Juliet figure (Hadriana) are: "Wait for me, husband, I follow you"¹³.

What Shakespeare creates between Romeo and Juliet, by contrast, is a distinctly mortal conception of love, governed by two central premises. First, that love is fleeting, brief, and restricted to this world; and second, that this temporal restriction intensifies and renders more precious the nature of erotic experience.

Upon learning of each other's deaths, Shakespeare's lovers respond with no hope whatever for a heavenly life together. Romeo's immediate concern is with entering – and remaining within – the Capulet tomb. When he arrives at the monument, he addresses it as a devouring rival that stands in his way:

Thou detestable maw, thou womb of death,
Gorged with the dearest morsel of the earth,
Thus I enforce thy rotten jaws to open,
And in despite I'll cram thee with more food. (V.iii.45-48)

Like Mercutio's description earlier in the play of his flesh as "worms' meat" (III.i.102), Romeo envisions the Capulet's corpses as food, differentiating Juliet's from the others not in kind, but only in degree: she is the "dearest morsel" (V.iii.46), but substantially no different from the rest. There is no mention of a soul that has

¹¹ Matteo Bandello, *The Novels of Matteo Bandello, Bishop of Agen, now first done into English prose and verse by John Payne*, London, Villon Society, 1890, vol. III, p. 156.

¹² Bandello, p. 166.

¹³ "Aspettatemi, Sposo, ch'io vi seguo", Luigi Groto, *La Hadriana*, Act V, scene vii, my translation.

recently departed and whom he wishes to join; his only concern is with protecting her corpse.

When Romeo declares his intention to lie beside Juliet, he does so in the context of preventing Death from having Juliet's flesh all to himself. The perceived threat of Death as a necrophiliac preying on his bride is what propels him forward, and prompts his decision never to "depart again":

Here, here will I remain
 With worms that are thy chambermaids. O, here
 Will I set up my everlasting rest,
 And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
 From this world-wearied flesh. Eyes, look your last.
 Arms, take your last embrace, and lips, O you
 The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss
 A dateless bargain to engrossing death. (V.iii.108-15)

Romeo invokes the terms of a Christian afterlife – he asks for "everlasting rest" (V.iii.110) or "*requiem eternam*", the formula used on countless epitaphs over many centuries to describe the repose of the blessed dead. But he immediately qualifies this request, indicating that he means nothing more than the "everlasting rest" the vermiculated earth will provide, not a rest that will lead to heavenly bliss¹⁴.

Romeo does not, moreover, turn to God, nor does he mention his soul's imminent liberation from his flesh, as he does in what is believed to be Shakespeare's immediate source for the play, Arthur Brooke's 1562 English poem, *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*, which was itself based upon a French version of the Italian story written by Pierre Boiastuau. Upon discovering the seemingly dead Juliet, Brooke's Romeus first instinct is to pray to Christ for forgiveness:

Lord Christ,
 Take pity on my sinnefull and my poore afflicted mynde.
 For well enough I know, this body is but clay,

¹⁴ The phrase "*cuius anima requiescat in pace*" surfaces repeatedly in John Weever, *Ancient Funerall Monuments*, London, 1631.

Nought but a masse of sinne, to frayle, and subject to decay.¹⁵

Shakespeare's *Romeo*, by contrast, emphasizes only his material, corporeal fate: he repeats three times in the space of two lines that he will remain "here".

When Juliet awakens to find Romeo dead beside her, she likewise makes no mention of their posthumous heavenly prospects. Gone are the words given to her by Brooke, whose Juliet petitions: "That so our parted sprites, from light that we see here / In place of endlesse light and blisse, may ever live yfere" (ll. 2787-88). The compromised pleasures of earth are replaced with "endlesse light and blisse"; the separations that the lovers have endured are erased by an eternity of life "yfere", an archaic English word for "together".

In Shakespeare's hands, there is no prospect of a heavenly reunion, nor is there any mention of the possibility that the couple might enjoy each other's company in the tomb. Juliet, it would seem, lacks even Romeo's desire to lie together as corpses. Instead, she concerns herself exclusively with bringing her life to a quick end before the Friar might take her away; she longs for death itself, and not what might follow upon it. Shakespeare's Juliet dies with an apostrophe not to the heavens above, nor to the husband lying in her bosom, but only to the knife that she thrusts into her breast: "O happy dagger / This is thy sheath. There rust, and let me die" (V.iii.168-69).

It is not only the tragic lovers, but also their families, who regard the afterlife in a strictly materialist, and commemorative vein. The funerary statues that Romeo and Juliet's fathers propose to erect are described not in terms of a new burial ground, but as a separate monument. "I will raise her statue in pure gold", boasts Montague:

That whiles Verona by that name is known
There shall no figure at such rate be set
As that of true and faithful Juliet. (V.iii.299-302)

to which Capulet, not to be undone, replies "As rich shall Romeo's by his lady's lie / Poor sacrifices of our enmity" (V.iii.303-4). The

¹⁵ Arthur Brooke, *Romeus and Juliet*, London, 1562, ll. 2674-80.

statues are in effect a form of cenotaph: literally an empty (*kenos*) tomb (*taphos*) that commemorates the bodies in their absence. There is no relationship established between the sculptures honoring their love and the lovers' physical remains. Nor is there any sense of what Panofsky calls "magical manipulation", so powerfully conveyed in the 'Bride and Bridegroom' of Cerveteri: namely, that somehow the fact of the monument itself will help to shape a more satisfying future for the couple. The monument for Romeo and Juliet is pure civic architecture, with no ambition beyond Verona.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare discovered that by stripping any possibility of an afterlife for love he could achieve a much greater tragic effect than any of the earlier stories. This is not to say that Shakespeare was by any means the first poet to deny lovers an afterlife for love, but rather that the idea of setting erotic limits, of making love belong exclusively to this world, and none other, did not belong to the Renaissance tradition he had inherited, but was instead a gesture back to an earlier, pre-Christian model. For the origins of that model, we need to return to the ancient Roman elegists, to Catullus and Ovid and Horace. Here is Horace's Eleventh Ode, which first introduced the phrase, *carpe diem*:

Don't you ask, Leuconoe – the gods do not wish it to be known –
 what end they have given to me or to you, and don't meddle with
 Babylonian calculations. How much better to accept whatever comes,
 whether Jupiter gives us other winters or whether this is our last
 now wearying the Tyrrhenian Sea on the pumice stones
 opposing it. Be wise, strain the wine and cut back long hope
 into a small space. While we speak, envious time will have
 flown past. Harvest the day and leave as little as possible for
 tomorrow.¹⁶

And here is Shakespeare's Romeo:

Amen, amen! but come what sorrow can,
 It cannot countervail the exchange of joy
 That one short minute gives me in her sight:
 Do thou but close our hands with holy words

¹⁶ David West, *Horace Odes I: Carpe Diem*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995.

Then love-devouring death do what he dare;
It is enough I may but call her mine. (II.v.3-8)

What Shakespeare gives us in *Romeo and Juliet* is a couple who does not meddle with Babylonian calculations, who accepts whatever comes, and who resists any standard consolation available for lovers confronting their deaths. *Romeo and Juliet* becomes, in the end, Shakespeare's greatest Roman play.