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The Place of the Gods: Biblical, Tragic, and Humanist Modes in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*

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RÉSUMÉ

Ce mémoire se focalise sur la pièce Antony and Cleopatra de Shakespeare en relation avec la pensée biblique, l'humanisme de la Renaissance et les caractéristiques de la tragédie comme genre littéraire et philosophie grecque. La chute d'Adam et Eve dans la Bible, ainsi que le conflit entre le héros tragique et les dieux, sont deux thèmes qui sont au centre de ce mémoire. Le mythe de la chute d'Adam et Eve sert, en effet, d'un modèle de la chute—et par conséquent, de la tragédie—d'Antoine et Cléopâtre mais aussi de structure pour ce mémoire. Si le premier chapitre parle de paradis, le deuxième évoque le péché originel. Le troisième, quant à lui, aborde une contre-rédemption. Le premier chapitre réfère à l'idée du paradis, ou l'Éden dans la bible, afin d'examiner ce qui est édénique dans Antony and Cleopatra. La fertilité, l'épicuréisme, l'excès dionysien sont tous des éléments qui sont présents dans la conception d'un Éden biblique et Shakespearien. Le deuxième chapitre est une étude sur la tragédie comme genre fondamentalement lié à la pensée religieuse et philosophique des grecs, une pensée qui anime aussi Antony and Cleopatra. Ce chapitre montre, en effet, que les deux protagonistes Shakespeariens, comme les héros tragiques grecs, défient les dieux et le destin, engendrant ainsi leur tragédie (ou 'chute', pour continuer avec le mythe d'Adam et Eve). Si le deuxième chapitre cherche à créer des ponts entre la tragédie grecque et la tragédie Shakespearienne, le troisième chapitre montre que le dénouement dans Antony and Cleopatra est bien différent des dénouements dans les tragédies de Sophocle, Euripide, et Eschyle. Examinant la pensée de la Renaissance, surtout la notion d'humanisme, la partie finale du mémoire présente les protagonistes de Shakespeare comme des éternels rebelles, des humanistes déterminés à défier les forces du destin.

Mots-clés : Shakespeare, tragédie, humanisme de la Renaissance, religion grecque, éden

ABSTRACT

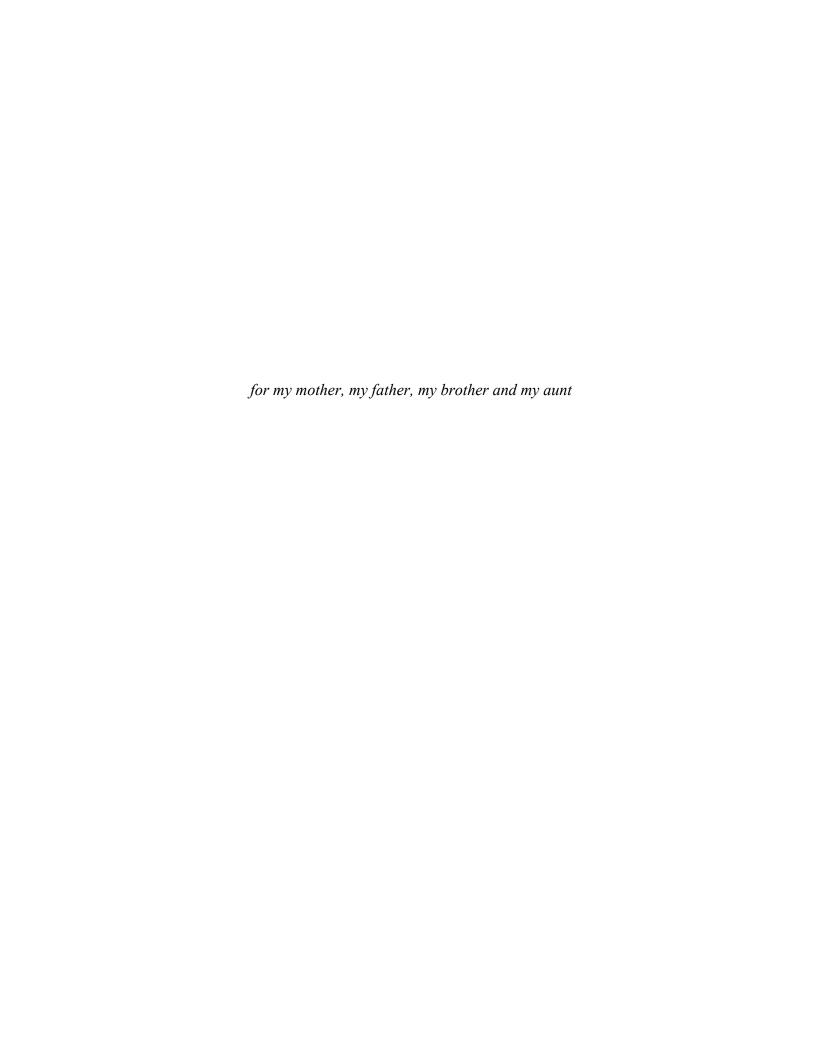
This thesis focuses on Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra in relation to biblical thought, Renaissance humanism, and tragedy as a literary genre and Greek philosophy. The fall of Adam and Eve as well as the conflict between the tragic hero and the gods are two themes that are at the center of this work. The myth of the fall of Adam and Eve functions as a model for the fall—and thus the tragedy—of Antony and Cleopatra and is also the very structure of this study. If the first chapter talks about heaven, the second evokes the original sin. The third chapter investigates a 'counter-redemption'. The first chapter refers to the idea of heaven, or Eden in the Bible, in order to examine the idea of Eden in Antony and Cleopatra. Fertility, Epicureanism, and Dionysian excess are all elements that are present in the conception of a biblical and a Shakespearean Eden. The second chapter is a study of tragedy as a genre fundamentally related to ancient Greek religious thought and philosophy—which is also the case in *Antony and Cleopatra*. This chapter demonstrates that the two Shakespearean protagonists are indeed similar to Greek tragic heroes, constantly defying gods and fate, thus, engendering their own tragedy (or 'fall', to continue with the myth of Adam and Eve). If the second chapter seeks to bridge Greek tragedy and Shakespearean drama, the third, however, shows that the ending in *Antony and Cleopatra* is different from the endings in plays by Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus. Analyzing the philosophy of the Renaissance, especially the notion of humanism, the final chapter of this work introduces Shakespeare's protagonists as eternal rebels, humanists who are determined to defy the forces of fortune.

Key-words: Shakespeare, tragedy, Renaissance humanism, Greek religion, Eden

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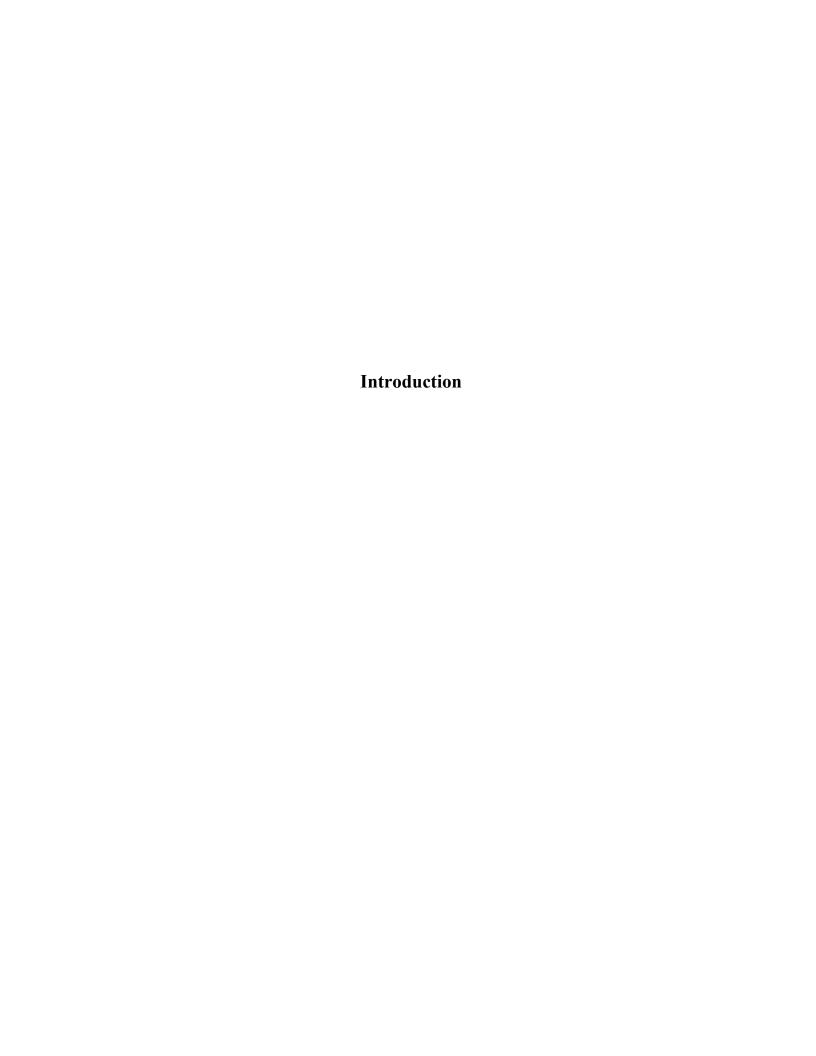


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The tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra is rooted in the tragedy of mankind. The Renaissance play resonates as a lingering echo of the Christian myth of the fall recounting how distinguished characters move from glory to shame. Like Adam and Eve, Antony and Cleopatra are human beings but they covet a knowledge that is divine; assuming godlike qualities, they long to be immortal. This human desire to play god is a governing trope in many tragedies whether Greek, biblical, or Elizabethan. Interestingly, Cleopatra, Eve, Adam, Antony, Oedipus, and others are different masks for a single human face—a face that sinfully (by Christian standards)—and tragically (by dramatic ones)—assumes divine features. This desire blinds the protagonists to matters of fate, fortune, and ominous prophesies. In the image of Creon who fatally silences Antigone, and Oedipus who humiliates Teiresias, Cleopatra dares taunting the messenger who is a version of the Greek Teiresias, and thus can be considered an agent of the gods. Antony, on the other hand, gravely orders him "Speak this no more!" (II.iii.24). Accordingly, it is this hubristic desire to silence the agent of the gods and become gods themselves that plague the tragic heroes.

My work aims at exploring the intersections between Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Greek drama, and the myth of the fall. At the crossroads lies a common theme: that is, the humanist belief that human beings can be godlike. The first chapter in my work aims at exploring the imagery of luxury, serenity, and extravagant joy that permeates *Antony and Cleopatra*. It shows that this imagery has its roots in the Christian imaginings of an Eden-like existence. Drawing parallels between procreative Egypt and the verdant Garden of Eden, I explore the elements in the play which frame an imagery of Egypt that invokes the

Christian paradise. I also evoke philosophical and mythological figures, namely Epicures and Dionysus, to study the celebratory mood conveyed through scenes of feasting, festivities, and environmental fertility. This 'Dionysiac pulse' that animates the play further conveys the immaculate, paradisical, and hedonistic existence that the two protagonists lead in Egypt. Such an existence, because it is carefree and solemn, appears to be Edenic, thus, blurring boundaries between Egypt and Eden. Egypt is often pictured as the locus of immoderate opulence, heavenly delights, and a vast medley of Dionysian celebrations that overflow all measures and overload any scale. It is true that pleasures in Egypt are of a sinful nature especially with spectacles of debauched carnal love and drunkenness but one should remember that pre-fall Eden is depicted in the Bible as a garden of luxury and delights (Isaiah 51:3;Genesis 2:8-16). The only difference that should be noted is that unlike in Eden, Egypt in *Antony and Cleopatra* does not involve any worship of any particular god. Antony and Cleopatra could easily be said to be worshipping themselves or each other.

To expose these intersections between *Antony and Cleopatra* and Greek drama and myths about Epicurean/Dionysian pleasures, I rely on close reading of passages from Shakespeare's text. Interestingly, I demonstrate that the language of the play is the very embodiment of what Michael Long calls "life's most creating and fructifying forces" (221). As Long asserts:

Antony and Cleopatra provides this apprehension of the lyrical with fulsome and voluptuous richness, its language impregnated with the festivity of the Dionysiac, its embodiment of life's most creative and fructifying forces being incomparably sure, sweeping and exuberant. It is an expansively lyrical play in which the romanticism of Shakespeare's metaphysic revels in its own life. (221)

In his edition of *Antony and Cleopatra*, David Bevington talks of "worldly magnificence" as enriched by themes of physical and sensuous Egyptian life, conveyed through images of "lascivious wassails", of songs to Bacchus, and of the sun's ability to breed life from the "dungy earth" of the Nile (33). Even the wise character Enobarbus, infected with Egyptian gluttony, vividly urges the servants to "[b]ring in the banquet quickly; wine enough/ Cleopatra's health to drink!" (I.ii.10-1). All the festive mood and immersion into carefree hedonism sheds light on how stable and serene the protagonists' life seemed to be before the tragic pathos is set in motion.

In the second chapter, I argue that Antony and Cleopatra's tragedy is the outcome of a fault that strangely resembles Adam and Eve's sin against the Christian God. Like the couple in the Bible, Antony and Cleopatra are "guilty of presumption against the gods, and [are] punished for it" (Bowrain Kitto, 119). In the Edenic setting of Egypt, the couple presumed that they could become divine. The Roman soldier and the Egyptian queen are even bestowed with superhuman qualities: Antony is a grand and glorious godlike hero, while Cleopatra emanates as a divine figure of Greek mythology. Cleopatra often stages her appearances with an exorbitant theatricality and spectacular mise-en-scène that invoke miracles and mythologies. Every vantage point presents her as possessing what Cedric Watts calls a "sense of transcendent excess" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, Intro, 12): everything surrounding her acquires magical proportions such as the barge on which she sat and which "[b]urnt on the water" (II.ii.196, my emphasis). Cedric Watts declares:

If you see a picture of Venus in which the artist's imagination offers a better creation than does nature, know that Cleopatra in her own person surpasses that masterwork. (*ibid*, 12)

When Enobarbus recounts the barge episode, he never forgets to highlight Cleopatra's divine-like posture: she is attired like the goddess Venus and is being fanned by boys who are described as little cupids:

She did lie,
In her pavilion. cloth-of-gold, of tissue,
O'er-picturing that Venus where we see
The fancy out-work nature. On each side her
Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
With divers-coloured fans, whose wind did seem
To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,

(II.ii.203-10)

Cleopatra's transcendental nature compels the elements to almost worship her. Not only could people on the wharves gaze at her beauty and smell perfumes wafting from the barge traversing the Nile but also the air itself went to look at her, thus, causing a temporary disorder in nature. As Enobarbus reports:

th'air; which, but for vacancy, Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too, And made a gap in nature.

And what they undid did.

(II.ii.221-3)

Antony, on the other hand, appears as a microcosmic image of the universe. At times, he is the universe itself while Cleopatra maintains that he is bigger and more impressive than the whole cosmos, making the earth, in comparison, an insignificant "little O" (V.ii.81). In addition, he is repeatedly compared to Mars, the god of war (II.ii.6;

VI.ii.117), often shown as the paragon of warrior prowess, and presented as the very epitome of the invincible legendary hero as if sketched in one of Homer's epics. Throughout the play, he is also associated with Hercules and other divinities. Clearly, the protagonists covet being larger than life. They stage "a play which gives us the whole world and then demands that we exchange it for a kiss" (Adelman, 141), a play that "give[s] a kingdom for a mirth" (I.iv.18). As Thomas McAlindon contends:

The grandeur of Antony and Cleopatra is central to the play's imaginative expansiveness. The protagonists are not only monarchs, imperial rulers; in their own imagination and that of those around them, they are enlarged to the dimensions of gods or demigods. (241)

This lofty pride is, as I argue, the very cause of the tragic demise. Through trying to be godlike, the two characters become the architects of their own downfall. In support of my argument, I resort to a plethora of Greek tragedies that depict pride and self-deification as the hubristic faults that cause the tragic hero's fall. Studying *Antony and Cleopatra* in relation to plays by Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus, I demonstrate that, even though Shakespeare wrote his play in 1607, the tragic pathos follows the same Greek tragic pattern. Tragedy, whether Greek or Shakespearean, stems from the conflict opposing men to gods, in the humanist desire to reach out for immortality, divinity, and decorum—a desire that is often met with misfortune. It is important to note that I do not argue that *Antony and Cleopatra* is modeled on a Greek tragedy. My main point is that there are amazing similarities between Shakespeare's play and ancient tragedies by Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus. For instance, the characters' constant invocation of the divinities is very striking. Besides, Pompey's words: "If the great gods be just, they shall assist/ The deeds of justest men" (II.i.1-2) echo Orestes' in *Electra*: "All right... if Apollo was right" (Electra, trans.

Watling, 1427) ;Cleopatra's warning that Antony's "mouth-made vows" shake "the thronèd gods" (I.iii.30; 28) is reminiscent of Teiresias' lament that the eagles snatch morsels from the soiled corpse of Polynices and take them to the skies, thus, soiling the thrones of Zeus. However, the most important common feature between Greek drama and Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* remains the tragic hero's self-glorification that repulses the forces of fate and invites the protagonists to encounter a dismal ending.

At first sight, and based on my work, Antony and Cleopatra's tragedy does not seem to differ from the tragic hero's fate in ancient Greek tragedy. However, and as I explain in the third chapter, the ending in *Antony and Cleopatra* highly differs, even contradicts, endings in Greek tragedy. *Antony and Cleopatra*, unlike the earlier Greek plays, establishes a sense of human dignity along a triumph of man's humanist nature over the forces of fortune. Even stricken by the gods' wrath, the Egyptian queen and the Roman soldier never cease to claim their right to a better form of being. The suicide scene, far from being an expression of a cowardly escape from the cruelty of fate, is a stunning revelation of a "transcendental humanism" as said Wilson Knight—humanism that I describe as being 'radical' for it does not only seek a higher position in the Great Chain of Being but because it rejects any possibility of failure to reach that position. It is a humanism that even overcomes death.

Fallen from grace, and doomed to a life of shame, the two characters choose to embrace death, not in order to escape, but to rule again, this time, like a god and goddess, over a better realm, neither Rome nor Egypt, but Elysium. The fall from grace becomes then

a reverse-fall: a transcendent ascendency fuelled by a never-ceasing, never vanquished, humanist desire to be godlike. In the third and last chapter, I extensively dwell on the cultural and historical context of the play's production before moving to studying the humanist in *Antony and Cleopatra*. I explore the Elizabethan mindscape and world picture as a cultural and philosophical cradle of Renaissance humanism. I show how the two protagonists challenge the Elizabethan worldview and expand the notion of humanism—hence, again, my description of Antony and Cleopatra's humanism as 'radical'.

The Eden in Egypt, the stylistic and thematic intersections between Greek drama and Renaissance tragedy, and the protagonists' 'radical humanism' are these modes of enquiry and criticism that I use in order to give a new and distinctive interpretation of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Chapter One: The Garden of Egypt

And the woman said unto the serpent,

We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden.

Genesis 3:2

Shakespeare's Egypt in Antony and Cleopatra may be read as a displacement and adaptation of the account of the fall in Genesis. Drawing parallels between procreative Egypt and verdant Garden of Eden, I explore the elements in the play which frame an imagery of Egypt that invokes Eden. My primary intention is to investigate what George Wilson Knight calls "life-themes" in his influential work The Imperial Theme; Further Interpretations of Shakespeare's Tragedies. Life themes, or the elements in the play that suggest life and creation, range from prestigious feasting, excessive gluttony, sexual gratification, to life-and love-celebration. These life-themes, which abound in Antony and Cleopatra, contribute in shaping the play's very much praised 'grandeur,' and give shape to what I consider an 'Edenic existence'. The life themes are a concomitant to a state of grace with which tragedy starts and which is reversed once the tragic hero commits a fatal error or hamartia. As soon as the tragic error is made, a reversal of fortune occurs. The state of grace withers away while the tragic hero meets his downfall. Antony and Cleopatra follows the same tragic pattern established by Aristotle and the Greek playwrights but also evokes the tragedy of Adam and Eve. This chapter deals with the protagonists' serene, life-celebratory, and Edenic existence. I will start by investigating the epicurean quality of the play and the time-concept of imperturbable eternity into which it is woven. I will, then, study the dionysiac pulse that animates the play with a particular focus on the snake, water, and fig imagery in order to show how they mirror the characters' devotion to a pleasant life. Finally, I argue that the Egyptian setting offers, in Antony's words, a "new heaven, new earth."

* * *

During the early Renaissance, philosophers and geographers sought enlightenment about the civilizations of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. In a study of the conception of Egypt in the early Renaissance, John Archer argues that for the Europeans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Egypt, Asia, and India constituted much of the venerated Old World (21). Aclassical text rediscovered in the fifteenth century was Horapollo's Hieroglyphica (fourth century AD) which provided extensive information about hieroglyphs, and was believed to contain "wisdom and truth of great significance" (David, 62). Egypt triggered curiosity and was often an object of study that bewildered the hermit in the monastery, the soldier in the battlefield, and the dramatist in his theatre¹. Egypt was often venerated and its ancient civilization very much admired. Ruins, relics, tombs, and archaeological discoveries invoked a past of sacredness both in terms of the pharaohs' grandeur and the biblical heritage. Egypt was also the target of colonizers who sought to get hold of it through 'orientalist' knowledge. In Culture and Imperialism, Edward Said describes how the case of Egypt was studied and modeled by the immense Description de L'Egypte commissioned by Napoleon. Napoleon was the first to encourage expeditions that aimed at developing an encyclopaedic knowledge of Egypt the more efficiently to control its manifestations (Spanos, 88). In Orientalism, Said argues that Egypt among the other countries that constitute the East, was often—if not always—perceived through the

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¹ In my research about how Egypt was perceived during the Renaissance, I found diverse accounts. The majority testify of how the East in general exerted great fascination on Europeans. There are those who, however, disdainfully dismissed Egypt as a locus of decadence and barbarism (Archer, 20). Interestingly, what is particular about Shakespeare is that he meshes both views. His Egypt, as presented in *Antony and Cleopatra* and as it will be argued later in my work, is both heaven and hell, both beneficent and hazard-filled.

colonizing optic of the European conqueror "premised upon the subordination and victimization of the native". Said resorts to Lord Arthur Balfour's speech delivered on June 13, 1910, to the British House of Commons in order to illustrate how the knowledge gathered about Egypt was stronger and more efficient than any military or economic power. For Said, "Balfour nowhere denies British superiority and Egyptian inferiority; he takes them for granted as he describes the consequences of knowledge" (cited in Spanos, 79). Because the colonizer knows how the colony functions, the latter is doomed to remain controlled and subordinated.

Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* introduces the reader to an Egypt where two gods, namely Pan and Dionysus, govern hand in hand: the fertile setting is interlocked with life-celebrating habits. Antony is portrayed as a mythical soldier taking part in festive grandiosities that seem to owe something to the lavish Greek banquets while Cleopatra is a resplendent enchantress who opens doors to fertile and unknown Egypt. Egypt strikes the reader as the site of immoderate opulence, courtly delights, and a vast medley of Dionysian celebrations that overflow all measures and overload any scale. The Egyptian land is pictured as a locus for excess, extravagance, exorbitance, luxuriance, prurience, indolence and magnificence (Blits, 13). It is a world of tastes, textures and voluptuous perfumes where the visitor finds

Epicurean cooks

Sharpen with cloyless sauce his appetite.

(II.i.24-5)

"Epicurean" stands as a paramount adjective in the play. The latter could even be read as the flawless illustration of the 3rd century BC Epicureanism. Initiated by Epicurus, the philosophical trend, also known as 'the philosophy of the garden', flourished in Hellenistic Greece and constantly challenged Platonism. Apart from his anti-teleological attacks on the conception of a god-created and directed world (Lucy Hutchinson, 25), Epicurus sought to attain *ataraxia*, that is, a state of absolute tranquillity (Warren, 36). This coveted mindscape, where no fears or worries would disturb the felicity of being, is guaranteed by pleasure only²; pleasure is the greatest intrinsic good and the very source of happiness. As Epicurus himself asserts:

I know not how to conceive the good, apart from the pleasures of taste, sexual pleasures, the pleasures of sound and the pleasures of beautiful form. (535)

The founding principles of Epicureanism very much apply to Shakespeare's play, and both Antony and Cleopatra would make devoted followers of the Greek sage. However, whereas Epicurus nevertheless insisted on selectivity and moderation since greedy licentiousness brought pain and sorrow in its wake (Wilson, 11), Antony and Cleopatra boundlessly indulge in all sorts of delights³. Their immersion into the bounties of a

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² I use the word "felicity" not only to describe the state of *ataraxia* coveted by Epicurus and his followers but also to hint at Coleridge's argument on Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Coleridge indeed maintains that of all Shakespeare's plays, *Antony and Cleopatra* is the "most wonderful" since it contends that "feliciter audax is the motto for its style" (Coleridge, 142).

³ In a letter to Menoeceux, Epicurus explains that "when we say that pleasure is the goal we do not mean the pleasures of the profligate or the pleasures of consumption, as some believe [...]. For it is not in drinking bouts and continuous partying and enjoying boys and women, or consuming fish and the other dainties of an extravagant table, which produce the pleasant life, but sober calculation [...] it is impossible to live pleasantly without living prudently, honourably and justly" (cited in Wilson, 11).

hedonistic existence is very grandiose, so grandiose that when preparing for a banquet, time itself dissolves.

The idea of time dissolving under the charms of Cleopatra is more pertinently invoked in the arrangement of the settings. Unlike the other tragedies, *Antony and Cleopatra* presents numerous scenes changing at a rapid pace. The constant vacillations between Rome and Egypt, present and past (as in recounting the first encounter between the Egyptian queen and the Roman soldier) connote the dissolving of time and space. Time which was frequently perceived by Epicurus as an inexistent source of pain is now morphed into an occasion for incandescent pleasures⁴. This is made obvious in Antony's jubilant command:

Let's not confound the time with conference harsh; There's not a minute of our lives should stretch Without some pleasure now

(I.i.46-8)

If Antony's life could be summed up in one term, it would probably be "pleasure". Repelled by seriousness and "conference harsh", he aims at making pleasure the governing motive of his life. He then adds: "What sport tonight?"(Li.47). This question is not restricted to the context of act I, scene I, but permeates the play and serves as a prelude to every Egyptian night. While every minute connotes a pleasure, every night is synonymous with renewed delight. The finest answer is Enobarbus's addressing the spellbound Romans. He, in fact, recounts tales of festal celebrations and wild banqueting hosted by Cleopatra and attended by Antony and others.

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⁴ Epicurus maintained that time has no attributes and thus it is inexistent. Time, like sickness, is itself temporary, and relies on epithets such as 'long' or 'short' to become meaningful. Time is then "an accident of accidents" (DeWitt, 148).

The Egyptian celebrations are always described as spectacular. They appear so extravagant that even the cosmic order of things is drastically inverted as a result of the festivities. Enobarbus claims:

Ay, sir; we did sleep day out of countenance, and made the night light with drinking. (II.ii.183-4)

Intrigued and nearly begging for more details, Maecenas verifies:

Eight wild-boars roasted whole at a breakfast, and but twelve persons there; is this true?

ENOBARBUS: This was but as a fly by an eagle: we had much more monstrous matter of feast, which worthily deserved noting.

(II.ii.185-9)

Cleopatra's guests inverse the order of things by sleeping during daytime and spending the night in revelry. The revelries they indulge in are impressive: this is conveyed when Enobarbus compares having eight boars for breakfast to a fly by an eagle, that is, eight boars is an insignificant banquet in comparison to the banquets they actually have. The scene continues with more of Enobarbus's reverent reports of Cleopatra's blithe extravagances, more specifically, of her first encounter with Antony. The queen appears on a barge, sumptuously dressed in the habiliments of the goddess Isis and exquisitely submerged in the "heady incense-laden air" (Preston, 161). She is also fanned by boys looking like little Cupids. With its silver oars, purple sails, and golden poop, the barge majestically dives on the Nile's scintillating waters. This provides seductive scenery for the mesmerized Roman soldier. As Jan H. Blits states in *New Heaven, New Earth*:

[W]hile the winds fell in love with the perfumed sails, the water fell in love with the oars stroking it to the music of lutes. Just as the winds were lovesick, the water was enamored. Cleopatra's barge, while arousing the senses, animated the winds and water with ardent amorous desire. (70-1)

The queen's extravagances are, however, more pronounced when she is in her palace, putting into practice elaborate stratagems to lure the Roman soldier and own his heart. It is reported that before "the nine hour, [she] drank him to his bed" (II.v.21). In the original account on the life of Antony and Cleopatra, Plutarch indeed mentions "so many lights hanging on display all over the place", and "purple tapestries shot through with silver and gold gleamed on the walls. Soft, silken dining couches awaited the Roman guests, the tables before them spread with golden drinking vessels and dishes crusted with precious jewels" (Cited in Preston, 161). When Antony presented himself at her palace, she entertained him with a grandiose banquet. The feast was so splendid that Plutarch refused to attempt a description (Tyldesley, 149). All these grandiosities contribute in shaping a life of tranquillity and *ataraxia*, a pre-lapsarian-like existence.

Although love in *Antony and Cleopatra* is always interwoven with carnal pleasures, it contributes nonetheless to creating an atmosphere of concord and felicity. The erotic nature of the relationship between the two protagonists also sheds light on the mood of playfulness and levity spread in the play and communicated through the ribald metaphors uttered by some secondary characters. The lecherous gamesomeness is indeed not restricted to Antony and Cleopatra but also takes place between other characters such as the soothsayer and Cleopatra's women. When talking about fortune and predictions of future events, Cleopatra's servants and the soothsayer verge on the bawdy-talk when evoking "chastity" (I.ii.42), procreation (I.ii.34-5) and especially being turned into a cuckold (I.ii.61-70). This provides an example of what Michael G. Bielmeier calls "lewd sexual witticism"

(120). Cleopatra is often portrayed as a "cornucopian sexual paragon" (Watts, 13). She satisfies the Roman soldier's desire but also makes him hungry for more sexual gratification. What is also remarkable is that lust is often conjured in association with other pleasures such as laughter: "[...] that night/ I laughed him out of patience" (II.v.19-20) and drunkenness: "I drunk him to his bed" (II.v.21). In Enobarbus's words, she "makes hungry/Where she most satisfies" (II.ii.242-3). Added to this talks about bodily pleasures, there is a strong practice of body talk, or body language. In Shakespeare's Talking Animals, Terence Hawkes argues that Egypt's fertility is not manifest only in all the sensuous delights but also in the "gestural relationships". He maintains that Egypt stages the "intensest kind of bodily communion" (114) in which communicative systems depend as much on the body as on the language used. Oral language is almost turned physical. Even the messenger charged with office of simple verbal communication is alarmingly urged to "[r]am thou thy fruitful tidings in mine ears, / That long time have been barren" (II.v.24-5) (Hawkes, 182). Consequently, everything ranks as a potential source of bodily pleasures. Feasting itself is "an age-old metaphor for sexual pleasure as well as its frequent precursor in practice" (Preston, 161). Liquor is rendered animalistic, highly erotic and even destructive; love and liquor almost compose one single entity. In George Herbert's words: "Love is that liquor sweet and most divine" (11). Like liquor, the love uniting Antony and Cleopatra gustily ascends to the head steeping reason in drunkenness –drunkenness that is glorified in a mood of festive frenzy –a frenzy so orgiastic that it verges on "Dionysus' madness" (Graf, 147).

The Dionysian pulse in ancient Greek plays such as Euripides's *The Bacchae* beats even more strongly in *Antony and Cleopatra* than in Greek drama. From the very opening lines of the play, passion, liveliness, and extravagance are conveyed. Shakespeare's play indeed opens with animated conversations attesting to an atmosphere of "leisured extravagance" (Long, 242):

Flourish. Enter ANTONY, CLEOPATRA, her LADIES [CHARMIAN and IRAS, and] the Train, with Eunuchs fanning her

PHILO: Look, where they come.

Take but good note, and you shall see in him

The triple pillar of the world transformed

Into a strumpet's fool. Behold and see.

CLEOPATRA: If it be love indeed, tell me how much.

ANTONY: There's beggary in the love that can be reckoned.

CLEOPATRA: I'll set a bourn how far to be beloved.

ANTONY: Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth.

(I.i.10-17)

Antony and Cleopatra's first appearance is spectacular. The queen is accompanied by servants and eunuchs just as the Greek Dionysus was reported to be followed by maenads and satyrs. The first sentence Cleopatra utters is both confusing and enigmatic. Asking Antony about how much he loves her, the question centers on something abstract: love. By urging Antony to measure something immeasurable, Cleopatra tackles a philosophical topic. Antony's answer "Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth" reaches beyond Cleopatra's "beggary", "bourn" and philosophical quest. He proves to be as extravagant and

immaterial as Cleopatra, stating that present earthly standards fail to measure his love and, for this, new heavenly and earthly standards need to be found. In *The Heroic Image in Five Shakespearean Tragedies*, Matthew N. Proser argues that Cleopatra's language makes Antony transcend earthly existence (181). As Phyllis Rackin also remarks, "[Cleopatra's language] dislodges Antony from the world of the mundane forms and raises him to 'Platonic' proportions: 'Platonic' in the sense of the *Symposium*, where art brings to birth new forms which mirror and immortalise the artist-lover and the beloved" (Rackin, 100). Similarly to Cleopatra's question, Antony's answer transcends logic and rises beyond common and mundane thought. Besides, it invites the reader to speculate about this "new heaven, new earth" which can be read in relation to Egypt where the characters are sustained and animated by the sap of Epicurean life and the wild fury of Dionysiac relish. Cleopatra's Egypt is, after all, a heavenly setting for the Roman visitor.

Dionysus is also the wild god of madness and excess—two ideas that are echoed in the play. Charmian's violent reaction to the soothsayer's prophesies, phrased in her ranting "Out fool! I forgive thee for a witch" (I.ii.36), is almost suggestive of a raging fury, a Dionysus-besotted madness proper only to Greek maenads. Cleopatra and her women may indeed be perceived as maenads since they excessively indulge in orginatic feasts with ecstatic abandon so reminiscent of the Bacchic cults. Charmian's wish to decorate her potential husband's "horns with garlands" (I.ii.4) may be fathomed as some sacred rite performed in the pre-festal veneration of the Greek god. The promised husband gaily decorated with flowers is a reference to the cultic decoration of "sacrificial beast[s]"

(Bevington, 83)⁵. Cleopatra taunting the messenger in act II, scene 5 testifies to how uncontrollable she can be:

CLEOPATRA: The most infectious pestilence upon thee!

Strikes him down

MESSENGER: Good Madam, patience.

CLEOPATRA: What say you?

Strikes him

Hence,

Strikes him again.

Horrible villain! or I'll spurn thine eyes

Like balls before me! I'll unhair thy head:

[She hales him up and down.]

Thou shalt be whipped with wire, and stewed in brine,

Smarting in ling'ring pickle!

(II.v.61-6)

Cleopatra draws a drastic picture of the punishment she reserves for the messenger, promising: "I'll spurn thine eyes" and "I'll unhair thy head". Her fury is Dionysiac and her "Riotous madness" (I.iii.29) does justice to the Greek maenads' deliriums⁶. Like the punishment of Pentheus in Euripides' *The Bacchae*, the punishment of the messenger by Cleopatra resonates as a cosmic curse.

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⁵ According to Park McGinty, Dionysus's devotees roamed about the tops of mountains on winter nights, danced with ecstatic abandon, and nursed "young wild animals, only to tear them apart with their bare hands and devour the still warm, raw flesh" (6).

⁶In *Dionysiac Poetics and the Memory of Civil War' in Horace's Cleopatra Ode*, Andrew Feldherr affirms that Cleopatra is to be considered as "an initiate of the mysteries of Dionysus" (231). Cleopatra's kingly lineage has also to do with the Greek god; "Cleopatra had noted Antony's enthusiastic reception in the East as the "new Dionysus." This title had once been accorded to her own father, Auletes, and was deeply intertwined with the Ptolemies since Dionysus was their legendary ancestor and an especial patron of the royal house of Egypt (Preston, 158).

Like the Oracle of Delphi who relates the Thebans to the god Apollo through uttering the latter's warnings and recommendations, Cleopatra, like a Dionysian prophetess, links her attendants with life, or in Park McGinty's words, to the "fullness and joy of life" (64). Satiated, drunk, and hypnotized by the fumes of beverages, the guests irresistibly give in to "levity" (II.vii.117). Cleopatra and Epicurean cooks ostentatiously "tie up the libertine in a field of feasts" (II.i.23) (Bielmeier, 129) making that "most of our fortunes tonight shall be" as Enobarbus envisions, "drunk to bed" (I.ii.42-3). To match the foul extravagance of the Egyptian queenly maenad, Antony calls for more wine. In addition, and as Caesar says, Antony expresses a sybaritic desire to "tumble on the bed of Ptolemy, / [and] give a kingdom for a mirth" (I.iv.17-8). Zestfully entertained, he "reel[s] the streets at noon", "stand[s] the buffet" (I.iv.20) and tethers in pastures of delights from which his enemies wish he would never stray.

If Cleopatra is a Bacchante, then Antony perfectly personifies the beneficent god, the giver of wine, the daimonic protector and promoter of all growth and prosperity⁷. Acting as an aesthete bent on immediate sensory gratification, he is an aesthete who strives to find infinite variety in the finite (Bielmeier, 120). Antony is playing at being Dionysus⁸. Besides,

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⁷ Erwin Rohde indeed describes Dionysus as a "beneficent god: the giver of wine, the daimonic protector and promoter of all growth and prosperity in the plant world and in all of nature, the godly incarnation of the whole extent and richness of the natural fullness of life, the model of the heightened joy of life (284-5).

⁸It is very interesting to know that in 42 B.C., after spending the winter months in Athens, Antony sailed East where he was greeted as the living incarnation of Dionysus. According to Diana Preston, "In Ephesus, women dressed as bacchantes, and men and boys clad as satyrs and Pans hailed him as the new Dionysus, the bringer of joy, and conducted him riotously through the streets" (152). Plutarch wrote: "The city was filled with ivy, thyrsi, harps, reed-pipes and wind-pipes." In the same context, Cleopatra had also noted Antony's enthusiastic reception in the East as the "new Dionysus." (Preston, 158) In *Cleopatra: Last Queen of Egypt*, Joyce Tyldesley argues that while he was confined to Rome, the eastern territories were starting to identify Antony as the "successor of all the former earthly Dionysoi, including Alexander the Great, the Ptolemies of Egypt and Pompey the Great." (145). In addition, as well as playing at being Dionysus, Antony also deliberately evoked his own supposed divine ancestor, the hero-god Heracles, who was believed to feast at Dionysus' table

the carnal aspect of his relationship with Cleopatra perfectly encapsulates the Priapic aspect of the Greek god.

The Greek god of fertility, abundance and madness is not only summoned in Egypt but seems also to preside over Antony's gathering with the other Roman leaders in Pompey's galley. The festive gathering even functions as a recreation of Egypt's banquets. In fact, Pompey's celebration immediately follows an entertaining discussion of Egypt's life, the Nile, and crocodiles. Pompey even urges Antony to do justice to his reputation of an Egyptian aesthete:

But, first or last,

Your fine Egyptian cooker shall have

The fame.

(II.vi.62-4)

Anthony is encouraged to be as merry as he was in Cleopatra's company. Later, cheerful commands such as "Be jolly lords" (II.vii.54), "A health to Lepidus!" (II.vii.27) punctuate the conversations that the characters engage in. Although the scene is in Misenum, in the vicinity of "Mount Misena", Egypt stands as a backdrop to the festive mood, and Cleopatra's presence is, by extension, constantly felt. Antony and Enobarbus who "have used [their] throats"(I.vi.128) in the Orient are not only invited to recreate what they experienced there but also to sing the "Egyptian bacchanals" (II.vii.100) and "celebrate our

(Preston, 159). Janet Adelman too in *The Common Liar* refers to Plutarch's association of Antony with Dionysus but mentions that Shakespeare, unlike the historian, "minimizes this association" (80).

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drinks" (II.vii.101). The song that the boy sings towards the end of act II clearly invokes Dionysus:

BOY [Sings] Come, thou monarch of the vine,
Plumpy Bacchus with pink eyne:
In thy fats our cares be drowned;
With thy grapes our hairs be crowned.

BOY and OTHERS Cup us, till the world go round;
Cup us, till the world go round!

(II.vii.109-14)

Evoked as a summoning spell, the song further strengthens the bonds between the characters' present Egypt and Dionysus' ancient Greece. The celebration of life and the subsequent serenity is a common feature of Greek Dionysian banqueting and Antony and Cleopatra's extravagant merriment. The Dionysiac spirit is transposed on to Cleopatra's court and is frequently imitated by the Romans. Both Antony's delighted getaways to Egypt and the Romans' newly exalted festivities are tangled in a Dionysian tradition of life celebrating. The three Roman leaders get abusively drunk to the extent where "their plants [become] ill-rooted/ [and] the least wind I'th'world will blow them down" (II.vii.1-2). Lepidus is later reported to have been "troubled/ with the green-sickness" since Pompey's feast (III.ii.5-6). Still, when offered another cup of wine, they never refuse it (II.vii.29). Nonetheless, the Roman feast is, as Pompey remarks, "not yet an Alexandrian feast" and will probably never be (II.vii.92). Roman feasting without Cleopatra, dressed as Isis and acting as a Bacchante, is, as Bevington contends, able only to "parody iconoclastically the sort of feast we might expect Egypt to supply" (149).

In the blissful context of Egypt, Antony and Cleopatra might be said to have attained what Epicurus termed ataraxia. Neither doubt nor fear can threaten the felicity of the "mutual pair" for "[w]hen our quick minds lie still" (I.ii.105) not even a "Roman thought" (I.ii.78) can be irksome. Even when threatened by Caesar, when "kingdoms and provinces" (III.x.8) are lost and "terrene moon/ is now eclipsed" (III.xiii.153-4), there is always room for some "gaudy night" of lust, mirth and bacchanal spirit. Put differently, the defeat of Actium does not prevent the couple from enjoying their hedonistic habits. Clearly, the battle of Actium was not in favour of the legendary couple, it succeeded only in precipitating the fall of Antony and the tragedy of Cleopatra. This is ominously hinted at through Cleopatra's words "heaven engender[ing] hail, / And poison it in the source" (III.viii.159-160). Her words, which evoke an apocalyptic imagery, presage an imminent disaster. She talks of the "brave Egyptians all, [...] L[ying] graveless till the flies and gnats of Nile/ Have buried them for prey!" (III.viii.166-7)⁹. When Cleopatra swears by the devastation of Egypt, Antony presages his own fall. When he fantasizes about defeating Octavius in a battle of sword against sword, he says: "I' will appear in blood [...] treble-sinewed, hearted, breathed" (III.xiii.174; 178). This description is as much suggestive of death as it is indicative of victory. However, even on the edge of their tragedy, drums, trumpets, and flutes can still be heard and again "[w]ine will peep through [the] scars" (III.xiii.191). It is this Bacchic essence acting as an elixir of life that will indeed bring life to the most improbable death; Antony is "Antony again" and Cleopatra will be Cleopatra (III.xiii.187). Into

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⁹ The aforementioned lines are taken from Cleopatra's conversation with Antony few scenes after their defeat in Actium. To assure Antony of her loyal love, she utters the "most powerful curse a woman can utter" (Bevington, 194). She wishes her life to be dissolved, her son and her people to be smote. She condenses horrid images of murkiness and destruction recalling the Book of Exodus where it is stated: "And the hail smote throughout all the land of Egypt" (9.25).

Dionysian stupor they would dive once more before the ultimate battle with "boy Cesar" (III.xiii.16). Antony orders:

To camp this host, we all would sup together

And drink carouses to the next day's fate,

Which promises royal peril. Trumpeters,

With brazen din blast you the city's ear;

Make mingle with rattling taborines,

That heaven and earth may strike their sounds together,

Applauding our approach.

(IV.viii.33-9)

Antony appears confident about the outcome of the ultimate battle. Solaced by his recent victory on land where he and his men "have shown all Hectors" (IV.viii.7). He, therefore, casts away all apprehension and indulges in mirthful plans where he, once again, follows a carpe diem desire to "[b]e the child o'th'time" (II.vii.96).

The Eden in Egypt is further suggested by the multiple references to reptiles, the Nile and figs. The serpent or snake, with its regenerative properties, stands for a creative life force. As Douglas Allen states in *Structure and Creativity in Religion*:

The snake or serpent is often connected with women and fecundity. Data from throughout the world illustrate the beliefs that snakes are the first object of sexual contact for women, and produce children. (150)

Furthermore, the serpent acts as a phallic symbol. Lura Pedrini in *Serpent Imagery and Symbolism* refers to "biblical serpents" as being 'phallic'. She states the example of Aaron's rod which was "a recognizable phallic symbol before it became a serpent, and the pole on

which Moses hoisted the serpent of brass was such as many Near Eastern peoples worshipped" (7). Lepidus's words "your crocodile" (II.7.26) addressed to Antony on Pompey's galley are thought-provoking. The crocodile is, as Adelman affirms, a "serpent of sorts" (62), thus hinting at the male genital organs. The term "crocodile," occurring just after the sentence "your serpent of Egypt is bred now of your mud" (II.vii.25), stresses Antony and Cleopatra's sexual relationships. This is further evoked in the phrase: "he ploughed her, she cropped" (II.ii.233) especially with the presence of the words "mud" and "bred". While "mud" suggests creation, "bred" eventually alludes to breeding and reproduction. According to Peter Markman, the serpent has a phallic shape and its entrance into the earth -often perceived as female earth- suggests the "human sexual metaphor through which agricultural fertility was symbolically rendered" (30). In the play, the image of the worm in the clown's speech is obviously identified with the penis. The 'aspic' imagery before Cleopatra's suicide is interlaced with sexual undertones; the verb "lies" means "to tell lies" but also hints at "to lie with men", the term "worm" (or snake) bawdily hints at the phallus (Bevington, 252). The snake metaphorically making love to Cleopatra when biting her breasts further emphasizes the procreative nature of Cleopatra's life—and later, death. In addition, like Edmund Spencer's Lucretian Venus who has at her feet "a snake whose head and tail were fast combined" (Fairie, IV.x.40), Cleopatra is unnaturally yoked to reptiles; she is even described as the "serpent of old Nile" (I.v.26). This connection is made more conspicuous through her incessant personification of Isis. The Egyptian love-goddess was indissociable from snakes. In an Egyptian myth, Isis caused a venomous snake to bite the sun-god Ra, but then agreed to save him with her magical powers (Farrell, 17). Talking to Antony about serpents in Egypt, Lepidus mentions Antony's "operation of sun" (II.vii.26) possibly relating Antony to Ra, while Cleopatra, being "the serpent of the Nile" perfectly embodies Isis.

Oppositely, when many anthropologists interpreted the snake as a male phallic symbol, others, such as Philip Slater in *The Glory of Hera*, maintain that the snake underlines a bisexual quality with the female one being the more salient of the two. Since it could entirely swallow its preys and thus evoke the shape of a pregnant woman carrying a baby in her belly, the snake is like a devouring vagina. To look at Cleopatra as being the serpent of the Nile sheds more light on the natural fruition of Egypt.

The references to serpents are to be read in correlation with the Nile's overflowing waters. While the serpent symbolizes fecundity and regeneration, water brings life to the earth after barrenness and sterility. The Nile rises yearly to its usual bountiful level making that water overflow the banks and, thus, revitalize the soil. With the rise of the water, the harvest is prone to thrive since the agricultural harvests usually depend on the Nile's floods (Preston, 147). As Antony affirms: "[t]he Higher Nilus swells,/ The more it promises: as it ebbs, the seedsman/ Upon the slime and ooze scatters his grain,/ And't shortly comes to harvest" (II.vii.19-22).

In addition to the snake and water references, the heavenly existence of Antony and Cleopatra is constantly symbolized by figs. The Hebrew equivalent of the word fig, i.e. $te'\bar{e}n\bar{a}h$, occurs about forty times in the Bible referring both to the tree and the fruit itself. It is closely related to the biblical myth of the Fall since the forbidden fruit is believed to have been a fig and not an apple. According to Stephen D. Renn, figs in the Old Testament

symbolize judgment, that is, Yahweh punishing his people for their disobedience¹⁰. Rotten figs also indicate divine judgment¹¹. In addition, figs are also symbolic of blessing. Renn mentions the link between the fruit and the "security and prosperity in the land of Canaan" (379). He further explains that in Joel 2:22 and Hag. 2:19 they signify a promised renewal after the inflicting of divine judgment (*ibid*). Like the serpent imagery, the fruit's equally pervades the play and gives an additional resonance to the conception of Egyptian fertility. Interestingly, the clown in the final act carries the asps on stage in a basket of figs. Figs and asps are associated with sexuality since Adam and Eve. Both natural elements, asps and figs, are both inherent to the world of life and generation (Adelman, 63). In *Of Isis and Osiris*, Plutarch goes as far as to claim that the fig "seemeth naturally to resemble the member of generation" (1301).

On their thrones of gold, Antony and Cleopatra, like Adam and Eve, are seated in the midst of an Edenic garden of pleasures. Egypt is indeed portrayed as a new earth that captures the two characters' hope of a new heaven. "Ne'er-lust-wearied" (II.i.39), always "disposed to mirth" (I.ii.77), and perpetually enjoying a "fruitful prognostication" (I.ii.46), the two protagonists enjoy the Eden in Egypt. Involved with serpents and figs, Cleopatra invites Antony to satisfy the "immortal longings" (V.ii.278)—immortal longings that would ultimately foster a tragic fall.

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¹⁰ Stephen D. Renn mentions the following biblical references; Jer. 5:17; 8:13; Hos. 2:12; Joel 1:12; Amos 4:9; Hab. 3:17)

¹¹ Jer. 24:1; Hos. 9:10; Nah. 3:12. (cited in Renn).

Chapter Two: The Tragic Sin

Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth; I made a spectacle of you before kings

Ezekiel, 28:17

Nor did I think your orders were so strong that you, a mortal man, could over-run the gods' unwritten and unfailing laws.

Antigone, 453-559

The gods! It smites me Beneath the fall I have.

Cleopatra, V.ii.170-1

Immortal longings in Antony and Cleopatra mesh with recurrent glorifications of the two protagonists. Often described in hyperbolic metaphors, Antony and Cleopatra appear as larger-than-life characters. Although they are human beings, they tend to refer to each other in divine terms. Moreover, they even outmaneuver the divinities and, therefore, as Bernard Beckerman posits, "[t]he names, Antony, Cleopatra, and Caesar ring out like a roster of the gods" (99). Placing the divinities and the protagonists on the same level, and claiming that Cleopatra, in her theatrical magnificence, and Antony, in his Herculean soldiership, are equal to the gods is, as this chapter demonstrates, the tragic flaw that would generate a tragic fall. Once the two characters self-identify as Isis and Mars (among other divine figures), the tragic machinery is set forth, and the foreboding sense of catastrophe abounds. Like Adam and Eve who, eating from the tree of knowledge, aspired to a higher status, a godlike knowledge, the tragic hero, proud and confident, tramples the order of things and subverts the chain of being when coveting a divine throne. This is a defining feature of Greek tragedy where Oedipus, Creon, Ajax, Pentheus, and others become envious of the gods. However, what they achieve is nothing but their own ruin, hence Aeschylus's characterization of the tragic heroes as "priests of ruin" (Agamemnon, 735). In this chapter, I make the link between Antony and Cleopatra and some of the Greek tragedies in order to demonstrate how this human desire to play god is a governing trope of the tragedies, whether Greek, biblical, or Elizabethan. Adam, Antony, Oedipus, Eve, Cleopatra, and others are different masks for a single human face—a face that sinfully (by Christian standards)—and tragically (by dramatic ones)—assumes divine features. The first part of the chapter redefines tragedy as an art fundamentally dealing with the relationship between man and god(s). I argue that this relationship is essentially conflictual. I heavily dwell on examples from Greek plays by Euripides and Sophocles and then investigate how Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* presents the same model of tragedy, a model that relevantly recalls the fall of Adam and Eve, and the original sin.

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During the spring, Athenians gathered in theatres as part of the yearly public drama festival. The national celebrations were the awaited occasion for playwrights to present their comedies, dithyrambs, and most importantly, tragedies (Norwood, 49). When, in the fifth century, the production of plays increased, the *agon* (meaning contest) was instituted (Lesky, 42). During the month of Elaphebolion (March to April), each tragedian admitted to the tragedy competition was invited to submit a tetralogy consisting of three tragedies followed by a satyr play. The latter, as it is performed, should bring a comic relief and a cheerful note as the epilogue (Lesky 42, Norwood 50, Gregory, 44). However, to claim that the ancient drama festival was solely the product of dramatic contests is to miss, to borrow Victoria Pedrick and Steven M.Oberhelman's book title, "the soul of tragedy". Aside from being a spring competition and an occasion for communal gathering, the performance of drama is initially religious.

Tragedy is, first and foremost, a ritual¹². It does not take much to the traveler who visits the theatre of Dionysus at Athens to realize that a Greek play and theatre are synonymous to a festive ritualistic procession¹³. Spatially, the theatre of Dionysusis located on the southern-eastern slope of the Acropolis (Norwood, 49). The monument itself belongs to the sanctuary of Dionysus. Nearby, at the foot of the Acropolis, many shrines are built where other gods are worshipped and celebrated (Hall, 90). In the front row of the theatre, there is a large stone seat, which, as an inscription indicates, was reserved for the priest of Dionysus (Lesky, 42). There is also an altar, beside which stood a sacrificial table. When the latter was not used for animal sacrifice, it served as a standing ground on which the chorus leader mounted during his dialogues with the chorus (Norwood, 1; 51). Interestingly, the stage in ancient Greece could be shared by men and gods alike (Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*, 99). Indeed, the Greek stage was composed of two planes: a dancing space (orchēstra) where mortals' lives were represented, and a higher plane called 'machine' (mēchanē), where the gods could make appearances (Hall, 7-8, Norwood, 51). In this upper level, suspended from a crane, a divine presence is projected as being looking down at the tragic hero¹⁴. The orchestra or what is also called "dancing ground" (Norwood, 51) evokes the crazed maenads dancing during a Dionysian ritual procession. Jan Kott in The Eating of the Gods:

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¹² Numerous are the accounts of drama being an art that originated in the worship of the vine, wild vegetation, and, the ecstasy god, Dionysus. It is interesting though to bear in mind that the Greek drama was also politically inclined, often portraying relationships between rulers and citizens. This view is widespread among classical Greek scholars such as Rebecca Bushnell, whose works, even though more focused on the religious aspects of tragedy, do not deny that tragedy was "shaped as much by Athenian democracy as it was by ancient religion' (Companion, 2). She further expands on this argument stating that tragedy's survival in the modern European and American contexts, "has been intertwined with the fates of dynasties, revolutions, and crises of social change" (ibid).

¹³I am grateful to E.G. Turner who starts Albin Lesky's outstanding book entitled *Greek Tragedy* with a very short but enlightening account on presumably his own voyage to the City Dionysia, more specifically to the theatre of Dionysus. Turner's description of the theatre is enchanting.

Interpretation of Greek Tragedy, compares Aeschylus' stage to an "entire cosmos" (4) that gathers the gods, men and the elements. He states:

This cosmos has a vertical structure: above, the seat of the gods and power; below, the place of exile and punishment. In the middle is the flat circle of the earth and the flat dish of the *orchestra* around it where the action unfolds. The vertical structure of the world with its definite functions, symbols and destiny, the above and the below, is one of the most universal and most perennial archetypes. [...] Hell the center of the earth, and the 'gate of the sky are then situated on the same axis' (4)

The idea of a divine gaze constantly surveying the theatre, both in its artistic and existential definitions, recalls Aristotle's words in *Poetics*: "by convention, the gods foresee everything" (in Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*, 99). The gods, in the Greek tragedies, see and foresee, but most importantly they keep an eye on mortals against any violations of the rules they had established. They also survey the actors and the playwrights, for it was solemnly forbidden, at the time, to stage any spectacle that would potentially offend the divinities. Certain acts and utterances especially those that delved into post-mortem matters like the Mysteries of Elysium, were prohibited by religious laws. Allan H. Sommerstein gives the example of Aeschylus who "is said to have been accused of divulging secrets of the Eleusian Mysteries in his plays [...] [but] must certainly have been acquitted, since if convinced he could hardly have escaped the death penalty" (30). In two of Aristophanes' plays, choruses of women celebrate the Mysteries but never disclose the secret rituals to anyone who did not already know them (Sommerstein, 31). At moments of violence in the Greek plays, the actors are often seen as representing the crazed attendants of Dionysus (Hall, 50, Henrichs, 32). In the third century BC, professional theatre companies touring in the ancient Greek world called themselves "artists of Dionysus" (Hall, 51). Before the drama festival officially started, the icon of the god which, as Hall describes, "consisted of a wooden pole with a mask at one end" had gotten adorned with costume and ivy, taken to Athena's academy and then brought back again to the theatre sanctuary (Hall, 22). This, of course, seeks to recreate the myth of the introduction of the Dionysian worship to the city reinforcing, the cultic and occultic aspect of the festival. Even the masks worn by the actors were inextricably linked to the cult of the god. As Lesky states:

[...] masks played their most important part in the cult of the god to whom tragedy was dedicated, namely Dionysos. His own mask hanging on a pole was a cult object, so that he might even be called the God of the Mask. His worshippers, among whom satyrs were the most prominent, were also masked, and satyr masks were brought to his shrine as offerings. We should not forget that the use of masks in tragedy as well as comedy was deeply rooted in the domain of cult and that this in turn goes back to very early superstitious practices (29)

Nietzsche's conception of the Greek theatre also testifies to the religious allegory behind the spatial arrangement of the stage:

The form of the Greek theatre is reminiscent of a lonely mountain valley; the architecture of the stage seems like a radiant cloud formation seen from on high by the Bacchae as they roam excitedly through the mountains, like the magnificent frame in which the image of Dionysos is revealed to them (42)

Another element that interlocks tragedy with a religious framework is the history of tragedy itself. In the mid fourth-century, Aristotle, in his poetics, mentions that both comedy

and tragedy are products of the hymns sung to Dionysus, or what is termed as a *dithyramb* (in Hall 49). According to Lesky, the oldest form of Dithyramb is "beyond recall" (32) but can be traced back to Pindar's poetry, which was rescued from the Egyptian desert over half a century ago. Again, according to Lesky, Herodotus tells us that the choric poet, Arion, raised the old religious chants to a poetic device, a sort of an art-form that would later become the source of tragedy¹⁵. Dithyramb moved then from being religious chants to the poetic verses spoken by the dramatis personae and later known as dithyrambs, and ultimately, became tragedy. Lesky affirms that Corinth Arion "made members of a chorus, who were masked as satyrs, sing dithyrambs" (33). Fortunately, we have an instance of dithyramb that exists in one of Euripides' surviving plays, namely The *Bacchae*:

Hither, O fragrant of Tmolus the Golden,

Come with the voice of timbrel and drum;

Let the cry of your joyance uplift and embolden

The God of the joy-cry; O Bacchanals, come!

With pealing of pipes and with Phrygian clamour,

On, where the vision of holiness thrills

And the music climbs and the maddening glamour,

With the wild White Maids, to the hills, to the hills!

(155-65)

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¹⁵Lesky's reading of Herodotus' account on dithyrambs remains uncertain. Herodotus reports that Arion was the first to write, name, and sing dithyramb (in Lesky, 33) but since a dithyramb existed even before Arion's poetry, Lesky presumes that Herodotus meant that Arion wrote, named, and sung it as an art-form and no longer as a religious hymn.

The hypothesis that dithyrambs were being sung by satyrs and then developed into a tragic art-form perfectly fits the etymological understanding of the word tragedy as "goat song" (Lesky, 34). In other words, dithyrambs were sung while a goat was being sacrificed as an offering to the Greek god Dionysus. The sacrificial goat introduces the indissoluble connection between tragedy and the Greek religious world picture. Its presence in the etymology of the word tragedy reminds us of the animal sacrifice at the gods' shrines. The plays themselves involve the sacrifice of animals that, in a way, resembles old traditions of sacrificial slaughter of human beings. ¹⁶

The tragedies are, therefore, initially religious chants that evolved to become explorations of religious conundrums such as the burial of the dead, the workings of fate, the cycles of transgression and redemption, and the deciphering of omens and predictions. As Zak William states in *Polis and the Divine Order*: "[t]he extant works of Sophocles are peppered [...] with references to and meditations upon the justice of the gods, passages in which characters defend belief or challenge it in terms of whether the gods' acknowledged power to punish human beings can be reconciled with the human sense of justice, responsibility and merit."(15)

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¹⁶ Walter Burkert, historian of Greek religion, thinks that behind animal sacrifice ceremonies lies human beings' fear of slaughtering each other. Acting out a ritual of animal sacrifice is, according to Burkert, a form of distancing from, and concealment of, the murderous possibilities for human slaughter (Burkert, Greek Tragedy 111). On the relation between animal sacrifice and tragedy, Martha C. Nussbaum, in *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, argues that '[i]t is the work of tragedy, song of the goat-sacrifice, to continue and deepen this function of ritual by bringing the hidden threat to light, by acting out, repeatedly, the possibilities for bestiality concealed and distanced by human society' (37). Pentheus in *The Bacchae* can be considered a human sacrifice since he ends up torn to pieces. His flesh, raw but warm with blood, is consumed in a gore scene that evokes the Dionysian rites performed by the frenzied and 'maddened' maenads.

Tragedies are also meditations upon the relations between men and gods and the unjustified ways of the latter to the former¹⁷. The characters encapsulate the paragon of the Greek citizen, and by extension, the human being, whose actions are so important that they happen to affect the cosmic order. The Greek heroes showcase the concerns of the ordinary Greek citizen who ritualistically meditates upon what the Fates have in store for him. Unlike the ordinary Athenian citizen, though, the tragic heroes' affairs are deeply impacted by the fluctuating humors of the gods, and it is frequent that these Greek heroes are themselves gods, demi-gods, or noble-ranked commanders who are more than just human beings. They can also be favorites of the gods since it is frequent that the gods, when directly involved in human affairs, take sides and team up with distinctive men. Athena, for instance, protects Odysseus against the vengeful fury of Ajax urging him not to be a "coward" (The Ajax, 64-111). Apollo, too, offers his help and protection to no one but Orestes. Medea's abhorrent crimes are never punished, and the gods, standing by her side, are insensitive to the blood of her innocent children that she cruelly spilt in the name of revenge. This divine superintendence of the privileged hero's fate further introduces tragedy as mainly revolving around the divine, and the divinely-favoured hero. As J.D Mikalson states in *Honor thy* Gods: Popular Religion in Greek Tragedy:

The tragic poets give to their characters a closer relationship to, more direct contact with, and a better knowledge of their gods than average Athenians enjoyed. Some characters, like

¹⁷ An interesting argument is that of Christiane Sorvinou-Inwood, who posits that tragedy is "a discourse of religious exploration, one important locus where the religious discourse of the Athenian polis was explored and elaborated in the fifth century. [...] this religious exploration was intimately concerned with the ritual context in which tragedies were performed, and within which tragedy had been generated" (10). She further explains the relation between tragedy and religion through the Greeks' incessant concern with the cosmic order as designed by the gods. The crucial religious worldview fostered the invention of tragedy as a "ritual performance" which was conductive to the problematization of certain aspects of religion, and the exploration of religious beliefs and cults (11).

Theseus, Heracles, Ion, and Helen, are sons or daughters of the gods; others, like Cassandra, Creusa, and Ion are their lovers. [...] Other tragic figures—men such as Orestes, Hippolytus, and Pentheus—for good or ill, also have close encounters with gods. Numerous other characters and choruses see their gods usually as *dei ex machina*, and learn directly from them their wishes, plans, and purposes (204-5)

Edith Hall, author of *Greek Tragedy: Suffering Under the Sun*, argues that tragedy is the representation of a serious event involving suffering (3). Hall's definition of tragedy is different from Aristotle's famous lines: "tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions" (2-3). While Aristotle focuses mostly on a paramount action being the center and motor of a tragedy and on what makes tragedy a literary genre of its own, Hall stresses the theme of suffering as the foundational backbone of tragedy that runs from Aeschylus to Arthur Miller. She states:

[S]uffering [...] remains central to the definition of all 'tragic' events in the theatre [...]. The representation of specific instances of suffering is one of the very few things that will always be central to the historically mutable medium of tragic drama. The suffering can take many forms, and the sufferers react to it in diverse ways. But suffer they do, or the play they are in would not be a tragedy. [...] It is suffering that unites Sophocles' Oedipus, Shakespeare's Hamlet, and Miller's Willy Loman, who dies after suffering, with precious little dignity (4)

Elaborately dwelling on suffering as linked to death and murder of another member of the same household, Edith Hall also introduces what I venture to call 'tragic suffering' as essentially related to the gods. The gods, as aforementioned, are the most germinal forces in drama. The sacred dimension they invoke also introduces the plays as moralistic tales.

Spatially, numerous plays evoke temples as settings for the action. Indeed, characters are often portrayed in, around, or nearby sacred temples and shrines: the Egyptian women in Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women* take refuge in the Argives' sanctuary; Creusa in Euripides' *Ion* is told by the chorus to sit on Apollo's altar; while the first scene in *Oedipus the King* opens on a royal palace around which stand many altars. To be at the gods' hands is also a recurrent metaphor in many Greek plays. In *Prometheus Bound*, one reads:

O divine air and fluttering, winged breezes!

Founts of the rivers, and of the sea's waves,

The infinite laughter of Earth, mother of all,

And the all-seeing circle of the Sun—I call on you!

Look at me and what I, a god, suffer at gods' hands.

(88-92)

Prometheus's mournful lament is also a divine invocation since Prometheus is calling upon the "divine air', the "winged breezes', "the rivers", "the sea's waves", "the circle of the sun", and the laughter of the Earth". Calling upon the "all-seeing circle of the sun" is itself a summoning of the sun god Helios. As Jon Mikalson posits: "Characters in tragedy often address, pray to, and speak of a wide variety of supernatural forces, including gods of the upper world and underworld, heroes, *daimones*, and even fortune and fate" (17). Often, these divine invocations interweave with oaths, promises, curses, supplications, decrees,

statements and, all together, they revolve around the divine pity, mercy, or cruelty as central themes in tragedy.

Examples of how the divinities abound in all forms of tragic discourse are numerous. They range from Medea supplicating Creon for a one-day-stay in the city in order to take her revenge to Apollo's oath to protect Orestes against the vengeful aspirations of the Erinyes¹⁸. Oedipus, for instance, curses his two sons with a sense of fatefulness that is echoed in Antigone lamenting the fratricide; Creon calls on "Zeus my witness, who sees all things always" to validate his decisions (172-218). Premonitions are also an intangible territory where the gods communicate with their consultants often through the medium of dreams. Hecuba, in her dreams, sees a deer dragged by her knees and then killed by a wolf; Clytemnestra saw that she gave birth to a snake that sucked a clot of blood out of her bare breasts. Addressing the gods whether by consulting an oracle or through praying is a defining action in the Greek tragedies. In *Suffering under the Sun*, Edith Hall states:

If you were a person in a situation of extreme vulnerability, as many characters are in tragedy, then you could pray for help to a particular god, or the gods collectively. [...] A last resort available to the desperate was supplication. Characters in tragedy could put themselves in the hands of a god by taking refuge in his temple, preferably actually physically sitting on an altar or beholding a statue. (159)

¹⁸ Edith Hall even defines supplication in religious terms. She says: "The god who oversaw these procedures was Zeus in his function indicated by the title *Hikesios*, 'Zeus of suppliants'. Supplication is a formal entreaty, accompanied by ritualized touching of knees, hand, and chin, which puts the recipient under a religious obligation to accede to the suppliant's requests. Supplication characterizes numerous crucial scenes in tragedy" (160).

Tragedy is then about the intersections of the divine and the human¹⁹. It often stages a tragic hero caught in the grip of something stronger, greater, and ultimately more fatedetermining than himself, something of a different nature and of a more influent power (Kitto, 248). The domain of the tragic lies in this "border zone where human actions hinge on divine powers and where their true meaning, unsuspected by even those who initiated them and take responsibility for them, is only revealed when it becomes a part of an order that is beyond man and escapes him" (Vernant, 9). The "order that is beyond man and escapes him" is always flouted by the tragic hero. The tragic hero, according to Aristotle, is a person of a noble position and distinction, who, because of an internal error or flaw, is doomed to suffer a "total reversal of fortune", leading to an aroused, and cathartic, feeling of 'pity and fear' in the audience (In Mishra, 1). The ultimate death of this protagonist of high distinction is provoked by a disproportioned trait of character in him. This trait, known as "flaw", "error", or "hubris", is often pride, a sentiment of grandiloquent desire to be of a greater status, a status that towers above the status of the gods themselves. In William Zak's words, this pride is "an anarchic human yearning to have everything happen according to the commands of one's own soul—in short, to be as the gods" (26). Zak dramatizes this idea stating that:

The problem lies not with the gods or the divine order they oversee, but with human beings' idealistic yet potentially faulty identification with those gods—that is, it lies with a naïve piety and righteousness in men that unwittingly fails to acknowledge the metaphysical gap dividing human being/sic/, with its/sic/ intrinsic and inescapable vulnerability to error, from

¹⁹ Throughout the chapter I try to explain in which ways tragedy is the outcome of a polar tension between the realm of the gods and the realm of the mortals. It would be erroneous however to limit the conflicts in tragedies to this god/man dialectic, for, as Albin Lesky mentions in *Greek Tragedy*, conflicts in tragedy can also reside within the realm of the gods independently of the realm of mankind, or even be a matter of elements, thoughts, desires in collision within a single man's mind (8)

divine self sufficiency. Through acts of righteousness and pity, men are free to participate to their benefit in the sacred order of good that the gods rule beyond them; but they cannot—without disastrous consequences—identify too completely with that order, imagining that their will is identical with the divine will. (21)

Basing his ideas on the Hegelian conception of tragedy²⁰, A.C. Bradley regards the tragic as the ensemble of powers in collision. Whether it is a conflict between the family and the state, the ruler and the citizen, personal desire and common good, each of these powers has a legitimate 'ethical substance' (71), something of a concordant moral claim. Bradley highlights that these conflicting powers are mostly foregrounded in the Greek tragedies:

In many a work of art, in many a statue, picture, take, or song, such powers are shown in solitary peace or harmonious co-operation. Tragedy shows them in collision. Their nature is divine, and in religion they appear as gods; but as seen in the world of tragic action, they have left the repose of Olympus, have entered into human wills, and now meet as foes. And this spectacle of sublime, is also terrible. The essentially tragic fact is the self-division and intestinal warfare of the ethical substance, not so much the war of good with evil as the war of good with good. Two of these isolated powers face each other, making incompatible demands (71).

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²⁰ In his *Aesthetics 1820-29*, Hegel proposed that the sufferings of the tragic hero stem from two moral claims in conflict. This conflict between these claims, in which the tragic hero is caught, is not an operation of good against evil but rather of a good against another good. The two claims are two moral claims, both justified and justifiable, and thus represent two ethical statements. It is the exclusive moral one-sidedness of the tragic character, not any inherent flaw or evil error—as Aristotle said—that brings about what Lesky calls "total tragic conflict", the subsequent suffering, and ultimately death. Because of the impossibility to reconcile the two moral claims, and especially the tragic hero's stubborn unwillingness to do so, the end is death. The tragic characters, according to Hegel's view are too good, struggling to establish a comprehensive good against another, resulting, in their failure and destruction. Hegel even rejects the notion of a tragic hero, since, for him, we rather witness a 'tragic collision' between two opposite and equally tragic sides, "each is just as much involved in guilt" (1196), since each aspires to "establish the true and positive content of its own aim and character only by denying and infringing the equally justified power of the other" (ibid).

According to Hegel and Bradley, tragedy is generally the conflict of two equally ethical claims. In Greek tragedy, one of the two claims is upheld by a divine hand, and the other is humanly bound. Almost always, it is the divine prerogative that is reasserted at the detriment of the mortal hero's ethical quest; the last line in *Trachinniae* confirms this idea: 'in all this there is nought but Zeus' (1278). Similarly, in the Suppliant Women, it is stated that "We are all, by a cruel fate, victims of one blow of Hera's" (in Kitto, 209). In Antigone, seen by Hegel as the finest tragedy (Burke, 273), Creon issues an unprecedented order following Polynices' failed attempt at invading his homeland. As the new ruler of Thebes, Creon orders that Polynices' corpse should remain unburied, prey to dogs and birds, as a punishment for having assaulted the city and engaged in a military invasion against both his homeland and his brother Eteocles, former ruler of Thebes. Interestingly, this decree is ethically sound, for not only does it punish the aggressor of the city, but it also warns any Theban against betraying the polis and harming its citizens. However, it runs counter to the gods' command that the dead should be honored and buried according to divinely ordained rites. As Lesky states: "This order issued by Creon, the new ruler of the city, lacks moderation; [...] a sin against the divine command that the dead shall be honoured" (103-4).

Against Creon's human decree, Antigone embodies the divine "immutable unwritten laws of Heaven" (Sophocles, 2009, 238). The gods' commands are indeed upheld by her, when upon hearing Creon's profane orders, she bravely decides to bury her brother. Her moral claim affirms the will of the divinities and clashes with Creon's own vision of the proper ethics to be adopted in situations of high treason. The divine laws, as recorded by Socrates to Hippias and reported by Xenophon in *Memorabilia* (IV, 4, 19-24), are unlike the

laws made by men for fellow-men. There is always a chance that one may avoid punishment if a man-made law is broken; this chance is inexistent when the law violated is divine. In other words, punishments following the infringement of a divinely ordained law are inescapable (Kitto, 120). Some critics such as Martha Nussbaum in *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, focusing on the parallel between the gods and the tragic hero, insist that Creon's stubborn persistence to leave Polynices' body unburied is a manifestation of his erratic ambition to posit himself as an arbiter of the gods, if not a god himself (58). As Rebecca Bushnell posits in *Prophesying Tragedy: Sign and Voice in Sophocles' Theban Plays:* "Sophocles presents Creon's fault not as the threat of an entirely secular rule, but as his attempt to claim that his voice is godlike, impersonal, and absolute, needing neither assent nor verification. Like the gods who speak through their prophets, Creon refuses to engage in dialogue or rescind his word—until it is too late" (54). To Humphrey Kitto, it is Creon's stubbornness that will lead the gods to cause his tragic downfall (126).

The same stubbornness is found in *The Ajax* where the Greek hero Ajax covets Achilles' armor that was forged by the blacksmith god Hephaestus. Because the armor was given to his foe, namely Odysseus, Ajax sets out at night from his tent to take his revenge on all the Greek generals. Working against the trope of revenge, Athena darkened his vision "with a veil of phantasy, which overpowered him/so that he turned his wrath upon the cattle" (50-2). Surrounded by cattle that he slaughtered thinking they were the Greek commanders who gave the armor to Odysseus, Ajax favors death to living in shame. His death could be seen as an attempt at retrieving a sense of dignity but also as an additional punishment from

the gods. Throughout the play, the gods seem always to work against him²¹. His predicament does not only arise from violating the law against killing but also from setting himself up, alone, against the gods (Hall, 143) uttering blasphemous self-absorbed statements. He says: "Do you believe I still owe any duty/ or service to the gods". Even though conscious that the gods are now against him, Ajax does not regret his revenge plot, and his denigration of the gods' commandments. Instead, he accuses Athena of blinding him unjustly; his "lofty sense of honor" (Lesky, 101) pushes him to disdain the gods and reject redemption. Ajax is even too proud to "think human thoughts", to admit the imperfection of man and "recognize the limitations of humanity and to behave accordingly" (Kitto, 104). It is this pride that will bring about his ultimate fall. Jon Mikalson argues:

Tragedy, as distinct from life, frequently presents individuals who directly and frontally assault the [...] god: the *theomachoi*. Although not unknown to epic, the human *theomachos* is particularly a topic of tragedy. Because the *theomachos* overvalues his own prowess, whether of mind or body, he demeans [...] the god. Unlike more ordinary sinners in life [...], he may suffer from his boasts alone. His punishment, when it comes, as it always does, is severe. (206)

In Euripides' *The Bacchae*, Pentheus denies the newly founded cult of Dionysus. In a blasphemous gesture, Pentheus dares to question the divine paternity of the god thus doubting that Dionysus is a divinity at all:

This tale of Dionysus; how that same

Babe that was blasted by the lightening flame

With his dead mother, for that mother's lie,

Was re-conceived, born perfect from the thigh

Of Zeus, and now is God! What call you these?

_

²¹ It is also widely spread among critics that Ajax is the "loneliest figure in Greek Tragedy" (Hall, 314).

Dreams? Gibes of the unknown wanderer? Blasphemies

That crave the very gibbet?

(242-8)

Although he was warned many times not to challenge the paramount authority of the gods, Pentheus denies the new religion. He even orders his guards to "head him [Dionysus incarnated in a human shape] here in gyves,/ Till he be judged and stoned, and weep in blood/ The day he troubled Pentheus with his God!" (356-8). Even worse, he ostensibly declares war against the god and his female followers, encouraged by a towering sense of pride (785). Such a hubristic fault is overtly condemned by the chorus who calls for a divine retributive revenge: "Come, O Holy One defied,/ Be thy golden wand uplifted o'er the tyrant in his pride!" (256-7). However, the tragic proportions of Pentheus' character are much more than an exemplum of excessive pride. Pentheus often refers to Thebes as being his 'land' (777) and his 'halls' (845), he sees himself as an almighty sovereign that no entity, mortal or divine, shall challenge or defy. Like Creon, and most of the tragic heroes, he seeks to implement his laws and imperatives at the detriment of the divine prerogative. The Greek tragic hero engenders his own ruin out of a latent desire to become a god in the place of the gods.

In Homer's epics as well as in the Greek tragedies, the gods speak through oracles, prophets and seers (Rabinowitz, 78). Their speech is conveyed in the form of prophecies. A tragic prophecy is, as Northrop Frye puts it, "a conception of ineluctable fate or hidden

omnipotent will" (Frye, 139, in Bushnell, 19). This hidden omnipotent will is that of the divinities and is encapsulated in tragic prophecies which express the Greek gods' wishes, warnings, and commandments. Talking about the seers, prophets, oracles, and other fortune-tellers who assume the role of messengers and spokesmen of the gods, Jon Mikalson writes in *Honor thy Gods: Popular Religion in Greek Tragedy*:

They know the truth, the divine, and the "things" of the gods. Seers in tragedies speak "god-spoken words" and give "signs," usually of future success or failure, to those who consult them. Like their counterparts in real life these seers are consulted on matters of war, voyages, health, omens, dreams, and religious needs, but the knowledge they possess and the information they offer are far different. (94-5)

In addition to assuming some power above men's, the seers mark the outlines of the tragic plot (Bushnell, x). A crucial episode or a momentum in the tragic plot often revolves around a prophecy or a revelation by a seer; the story of the house of Laius, for instance, is shaped by responses to an old prophecy (Bushnell, xiii). Accordingly, the position that the seer occupies in a tragedy is endowed with a great power that is likely to change the course of the tragic events. Such is the reason why many tragic heroes strive to silence the seers in order to reappropriate for themselves the paramount power of interpreting the signs and using them to one's advantage. As Rebecca Bushnell states in *Prophesying Tragedy: Sign and Voice in Sophocles' Theban Plays*²²:

²² I am very grateful to Rebecca Bushnell, an amazing scholar, who, in her book entitled *Prophesying Tragedy:* Sign and Voice in Sophocles' Theban Plays, discusses the importance of prophecy in tragedy both in relation to the politics of the Greek polis, and to the conflict between the hero and the prophet, and by extension, the conflict between the hero and the gods. The last point is made clear when she sums up this tension between the two sides saying: "[...] the hero sees the gods as imposing the meaning of his life through the spells of prophecy. At first, the hero exposes the gods' language as mere convention, to show that these signs are arbitrary or even meaningless rather than inherent in the "natural" order of things. The crisis comes when the hero does so to reveal himself as master, trampling down those writings and spells only to enforce his own" (31).

The use of prophecy in the plays and politics of Athens exemplifies the struggle for influence through control of public discourse, for the person who masters or controls the "divine" sign of prophecy may control the significance of events, in theater or marketplace.

(3)

In *Antigone*, Teiresias, the seer, announces to Creon that by prohibiting the funeral of Polynices, he has brought a dreadful calamity to the city of Thebes. Teiresias reports how the birds have a strange voice among them, and are attacking each other murderously; it is a strange action that predicts a disaster²³. He also laments that religious sacrifices and rituals are no longer accepted by the gods, pointing to a dank moisture preventing the sacrificial fires from burning, and therefore, causing the failure of the rites. Teiresias relates this failure in the ritual proceedings to the anger of the gods. His interpretation of the signs in nature is that the divine anger is mainly caused by the birds eating from the corpse of Polynices and carrying the polluting morsels up high to the throne of Zeus. At the genesis of this abhorrent deed lies Creon's public edict that Polynices' corpse shall not be buried. Teiresias states:

[T]is thy counsel that hath brought this sickness on our State. For the altars of our city and of our hearths have been tainted, one and all, by birds and dogs, with carrion from the hapless

²³ Birds have always taken part in the Greek discourse of prophecy as a significant sign. Seen as both predators and messengers of particular deities, their strange behavior—like when eagles tear at each other's head in Homer's *Odyssey* or the sparrows get devoured by a snake in the *Iliad*—easily attracts people's attention. Such a behavior connotes the gods' anger and ominously predicts a catastrophe. (Bushnell, 8; 9) In *Antony and Cleopatra*, swallows had built their nests in Cleopatra's ships. The ominous sign is very portentous as it foreshadows the queen's flight from the battleground and, subsequently, Antony's defeat at Actium. Even the soothsayers refuse to communicate the arcane knowledge of which they are in possession: "The augurs/ Say they know not, they cannot tell; look grimly, / And dare not speak their knowledge" (IV.vii.4-6).

corpse, the son of Oedipus: and therefore the gods no more accept prayer and sacrifice at our hands, or the flame of meat-offering; not doth any bird give a clear sign by its shrill cry, for they have tasted the fatness of a slain man's blood (Antigone, 995-1042)

Creon's immediate reaction is to scorn Teiresias. He even accuses the seer of being another greedy fortune-teller coveting gold, money and political prestige. This transgressive accusation is reminiscent of when Pentheus in Euripides' *The Bacchae* accused the seer of being a profit-seeker. Pentheus was so indignant and imbued with pride that he even threatened Teiresias with demolishing his sanctuary. Creon states:

- [...] the seer-tribe hath long trafficked in me, and made me their merchandise
- [...] the prophet-tribe was ever fond of money
- [...] shameful thoughts in fair words, for lucre's sake

(995-1042; 1042-1061; *ibid*)

He also—and outrageously—dismisses the seer's prophecies as "evil deeds" (1042-1061) that will never succeed to convince him of burying the corpse of Polynices, even if "the eagles of Zeus should bear the carrion morsels to their Master's throne" (995-1042).

An equally unheroic abuse of the seer is found in *Oedipus the King*. After that Teiresias reveals that Oedipus is himself the slayer of his own father, Oedipus, enraged with anger, begins to insult the old prophet. Not only does he denigrate the seer's prophetical speech judging it as being "said in vain" (356-373) but he also describes the seer as

"maimed in ear, and in wit, and in eye" (*ibid*). He, later, accuses Teiresias of conspiring with Creon. Oedipus believes that Creon, with the help of Tereisias, intends to accuse him of being the killer of King Laius, and then seize the throne once Oedipus is banished as a criminal. The latter's accusations are so scathing that he doubts the truth of the seer's divination dismissing the prophecy as "folly" (415-443). He ends up expelling the old man commanding "Aye, let him take thee: while here, thou art a hindrance, thou, a trouble: when thou hast vanished, thou wilt not vex me more" (444-486).

* * *

After exploration of the Greek tragedies, I shall now turn to Shakespeare's *Antony* and *Cleopatra* in order to demonstrate how the tragical pattern in the Shakespearean play does not really differ from the tragical pattern in the Greek drama. At the heart of *Antony* and *Cleopatra* lies indeed the same tension between the protagonists and the gods. I will first analyze this tragic notion of 'playing god' through the study of Cleopatra and Antony's self-glorifying speeches, and then dwell on how the protagonists fatefully challenge the concept of prophesy and violate the divine word or sign.

In Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, the protagonists are presented as gods and demigods. Antony and Cleopatra are defined through metaphoric associations to pagan divinities and natural elements such as the earth, the moon, fire, and world itself. Antony is a "triple pillar of the world" (I.i.12) and Cleopatra is an incarnated Venus (II.ii.206). Even Pompey assumes a divine aura invested with cosmic attributes. Menas addressing him states:

Thou art, if thou dar'st be, the earthly Jove:

Whate'er the ocean pales, or sky inclips,

Is thine, if thou wilt ha't.

(II.vii.64-6)

The cosmic attributes of god-like personae are relevant in the usage of the terms "Jove", "earthly", "ocean", and "sky". As George Wilson Knight cites: "the word 'world' or 'earth' recurs continually, usually in relation to the main persons, themselves drawn to heroic proportions" (208). Cleopatra, on her side, extravagantly appears dressed "[i]nth'habiliments of the goddess Isis" (III.vi.17) and is in possession of some arcane witchcraft that allows her to "make defect perfection" (II.ii.236). Charmian's choric description of the Egyptian queen starts with "O Isis!" (III.iii.15) and ends with another allusion to the goddess of love, "O eastern star" (V.ii.305), just as the asp sucks life out of the queen's breasts. Using a similar stream of allusions and associations with the divine, Enobarbus often presents her as an idle queen "O'er-picturing that Venus where we see/ The fancy out-work nature." (II.ii.205-6).

Interestingly, Cleopatra is not only mated with the gods but is rendered more glorious and supreme than them. She steals the divine glow from Venus and reappropriates it in the socio-political context of the Romano-Egyptian rule over the world. Her superhuman propensities overflow the measure to the extent that she is presented as a second Venus. In the barge scene, her handmaids become "mermaids" and "Nereides", while the boys fanning her morph into "cupids":

ENOBARBUS:

[...] In her pavilion, cloth-of-gold, of tissue,

O'er-picturing that Venus where we see

The fancy out-work nature. On each side her

Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,

With divers-coloured fans, whose wind did seem

To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,

And what they undid did.

.....

Her gentlewomen, likethe Nereides,

So many mermaids, tended her I'th' eyes,

And made their bends adorning. At the helm

A seeming mermaid steers: the silken tackle

Swell with the touches of those flower-soft hands,

That yarely frame the office.

(II.ii.204-9; 211-6)

Cleopatra is the "day o'th world". According to Antony who calls her "my Thetis" (III.vii.59), she is so grand that, compared to her, "kingdoms are clay" (I.i.35). We get the impression that she is not a human being. As Robert Ornstein states in *The Ethic of the*

Imagination: Love and Art in Antony and Cleopatra:

Her place in the story is beside the legendary figures who live in ancient myth. She is another Thetis, an Isis, a Venus, a Dido; Cupids and Nereides attend her, the winds are enamoured of her, and she is wooed by Phoebus and, at last, by Death himself. She teaches a plated Mars [Antony] an artful way of loving; and she turns this demi-Atlas after death into a very god who spreads the masculine seed of his inexhaustible bounty over the earth. In her mythopeic imagination, Antony bestrides the ocean, making cities on the waves, and creating empires through a divinely prodigal carelessness—he drops realms and islands out of his pockets (45)

As in the two other Roman plays, namely *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar*, the protagonists are bestowed proportions with commensurate to their heroic value. They are like the Titans in their imperial rule over the world just as Antony is the perfect soldier impregnated with what Wilson Knight calls "military opulence by sea and land" (213). Markus Coriolanus is

described in Coriolanus as:

His nature is too noble for the world:

He would not flatter Neptune for his trident,

Or Jove for's power to thunder. His heart his

Mouth:

What his breast forges, that his tongue must vent;

53

And being angry, does forget that ever

He heard the name of death.

(III.i.255-60)

Coriolanus is clearly a distinct human being with qualities that rival the qualities of the gods. His bravery, pride and anger together with his honesty—communicated through the metaphor of "[h]is heart being his [m]outh"—are considerable. His "nature" seems to naturally evade the grasp of death as the latter is nearly inexistent to the Roman commander. He does not flatter Neptune and Jove because he sees himself as being equal to them. Similarly to Coriolanus who is held at a high esteem, Antony is depicted as "the demi-Atlas of this earth" (I.v.24), the "burgonet of men" (I.v.25), the "Lord of lords" (IV.viii.17), an "Arabian bird" (III.ii.12). Relevantly, he is introduced through an amplitude of images ranging from hyperbolic similes to equestrian and chivalric metaphors. Cleopatra, for

[...] is he on his horse?

O happy horse, to bear the weight of Antony!

Do bravely, horse; for wot'st thou whom thoumov'st?

The demi-Atlas of this earth, the arm

And burgonet of men.

instance, exclaims:

(I.v.21-5)

According to G. Wilson Knight, all the horse imagery and references evoked in conjunction to Antony do "heighten and intensify our feeling for military magnificence. [...] The horse

in Shakespeare is elsewhere clearly idealized, as a beautiful animal—especially in Venus

and Adonis (265-324). It is often idealized as a war symbol" (213-4).

However, Antony is not only a chivalric soldier, a "man of steel" (IV.iv.33) whose

soldiership makes him a "grand captain" (III.i.9) like Othello or Titus Andronicus. He is also

a god-like figure, almost a god himself. His face is "painted one way like a Gorgon" and

"the other way's a Mars" (II.v.116-7), his "goodly" eyes "[h]ave glowed like plated Mars"

(I.i.4). Strikingly, Antony is repeatedly compared to Mars, the god of war (II.ii.6; VI.ii.117),

becoming thus the paragon of warrior prowess and the very epitome of the invincible

legendary hero as if sketched in Homer's epics. Throughout the play, he is also associated

with Hercules. When the two soldiers in act IV, scene III hear a noise followed by "music

i'th' air" (IV.iii.14), they believe it is the god Hercules who abandons Antony (IV.iii.17).

Cleopatra states, he is "the crown o'th'earth" (IV.xv.63). Even more, his grandeur at times

exceeds the earthly realm itself as it bears upon the heavens. This is clearly revealed in

Cleopatra's dream:

I dreamt there was an Emperor Antony.

O, such another sleep, that I might see

But such another man!

His face was as the heav'ns; and therein stuck

A sun and moon, which kept their course and lighted

The little O, the earth.

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(V.ii. 76-78; 79-81)

In her dream of him, Cleopatra sees her lover's image as the whole cosmos. In comparison, the earth is but a 'little O'. She says extending the description of the Roman soldier to a cosmic scale:

His legs bestrid the ocean, his reared arm

Crested the world; his voice was propertied

As all the tuned spheres, and that to friends;

But when he meant to quail and shake the orb,

He was as rattling thunder. For his bounty,

There was no winter in't; an autumn 'twas

That grew the more by reaping. His delights

Were dolphin-like: they showed his back above

The element they lived in. In his livery

Walked crowns and crownets; realms and islands were

As plates dropped from his pocket.

(V.ii.82-92)

In her speech, Cleopatra opposes Antony's human features to the natural elements of the universe. Strikingly, the human features are more grandiose than the natural elements. The latter are even under the command of the Roman soldier for while his "arm/ crest[s] the world", his voice, like a rattling thunder, "shake[s] the orb." To the Renaissance thinkers,

the world was ordered according to precise mathematical ratios tuned by a cosmic music. This music of the spheres is identified by the early 6th century philosopher Boethius as the "musica mundana" or the "music of the world". An illustration entitled "The Divine Monochord" (also called *The Tuning of the Spheres*) by Robert Fludd in his book *Utriusque* Cosmi Maioris Scilicet etMinorisMetaphysica, Physica, atque Technica Historia (The Metaphysical, Physical, and Technical Story of both the Greater and the Lesser Cosmos) introduces the universe as a giant viol that is regulated by music and mathematical ratios. This worldview is echoed when Cleopatra talks about the "tuned spheres" and the "orb". The cosmic order is portrayed, however, as dependent on Antony's voice. The Roman soldier is able to distort the natural order of things when his voice becomes like a "rattling thunder" that disturbs the musical attunement of the universe. Antony seems to be greater than the universe itself. As Maurice Charney argues in *Style in the Roman Plays*, Cleopatra's dream challenges the limits of both the world and our conception of it. Watching her and Antony, everything appears as past the size of dreaming, always opening up on new realms, new heavens, and new earths ²⁴. As Charney posits: "This is the Marlovian strain of invidious comparison in which man is literally made the measure of all things. Cleopatra goes as far as to question the reality of her dream, as if it were beyond our mortal sense of possibility" (16). G. Wilson Knight, in *The Imperial Theme* believes that, in Cleopatra's language, "Naturalism is transcended. The earth itself, with its sea and land, is a little thing, a bauble in comparison with such heroes. The setting is not, in fact, our little world at all: it

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²⁴ The grandiloquent cosmological proportions in the play can be summarized in this hyperbolical statement uttered by Antony: "Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth" (I.i.17). Indeed, when Cleopatra asks him about the size of his love for her, he responds using this hyperbole. The play with its exuberant theatricality continually strives to challenge limits of style and theatrical mise en scène, thus suggesting new theatrical heavens and earths. One of its extravagant features, often despised by critics and stage directors, is the huge number of short scenes, entrances and exits, the dizzying leaping from Egypt to Rome to Sicily and even to Syria (Rose, 1).

is either (i) the Mediterranean empire idealized beyond all rational limits; or (ii) the universe" (210). Antony's magnificent stature rises to the heavens, surpasses the limits of the earth, and "[o]'erflows the measure" (I.i.2).

Antony and Cleopatra often make references to the heavens and to themselves as being of a superhuman lineage, a "heavenly mingle" (I.v.61). Cleopatra boasts that:

Eternity was in our lips and eyes,

Bliss in our brows' bent; none our parts so poor

But was a race of heaven

(I.iii.35-7)

Again, one witnesses the interlocking of human features with grandiose cosmic attributes. The protagonists are of a breed other than humanity. With no "parts so poor", they are so flawless that they appear as mates to the gods. Their distinctive lineage renders them both godly and unique. In *A Shakespearean Adjustment*, John Danby posits that "Antony and Cleopatra are opposed to the world that surrounds and isolates them. In this isolation, their union seems absolute, infinite, and self-sufficient" (40). They are indeed the 'motor mobilis' of their own world, enthroned, as Caesar said, in "chairs of gold" (III.vi.4).

In her pre-suicide speech, she majestically declares: "I am fire and air; my other elements / I give to baser life" (V.ii.286-7). As will be discussed in the third chapter of my work, Cleopatra stresses the heavenly mingle of her and her lover's being rejecting, thus, the human form in favor of an ethereal nature. In *The Common Liar: An Essay on Antony and Cleopatra*, Janet Adelman posits that "she [Cleopatra] creates the most monumental vision of all. Her emperor Antony is a gigantic and godlike figure, virtually a human form divine" (102).

Accordingly, all these associations with the gods mirror, to use Knight's words, "the diviner hopes of mankind" to be supreme, and godlike, hopes that are also shared by most of the Greek tragic heroes (261). One is even tempted to think that Antony and Cleopatra summoning heroic features of a variety of pagan gods are themselves more significant and divine than the true gods to which they are compared (Knight, 210). They crave to be so powerful and distinctive that "no grave upon the earth shall clip in it/ A pair so famous" (V.ii.355-6). This sense of towering pride functions as a hubristic flaw and, as it is the case in the ancient tragedies, leads the couple to an inescapable downfall.

Another feature shared with the Greek tragic heroes is Antony's contempt towards the seer. The presence of a seer, being a soothsayer in the Shakespearean tragedy, is problematic. The treatment that the soothsayer is subjected to by Antony strikingly recalls Oedipus' and Creon's treatments of Teiresias. In the third scene of the second act, Antony summons a soothsayer in an attempt to probe into the future. Antony's questions addressed to the soothsayer are of a military order, concerned mainly with the outcome of the 'cold

war' he is having with Caesar. He asks: "Say to me, whose fortunes shall rise higher, Caesar's or mine?" (II.iii.15-6). The soothsayer does not hesitate to utter the feared truth:

O Antony, stay not by his side.

Thy daemon, that thy spirit which keeps thee, is

Noble, courageous, high, unmatchable,

Where Caesar's is not; but, near him, thy angel

Becomes afeard,

If thou dost play with him at any game,

Thou art sure to lose; and, of that natural luck,

He beats thee 'gainst the odds. Thy lustre thickens,

When he shines by. I say again, thy spirit

Is all afraid to govern thee near him;

(II.iii.18-22; 25-9)

Upon hearing the fortune-teller's response, Antony, disturbed if not enraged with anger, compels the man to be silent: "Speak this no more" (II.iii.23). A few lines after, Antony, like Oedipus, even expels the soothsayer from the house growling "Get thee gone" (II.iii.30). By trying to silence the soothsayer, Antony despises the prophecy which reveals that whenever he confronts Caesar, he is doomed to ruin and decay. Antony does not tolerate this reality where Caesar overshadows him and thus silences—and later dismisses—the fortune-teller. He eventually ignores the prophet's warning and indulges in a declared war against Caesar thus fostering his doom and witnessing the prophecy coming true. The Roman commander

realizes that he has no chance against Caesar, affirming that the soothsayer "Be it art or hap/
[...] hath spoken true" (II.iii.32-3). The expression "Be it art or hap," meaning whether the
soothsayer is truly gifted or merely lucky in prophesying the future, nonetheless, hints at a
certain notion of doubt as Antony questions the method by which the soothsayer reads
fortune. Questioning the prophetical agency does not, however, mean that Antony is not sure
of the prophecy's truth. In fact, with their constant references to the gods, to fortune, and
fate, one assumes that Antony, Cleopatra and the other characters in the play do believe in
an occult outlook on existence. In act I, scene II, Charmian discloses this belief when she
bids the soothsayer: "Good sir, give me a good fortune" (I.ii.12). The soothsayer corrects: "I
make not, but foresee" (I.ii.13) revealing thus how the characters "trust not in themselves,
but in fortune" (Blits, 24). Jan Blits explains in *New Heaven, New Earth: Shakespeare's*Antony and Cleopatra:

Ever since the time of Romulus and Numa, the Romans have practiced augury or divination. Believing that the gods take part in human affairs, they hold that the gods send meaningful signs to men, solicited or unsolicited, through thunderstorms, comets, shooting stars, entrails, dreams and other forms of omens and auspices. The interpretation of portents and prodigies is thus central to Roman religion and Roman life. One might therefore think that Roman divination and Egyptian soothsaying are similar. The former reads the flights of birds; the latter, the psalms of humans. (24)

This set of beliefs is another common feature between the Greeks, the Romans, and the Ancient Egyptians. It further bridges the Renaissance play and the Greek tragedies where the mysteries of fate, the relation of men with the gods, and the fortune-tellers' prophecies are no less than paramount. What is also striking is Antony's behavior and how like Creon and

Oedipus he tries to silence the soothsayer once the prophecy runs counter to what he expects and wants to hear. Silencing the voice of the prophet, and opposing thus the signs of the gods, the Roman soldier tyrannically tries to implement his own vision on fate. As Rebecca Bushnell posits:

When heroes defy the tyranny of the gods, they do so in the belief that they can control their own lives, but also, in Attic tragedy, they do so to gain control of state or city. They themselves may thus verge on the tyrannical in their desire to appropriate the power of signs. (6)

Accordingly, Antony and Cleopatra, like the Greek tragic heroes, defy the gods mainly through assuming a nobler stature than mankind. Cleopatra in the posture of Isis, Thetis, and other divinities, outwits the forces of the cosmos while Antony, a mate to Hercules and Mars, makes the earth a "little O" (V.ii.81). In his pride, he does not differ from a series of Greek rulers who mistreat the seers and soothsayers: messengers of the gods. The tragic hero is fundamentally a transgressor of rules, a violator of cosmic orders, a hero whose deeds challenge a set of commandments, and discount prophecies, just as Adam and Eve discounted the Christian God's command not to eat from the tree of knowledge. It is also noteworthy to mention that Cleopatra would have not failed in taunting the soothsayer if he ever prophesied against her wishes just as she taunted the messenger in act II, scene V. All these "hubristic deeds" (149), to use Jan Mikalson's words, would usher in their tragedy: a fall from grace.

Chapter Three:

Radical Humanism,

or Beyond Redemption

[...] by the help of God we stand – or fall.

Oedipus, *King Oedipus* (146, Watling)

If I were bound to divine of this unity, I would not prophesy so.

Enobarbus, *Antony and Cleopatra* (I.iv.112-3)

Antony and Cleopatra express a capricious desire to imitate the gods, presenting themselves in postures that are lofty and divine. Such a behavior is, as my work explains, the tragic sin that brought about the couple's downfall. This tragic flaw which is at the heart of ancient Greek tragedy is, as I demonstrated, also found in *Antony and Cleopatra*. For having been insolent to the gods, the legendary couple attracts the heavens' fury and, as Thomas McAlindon puts it in his book *Shakespeare's Tragic Cosmos*, the play shows an "emphasis on the capricious turning of Fortune's wheel and the insecurity of high places" (222, my emphasis). The lofty places that Antony and Cleopatra attain—and where they could claim to be divine— are certainly insecure; the higher they rise the more dreadful their fall was expected to be. However, and as many critics such as G. Wilson Knight noted, the fall of the two protagonists does not really take place. The colourings of their suicide do not suggest a fall or a fallen existence but rather a triumphant transcendence instead of a fatal collapse. The final lines uttered by Antony and Cleopatra imply that they could morph fortune's damnation into another instance of greatness: a final confirmation of their larger-than-life persona. In this final chapter in my work, I will demonstrate how, unlike some of the heroes of the Greek tragedies (whose death is a cowardly escape from the will of the gods), Antony and Cleopatra further challenge the gods. I will show that Antony and Cleopatra's humanism is not thwarted by their tragic ending but is even more stressed as the play advances toward its end. If the gods in tragedy abhor how a protagonist tries to imitate them and, therefore, dooms such a character to decay, these gods fail in their cursing of Antony and Cleopatra. To investigate this notion of human triumph over the fate ordained by Fortune, I will explore the concept of Renaissance humanism in relation to the deeply heroic nature of the two protagonists. I even venture to demonstrate how their heroism can be interpreted as a very intense and enhanced form of humanism, even a 'radical humanism' rather than what G.Wilson Knight calls a "transcendental humanism". Knight's "transcendental humanism" is about a humanism that transcends the 'natural' realm where the protagonists are now "transfigured under the intense ray of love and keenest poetic vision", about a "general elevation of humanity [...] to two main streams of imagery: those of (i) War, and (ii) Love." (210). Humanism in *Antony and Cleopatra*, as I understand it, is a humanism of challenge, of human dignity and non-surrender to an antihuman fate. It is a humanism about assuming humanist decisions and trying to regain a perfect and prelapsarian nature even if this means fighting against Fate. Humanism here, as I argue, is about humanity triumphing over death, Fate, and Fortune.

* * *

According to Nicholas Mann, the term *umanista* was first used in fifteenth-century Italian academic jargon to describe a "student of classical literature and the arts associated with it, including that of rhetoric" (In Kraye, 1). Mann also maintains that the English equivalent, i.e. humanist, made its appearance in the late sixteenth century with a very similar meaning (*ibid*). R.H. Wells, in *Shakespeare's Humanism*, holds that 'humanist' was first used in England in 1589 describing someone who taught the humanae litterae or the "liberal arts" as Prospero calls them in *The Tempest* (I.ii.73) (7). "Only in the nineteenth century, however, and probably for the first time in Germany in 1809", says N. Mann, "is the attribute transformed into a substantive: humanism" (Kraye, 1). As a substantive, the word stands for "devotion to the literatures of ancient Greece and Rome" as well as for "the humane values that may be derived from them" (*ibid*, 2). The term also encapsulates the whole Renaissance philosophical movement that emerged in fourteenth century Italy (Kelley, x) and which, as a cultural trend, contributed to the building of the modern world with its cultivation of the arts and science of the classical knowledge (Kelley, ix). Classical texts were indeed the material ground for Renaissance humanism and, reaching back to antiquity, humanists nourished the desire to revive the knowledge of the past such as Greek and Roman philosophy, grammar, rhetoric, theology, and law. These fields of study were immediately embraced then celebrated for both the distinctive and revolutionary ideas they triggered. In Nicolas Orbellis's words: "Grammar speaks, Logic teaches truth, Rhetoric colors discourse, Music sings, Arithmetic counts, Geometry measures, Astronomy watches the stars" (In Kelley, 64). Nicholas Mann adds:

Humanism is that concern with the legacy of antiquity – and in particular, but exclusively, with its literary legacy – which characterizes the work of scholars from at least the ninth

century onwards. It involves above all the rediscovery and study of them and the assimilation of the ideas and values that they contain (In Kraye, 2).

In addition to the knowledge revived from the past, humanism received an impetus from the urban, educational, artistic, and familial culture of Renaissance Italy (Kelley, x; 1; 14). Both rooted in antiquity and motivated by the intellectual circumstances of the Elizabethan era, humanism flourished as a set of beliefs that expressed the spirit of the age. Among these beliefs, one notes the belief in man and the affirmation that mankind is glorious, noble, and godlike. Almost suddenly, man has become the center of the universe and the main object of enquiry. As Charles Edward Trinkaus states in *The Scope of Renaissance Humanism*:

Humanism was deeply concerned with the dignity of man, giving new importance to human values while taking full account of human limitations. This approach, which was central to the Renaissance, gave expression to a renewed interest in man in his historical setting and to a heightened appreciation of the qualities and achievement, the "wonders" of man, without any repudiation of the Creator in whose image man was wrought. The fact that a special concern for the nobility and affective eloquence of the human figure in an increasingly natural environment was a central characteristic of the paintings of Giotto [...]. (33)

Clearly, humanists devoted much thought to the study of the nature of man. Their studies put man under a lot of scrutiny, and much focus was given to the analysis of the human faculties. Numerous treatises on the subject sought to showcase the godlike image of man. Man was indeed deemed the heir of God and the most admirable creature in the universe, a creature whose image is modeled on the image of the God Himself, something which offered complexity but also a possibility to rise above imperfections and reach

towards a superior plane of existence. Vincent of Beauvais had marveled that "[m]an, this miracle-compendium of creation, this universal creature made in the image and likeness of God, should become by himself, by his thoughts and by his wisdom, the living image of the universe, the great universal mirror in which should be reflected God, the world, and humanity" (Gabriel, 8).

Before reaching back to classical accounts of man though, some Renaissance humanists such as Cicero turned to Judeo-Christian accounts of the greatness of mankind. A critical Christian text that contributed to the humanists' praise of man was nothing else than the Bible, more specifically passages such as Genesis 1:26: "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness"; and Genesis 1:28: "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." ²⁵. The neo-Platonist, Pico della Mirandola, even immersed himself in the teachings of the Kabbalah with the aim at decoding—or maybe fully embracing—the aura of superiority surrounding mankind. His studies resulted in one of the most elated accounts of man which he called "poetic theology". His account, entitled Oration on the Dignity of Man served as an introduction to his 900 theses on religious philosophy, natural philosophy, and magic. The Oration has received great praise and is often referred to as the most glorifying laudation of mankind (Kerrigan, 117). In Prisci Theologi and the Hermetic Reformation in the Fifteenth Century, it is Pico della Mirandola's Oration that James D. Heiser refers to as "the Hermetic Reformation". In the *Oration*, the Renaissance occultist

²⁵ I am grateful to C.E. Trinkaus for reminding me that as much as the Renaissance thought is influenced by pre-Christian treatises, pagan cults, and seemingly secular ideas, it is inspired by medieval religious and theocentric thought.

begins his text with the quotation "A great miracle, Aesculapius, is man" (In Trinkaus, 349). Meditating upon man's power to be master of his life and destiny, Pico della Mirandola even imagined God telling man: 'Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish. Thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul's judgment, to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine" (225).

"[T]o be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine" is the key idea when it comes to the study of Renaissance philosophy and portrayal of the human(ist) existence in the world. Reaching towards the divine and climbing the great chain of being are important Renaissance concerns that I shall return to later in this chapter. One should, however, investigate the tools or rather grounds on which man was encouraged to tread in his quest for divine transfiguration. What made man a topic for philosophical thinking and a source of admiration among humanists is the ideal shape and capacities that he was endowed with. Physical senses, intuition, and intellect mesh together to make man a creature capable of transcending the static existence of objects and plants: they also allow him to rise above the instinctive conduct of animals. Consequently, man covets an angelic, even a divine, form of existence. None can express this better than Hamlet, who, as it is argued among scholars, embodies Renaissance optimist humanism but also early baroque cynicism and disenchantment. In the following soliloquy, Hamlet wonders at man's faculties and workmanship:

What piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals

(II.2.305-9)

Equally speaking of man's distinctive and privileging attributes, Annibale Romei, in his *Courtier's Academy*, defines man as "[t]his heavenly creature whom we call man, was compounded of soul and body, the which body, having to be the harbor of a most fair and immortal soul, was created [...] most exquisite, with his eyes toward heaven, and was placed in the midst of the world to the end that as in an ample theater, he might behold and contemplate the works of the great God, and the Beauty of the whole world: as also there was granted unto him a perfect tongue and speech, that enflamed with love divine, and replenished with admiration, he might praise, and with words extol divine beauty" (In Spencer, 4).²⁶

The new conception of man teems with a revolutionary optimism and a glorification of what this noblest creature is capable of achieving. The early Renaissance clearly advances a certain "assertion of human dignity against the ascetisms of medieval misanthropy" (Tillyard, 11). The human dignity and pride are also evoked in treatises and meditations on the universe. Numerous humanists indeed marveled at the beauteous harmony in which all

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²⁶ It is noteworthy to state that philosophers were divided between whether the body is as equally important as the mind. This 'classic' debate was also triggered between Renaissance thinkers. Often, the body was seen as having a negative influence and, therefore, has to be ruled by the mind. Sukanta Shaudhuri in *Infirm Glory*: Shakespeare and the Renaissance Image of Man summarizes the debate saying "Most humanists would admit the 'amphibious' nature of man, the union of higher and lower faculties in his nature. The main body of humanists might try to overcome this duality, foster the 'higher' man alone through intellectual labour or spiritual discipline; the religious-minded may stress the need for God's grace to accomplish this task. But the more heterodox, such Rabelais and Montaigne, would not consider such a separation desirable. They delight in exercising the intellect, but they also have a sense of its very limited efficacy. Learning is tested against real life-to a great extent, against the physical appetites-and is accepted only if it agrees with basic human nature" (17). For Francis Bacon, the human mind offers "the just and lawful sovereignty over men's understanding, by force of truth rightly interpreted, is that which approacheth nearest to the similitude of the divine rule" (Johnston, 57). Similarly, E.M.W. Tillyard in The Elizabethan World Picture, maintains that reason is the "supreme human faculty", it guarantees that man rises above the bestial plane of base appetites and align himself to God and the angels (78). Tillyard holds that the mind is composed of two parts, understanding (or wit) and the will, both are the basis on which Elizabethan ethics are built (79).

the living and non-living things are shrouded, a harmony so praised that it often recalls a prelapsarian worldview and further stresses humanist optimism. There is no doubt that the Renaissance man, a distinguished dramatist or a farmer in the countryside, had a conception of the universe influenced by the 'new' knowledge channeled through classical treatises, literature, and philosophical pamphlets. The Elizabethan worldview commingles Christian doctrines that dominate the medieval mindscape and a resuscitated Platonist knowledge sometimes resembling principles from pagan cults. This unique mixture presents the universe as created according to a specific divine pattern characterized by order and harmony. All creation, according to the Elizabethan thinkers, observes 'degree, priority, and place' (*Troilus and Cressida*, Liii.86). The harmony of the world is assured by a hierarchal system and a microcosm/macrocosm dichotomy.

Owing much to the Platonist conception of the universe indeed, Elizabethan thinkers and astrologists believed that the universe was divided into two levels: the sphere beneath the moon and the sphere above the moon (Tillyard, 46). Above the moon, things were purer than the world existing beneath the moon for, above the moon, there was ether, thought to be the fifth element, and which composed the pure atmosphere of the sphere existing above the moon. The heavenly bodies, also referred to as the 'fixed stars', planets, celestial bodies or spheres, are located in the pure realm above the moon and highly affected life on earth and life both in and of man as much as they had "absolute sway over plants and beasts" (Tillyard, 68). Accordingly, all existing things seemed to submit to an inherent configuration that is set by higher forces. Renaissance rituals such as harvest, weddings, and prayers were performed during specific times that respected the alignment of the planets and conjured

superhuman and spiritual energy. This mysterious energy, embedded in the instinctive functioning of the universe, was often understood in relation to "the music of the universe" or, in George Hakewill's words, the "melody made up by the motion of the celestial spheres" (In Tillyard, 56). As mentioned in the previous chapter, the universe was illustrated by Robert Fludd as a giant viol composed of spherical entities and mathematical ratios and itself composing a harmonious cosmic music. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Lorenzo tells Jessica:

There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st But in his motion like an angel sings, Still quiring to the young-ey'd cherubins; Such harmony is in immortal souls

(V.i.60-3)

The music of the spheres guarantees a harmonious design of life in the vast universe and equally maintains the operation of things in a concordant way. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault quotes from *Magie Naturelle* by G. Porta comparing all forms of being to a "rope stretched [...] by a reciprocal and continuous connection". He says:

As with respect to its vegetation the plant stands convenient to the brute beast, so through feeling does the brutish animal to man, who is conformable to the rest of the stars by his intelligence; these links proceed so strictly that they appear as a rope stretched from the first cause as far as the lowest and smallest of things, by a reciprocal and continuous connection; in such wise that the superior virtue, spreading its beams, reaches so far that if we touch one extremity of that cord it will make tremble and move all the rest. (48)

Plants, beasts, and humans, and all the other beings contribute in fashioning a circular view of existence where order is maintained by celestial music and powers²⁷. Order is the main characteristic of the divine design of the world. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Ulysses explains:

The heavens themselves, the planets and this centre Observe degree, priority and place,
Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,
Office and custom, in all line of order;
And therefore is the glorious planet Sol
In noble eminence enthroned and sphered
Amidst the other, whose med'cinable eye
Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil
And posts, like the commandment of a king,
Sans check, to good and bad.

(I.iii.85-94)

The notion of the order that rules the universe is, however, threatened by chaos. When the planets' orbits are distorted, and disorder disrupts the harmonious universal patterns, "frights", "changes", and "horrors" are unleashed. Ulysses adds:

But when the planets
In evil mixture to disorder wander,
What plagues and what portents, what mutiny,
What raging of the sea, shaking of earth,

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²⁷ The idea of the universe resembling a circle is central to the Renaissance thought. W.R. Elton, in his essay entitled *Shakespeare and the Thought of his Age*, explains: "Renaissance astrological views operated within a finite universe of spherical shape-the circle was regarded as perfection in form and motion-and the very small planet earth was at its centre and lowest point" (21). Some Renaissance thinkers such as William Caxton believe that the creator of the universe shaped the latter in a circular form, all round like "a pellet the which is all round; and he made the heaven all round which environeth and goeth round about the earth on all parts wholly without any default, all in like wise as the shell of an egg that environeth the white all about. The which in Latin is called *hester* [aether]" (In Tillyard, 53). According to Daniel Vitkus in *The 'O' in Othello: Tropes of Damnation and Nothingness*, Shakespeare often employs the interjection "O" as "an archetypal image [...] the "O" as symbol, including the perfect circle as an image of the round world or all-encompassing, concentric universe that turns in ordered harmony" (349).

Commotion in the winds, frights, changes, horrors,

Divert and crack, rend and deracinate

The unity and married calm of states

Quite from their fixure! O, when degree is shaked,

Which is the ladder to all high designs,

Then enterprise is sick.

[...]

This chaos, when degree is suffocate,

Follows the choking.

(I.iii.94-103; 125-6)

The idea of order is also evoked by Theodore Spencer in *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man*:

Nature's order was shown in the elements, in the stars, in the hierarchy of souls, in the ranks of society. Everything in the world was part of the same unified scheme, and the body and soul of man, each a reflection of the other, and both an image of the universal plan, were the culmination and the final end of God's design. (20)

In his study of human sciences and the system of human thought, Foucault cites *convenientia* as a natural law that showcases the harmony of nature and helps understand what he calls "the syntax of the world" (20): Foucault explains *convenientia* as "a resemblance connected with space in the form of a graduated scale of proximity. It is of the same order as conjunction and adjustment. This is why it pertains less to the things themselves than to the world in which they exist" (21). *Convenientia* is therefore the linking of things on the basis of their resemblance thus making the world an immense concordant chain:

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In the vast syntax of the world, the different beings adjust themselves to one another; the plant communicates with the animal, the earth with the sea, man with everything around him. Resemblance imposes adjacencies that in their turn guarantee further resemblances. Place and similitude become entangled: we see mosses growing on the outsides of shells, plants in the antlers of stags, a sort of grass on the faces of men; and the strange zoophyte, by mingling together the properties that make it similar to the plants as well as to the animals, also juxtaposes them. All so many signs of 'convenience' (*ibid*, 20-1)

Alongside the concept of convenientia, there is analogy. Already familiar to Greek science and Medieval thought, analogy speaks of, to use Foucault's words, "adjacencies", "bonds and joints", "subtle resemblances of relations", and "similitudes [...] between things" (23-4). It is about the "relation of the stars to the sky in which they shine [.] [It] may also be found: between plants and the earth, between living beings and the globe they inhabit, between minerals such as diamonds and the rocks in which they are buried, between sense organs and the face they animate, between skin moles and the body of which they are the secret marks" (Foucault, 24). In the Renaissance philosophies, analogy often goes hand in hand with the famous dichotomy of microcosm/macrocosm. Such duality implies that the human beings, more than animals or vegetation, are more impacted by celestial configurations. The workings of man's body and soul are deeply influenced by the movement of the stars and the workings of the outer universe. The opposite is also true, and the great world may often reflect the state of man's inner world. This is what the Renaissance thinkers referred to as "correspondence" or the micro/macrocosmic mirroring of human and natural harmony (or sometimes chaos) in one another. In The Elizabethan World Picture, E.M.W. Tillyard states that "[1]evels of existence, including human and cosmic, were perceived everywhere. Man as microcosmic model was thus a mediator between himself and the universe; and knowledge of one element in the microcosmmacrocosm analogy was knowledge of the other" (17-8). An example from *King Lear* reflecting this dichotomy is when Lear's madness is displayed as an inner and outer storm. Moreover, each body part was even thought to possess cosmic affinities with the celestial bodies: the brain with the Moon, the liver with the planet Jupiter, while the spleen was ruled by the planet Saturn (Elton, 21). Each planet infused a particular humor or temperament; while Mars was thought to provoke anger, Saturn was associated with melancholy: the adjective "saturnine" means "gloomy", "moody", or "mysterious" and originally stems from the Latin *Saturninus* Of Saturn', associated by astrologers to the planet and to slowness and gloom (Oxford dictionaries).

An equally important concept, in addition to analogy and correspondence, and which stands as a feature of Renaissance thought, is hierarchy. Both living and non-living beings are positioned hierarchally in what is known as the great chain of being. From the cosmos divided into higher and lower spheres to senseless stones and pebbles, all creation assumed a position in the chain. The idea of the chain of being was not a Renaissance product but had begun with Plato's *Timaeus* and was developed by Aristotle before it was re-adopted by the Alexandrian Jews and spread by neo-Platonists in the sixteenth century (Tillyard, 34)²⁸. At the bottom of the chain, there is mere existence: senseless things, elements, liquids, and metals. This inanimate class is below the true existence. The latter, mingled with life, spans the vegetative components of the world. Higher than the vegetation of the universe are animals and mankind. What makes the cosmic position of mankind higher—and thus nobler—than that of the other creatures are understanding and wit. Nobler than man are the

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²⁸ I am very grateful to E.M.W. Tillyard for the insightful *Elizabethan World Picture* which serves as a condensed introduction to Renaissance thought especially on the great chain of being.

angels with their unfallen status. At the top of the chain of being is God, creator of the universe and ultimate life force.

The position of man in the chain of being earned much speculation among thinkers and theologians. Man is secured a central position that is intermediate between the natural and supernatural worlds, a pivot between mere sense experience and rational reflection (Kelley, 44). Man is, therefore, the border line between animals' instinctive existence and the angelic realm of ideas. Interestingly, and although each creature is assigned a precise position, there is always a possibility to move up or down the chain. Tillyard even compares the chain of being to a ladder (36): man can indeed ascend upwards towards god or sink into animalistic forms of being. Sukanta Shaudhuri in *Infirm Glory: Shakespeare and the Renaissance Image of Man* states:

Man occupies a particular position on the scale of being; but because this position is an intermediate one, bridging or comprehending all categories of existence, he also has a unique capacity for ranging freely along the scale. The potential of the entire created universe can be realized and perfected in him, united with the absolute or maximum (28).

Humanists and Neo-Platonist like Pico della Mirandola foregrounded the possible mobility down as well as up the ladder of creation. Man has a fundamentally "self-transforming nature" and is able to refashion himself in transcendental ways (244). In this way, Pico della Mirandola concluded, "we can become what we will" –if only we devote ourselves to the riches of philosophy, science, and religion as well as to the conventional program of humanist learning (*ibid*, 225). Accordingly, man can sink to animalistic baseness or rise to a position of "an angel and the son of God' (*ibid*, 225).

These accounts of the ability of man to move through the chain of being, ascend or fall as his deeds imply, invoke two important ideas that foster the humanist philosophy of the Renaissance. These two ideas are, first, deciphering the secrets of nature, and, second, aspiring to become divine. I shall first demonstrate how man was encouraged to use his impressive and distinctive physical and intellectual faculties in reading "the infinite book of nature" (I.ii.7) then I will turn to how the 'wisdom' found in the natural realm was thought to trace the path towards a higher position in the chain of being and, therefore, assures a nobler form of existence.

Beholding "the works of the great god" and extolling the "beauty of the whole world", to use Annibale Romei,'s words, connote a famous humanist practice, that is, contemplation, or dedicating one's time to a *vita comtemplativa* (In Spencer, 4). This practice is achieved through the mind, often deemed as the divine gift to man and the ultimate way to rise above the status of animals and other instinctive or senseless forms of being. Renaissance neo-Platonists like Philo stress that "the divine image in man is the mind. Molded after the archetype of the Mind of the universe, the human mind is like a god in man [...] [s]ince man's mind was created out of divine breath and man's body from clay" (Trinkaus, 345). Consequently, the mind places man as the borderland between ethereal and base forms of being, between the mortality of the body, and the immortality of the ideas—the ideas here are to be considered as ideas provoked by the thinking mind, but also, ideas that trace a bridge towards supra-lunar ideas, in the Platonist diction.

The mind as a gift—together with other physical and intuitive attributes with which man was endowed—points to man's mission in the universe. The mission or the goal behind man's existence in the world was the subject of a lot of Renaissance speculation. In *The Elizabethan World Picture*, Tillyard holds that regaining a pre-Fall knowledge is the pulsing desire that animates man's existence. In fact, under the influence of Christian teachings, many Renaissance humanists viewed man as stripped of his angelic—even divine—knowledge once fallen from Eden. These thinkers' humanism stems from their belief in man's capacity to reclaim that knowledge through serious and constant striving for a better existence and ambitious devotion to art²⁹. Labor and art seem to be the means by which man can "regain true-self knowledge" and mend his post-Fall alienation from perfection (Tillyard, 28). John Milton states:

The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright... But because our understanding cannot is this body found itself but on sensible things nor arrive so clearly to the knowledge of God and things invisible as by orderly conning over the visible and inferior creature, the same method is to be followed in all discreet teaching (5-6).

"Teaching" is a key word to the Renaissance humanist. With the humanist learning, arose different disciplines such as rhetoric, the philosophy of religion, poetry and philosophy, mathematics, political thought, the foundations of anthropology. All forms of knowledge aim at deciphering the divine signs inscribed in nature. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault concludes that "[t]he world is covered with signs that must be deciphered, and those signs,

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²⁹By the term 'art' is meant "all the techniques by which man interprets Nature's rules and so finds out the truth; the art of cosmography, of astronomy, of government, of logic, of rhetoric, of poetry, of painting, and of the practical crafts—art is the interpreter of Nature's rules, and in the exercise of art, itself the product of Nature, man helps to fulfill his natural function" (Spencer, 17).

which reveal resemblances and affinities, are themselves no more than forms of similitude. To know must therefore be to interpret: to find a way from the visible mark to that which is being said by it and which, without that mark, would lie like unspoken speech, dormant within things" (36).

The natural world, although teeming with secret knowledge, is meaningless without man's interpretative powers and curiosity. Man's role is that of a discoverer, an interpreter, before he becomes an architect. In *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man*, Theodore Spenser compares the world to a "vast theater in which man could sit to contemplate what the divine architect has made for him" (10). Through altering the world himself, man becomes a second architect, less divine, but skilful and effective nonetheless. Such practice enables him to achieve the full realization of his dignity and a certain emulation of god. Gaining more knowledge of the world surrounding him indeed confirms man's aspiration to govern nature, and, by extension, assume a godlike position. As Thomas Starkey states:

This is certain and sure—that man by nature far excelleth in dignity all other creatures in earth, where he is by the high providence of God set to govern and rule, order and temper all to his pleasure by wisdom and policy, none otherwise than God himself doth in heaven govern and rule all celestial things (11).

Becoming godlike has always been a master-theme in hermetic philosophy and practices. Contemplation of the world, intellect, and pious devotion to religious rituals has always motivated philosophers, hermits, and saints. It is also a defining feature of mankind, often evoked in association with man's divinely-inspired wisdom and intellect³⁰. The

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³⁰ It is important to mention that although many humanists stressed man's role in becoming godlike, that is, through labour, knowledge, and creation, other thinkers took the deification of man for granted. In other words,

exultant words of Faustus, "A sound magician is a mighty god./ Here, Faustus, try thy brains to gain a deity!"(I.i.64-5), testify to this. Pico della Mirandola, too, though more eloquently, voices man's longing to be godlike:

Let us fly beyond the chambers of the world to the chamber nearest the most lofty divinity. There, as the sacred mysteries reveal, the seraphim, cherubim, and thrones occupy the first places. Ignorant of how to yield to them and unable to endure the second places, let us compete with the angels in dignity and glory. When we have willed it, we shall be not at all below them" (In Kerrigan, 120).

* * *

To be godlike is an important feature of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras when Shakespeare wrote his plays. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Egypt, with its Edenic attributes, is the locus where the two protagonists, in the image of the Greek tragic heroes, reach out to a divine plane of existence. I will investigate this idea of self-deification in *Antony and Cleopatra* in relation to both Elizabethan and Jacobean cultures and the humanist thought that marked Renaissance philosophy. I will finally demonstrate how the humanism of the

the deification of a number of men selected by the divine will is a matter of fact that would happen sooner or later. In his sermon, *De mysterio Eucharistiae*, Valla declared, "[...] God reveals to pious and believing minds that, as he transforms that bread, so he will transform us in the day of judgment, into God" (In Trinknaus, 29).

two protagonists is a radicalized appropriation of the Renaissance humanist thought in a way that accentuates and expands the philosophy's main principles.

Antony and Cleopatra perfectly epitomizes Renaissance man's aspiration to become divine. This humanist desire is echoed from the very opening scene in the play. When Cleopatra asks Antony about the size of his love for her, he replies: "Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth" (I.i.17). Already, one understands that the whole universe is too small for their love and, by extension, too small for them as lovers. Clearly, to find a universe that matches their grandeur, the "mutual pair" needs to set sails for a larger universe, a new earth, and a new heaven wide enough to contain the impressive expansiveness of their feelings. The couple speaks—and is almost always spoken about—with eloquence, perpetually associated to heavens, spheres, planets, vegetative elements, and other cosmic attributes that relate to the Elizabethans' worldview. Antony is not only the paragon of man (I.v.75) but also a god incarnate that imagination fails to conceptualize. Cleopatra says:

Nature wants stuff

To vie strange forms with Fancy; yet t'imagine

An Antony were Nature's piece 'gainst Fancy,

Condemning shadows quite.

(V.ii.96-99)

Nature is unable to produce shapes as magnificent as imagination does. Nonetheless, if one is to imagine Antony in nature, the Roman soldier would stand as nature's most wonderful piece of creation discrediting any shape or form that imagination could fashion. In other

words, when Antony is real and part of the natural world, nature is more creative and masterful than the considerable, yet limited, powers of imagination.

Cleopatra, on the other hand, is a queen "descended of so many royal kings" (V.ii.324) solemnly appearing as a charming enchantress. Her "infinite variety"(II.ii.241) wields magical powers and her thanks are a blessing (IV.viii.14). Her magical powers however, are not human, and her posture as a wrangling queen is rather divine. Swift and wondrous are her wishes and orders: "Melt Egypt into Nile, and kindly creatures / Turn all to serpents!"(II.v.77-8); "let heaven engender hail" (III.xiii.159). As an oath of love for Antony, she curses herself, her children and all her subjects with their lying "graveless, till the flies and gnats of Nile/ Have buried them for prey!" (III.xiii.166-7).

Similarly, Antony declares:

Let Rome inTiber melt (III.iii.33)

Moon and stars!
Whip him!
(III.xiii.95-6)

By condemning Egypt to melt into the Nile, and Rome in Tiber, the couple overthrows standard moral categories³¹. Their audacity and disproportionate wishes hint at the couple's possession of some demiurgic power that exceeds human beings'. Antony, answering Scarus who tells him that Caesar is preparing for a sea-battle, decides that if Caesar's armies "fight i'th' fire or i'th air; / We'd fight there too" (IV.x.4-5). His decision to fight in all elements

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³¹ This idea is also found in Sukanta Shaudhuri's *Infirm Glory*, page 188.

replaces prudent military strategy with cosmic swagger. Cleopatra is even mated to one of the celestial bodies. She is "with Phoebus' amorous pinches black"(IV.v.29). "Black" recalls when Philo refers to her as dark-skinned using the metonymy "tawny front" (I.i.6). Her blackness is, however, divine, engendered by a surreal exposure to the sun-god. The sungodis one of her lovers confirming thus an "exultant sexuality extended on to a cosmic scale" (McAlindon, 240). For Enobarbus, "[w]e cannot call her winds and waters 'sighs and tears'; they are greater storms and tempests than almanacs can report" (I.ii.141-3).

The world to which Antony and Cleopatra belong is in his words 'a new heaven, a new earth', a world whose cadences are those of eternity. As Cleopatra states, stressing their superhuman lineage and "heavenly mingle" (I.v.61):

Eternity was in our lips and eyes,

Bliss in our brows' bent; none our parts so poor

But was a race of heaven

(I.iii.36-8)

Their human physiology "lips", "eyes", and "brows" are neither "poor" nor common but are of divine characteristics. This is confirmed in Cleopatra's dream of Antony where she sees his face as "the heav'ns" (V.ii.79), his legs outgrowing the ocean (V.ii.83) while his arm is cresting the world (V.ii.83-4). She also adds:

his voice was propertied

As all the tuned spheres, and that to friends;

But when he meant to quail and shake the orb,

He was as rattling thunder

(V.ii.84-7)

Antony appears not as a microcosmic image of the universe but as the universe itself,

sometimes even bigger and more impressive than the whole cosmos making the earth an

insignificant "little O" (V.ii.81). Moreover, what seems metaphoric to us is taken by

Cleopatra as being real. According to Jan Blits:

[...] to her [Cleopatra] [...] Antony was real, not merely a dream or imaginary, and that he

was superior to anything else found in the world. Cleopatra both poetizes Antony and insists

that her idealized depiction is true. Reflecting the dual and often conflicting tendencies of

spiritedness to poetize or idealize—to elevate, beautify, simplify, and suppress—and to insist

that its exaggerated or distorted description is true (202).

Cleopatra's description of Antony's voice is an interesting humanist revision of the

Elizabethan world picture. Just as his image is the image of the universe, Antony's voice is

not only as powerful as to shake the world and disturb the music of the spheres but is

probably the very incarnation of the spherical music itself. When Antony is calm and speaks

to friends and allies, his voice meshes with the music produced by the motion of the celestial

bodies, it is "propertied" but when he is angered and means to frighten or threaten his

enemies, his voice, like a rattling thunder, shakes the earth thus introducing cacophony and

disorder in the now bygone harmony of the universe. The idea of the spherical music is also

invoked when the soldiers mention that Antony's glorious warriorship has departed with the

music of Hercules.

Soldier 2: Hark!

Soldier 1:

Music i'th'air.

Soldier 3:

Under the earth.

Soldier 4: It signs well, does it not?

Soldier 3:

No.

Soldier 1:

Peace, I say!

What should this mean?

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Soldier 2: 'Tis the god Hercules, whom Antony loved, Now leaves him.

(IV.iii.16-24)

Music here is linked to the "air" and to the "earth". It is also attributed a divine dimension when it is referring to the demi-god Hercules. This music that accompanies Antony like an astral body has, at the end, left him. Even Rome, Antony's homeland, is described as a celestial sphere: "To be called into a huge sphere, and not to be seen to move in't, are the holes where eyes should be, which pitifully disaster the cheeks" (II.vii.13-5). Antony is called into the huge sphere of Rome, but he stays in Egypt. Antony as a Roman soldier is part of a sphere himself.

Such a boundless devotion to rise above human imperfections and aspire towards a divine existence conferred Antony and Cleopatra a tragic fate. As it is posited in the previous chapter, *Antony and Cleopatra*—and certainly other Renaissance plays—stages a tragedy of mankind, the tragedy of the human being wanting to climb the ladder of creation and ascend to a divine position. Similarly to the Greek tragic heroes, Antony and Cleopatra are cursed by angered forces that are often referred to as the gods. With reference to the characterization of the protagonists as demi-gods or 'daemon' in both Plutarch and Shakespeare's texts, Thomas McAlindon, too, suspects that this midway position between gods and men is the hubristic flaw behind the couple's tragedy³². In other words, the lovers'

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³² It is interesting to think here about some historians and scholars' account on the godlike nature of Antony and Cleopatra. In *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, Plutarch mentions the old belief that Antony is of a mythic lineage, a descendent of Hercules. He also refers to how Antony's physical features resembled Hercules' "commonly seen [...] in pictures, stamped or graven in metell [sic]" (McAlindon, 229). Robert Ornstein reinforces this belief while stating that Antony was "A legend in his lifetime, he is the hero of

desire to become gods was erroneous as not only it represented a sacrilege to the true gods but also implies the rejection of the human part in them. He says quoting Plutarch:

In 'their puissance they much surmounted our nature: but that divinitie [sic] which they had, was not pure and simple'. Like ordinary mortals, they displayed 'a diversitie [sic] and difference of vice and virtue [sic]'. Thus they had to be punished and cleansed of their sins and offences before they could 'recover againe [sic] the place, estate and degree[...] meet for them and according to their nature' (229-30).

This belief that human beings should not excessively covet divinity is echoed by some Elizabethan philosophers whose humanism was more temperate and rational than Pico della Mirandola or Marsilio Ficino's. In *The Scope of Renaissance Humanism*, C.E. Trinkaus affirms that the Renaissance man who sought to ascend toward the divine has to accept, sooner or later, the limitation of "being God-like but not God, Himself" (355). Montaigne cynically declares that the humanist belief in the possibility of rising to an angelic or divine existence is nothing but an illusion. He maintains that man has a fixed position. The philosopher thus gives a blow to one of the most cherished premises of Renaissance idealist thought. For Montaigne, indeed, man only attributes to himself divine characteristics but that is only an illusion that hides a different state of being:

He [man] feels and sees himself lodged here, amid the mire and dung of the world, nailed and riveted to the worst, the deadest, and the most stagnant part of the universe...; and in his imagination he goes planting himself above the circle of the moon, and bringing the sky down beneath his feet. It is by the vanity of this same imagination that he equals himself to God, attributes to himself divine characteristics (330-1).

fantastic exploits and the stuff of soldierly brags and mythic imaginings (90)". Cleopatra, on the other hand, is often perceived as possessing the pharaohs' divine qualities.

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When struggling to raise Antony's dying body, Cleopatra, in a moment of recognition, referred to by Aristotle as *Anagnorisis*, realizes "[y]et come a little;/ Wishers were ever fools" (IV.xv.37-8). She, at last, comprehends that irrational and disproportionate desire to be of a divine nature is but a foolish wish. With this, Cleopatra suddenly loses all divine attributes. Wishing to lift up Antony's dying body, she wishes she had Juno's power: "Had I great Juno's power,/ The strong-winged Mercury should fetch thee up/ And set thee by Jove's side" (IV.xv.35-7) but she quickly realizes that she cannot have Juno's power and that her wish shall remain unfulfilled. Antony, too, has this moment of *Anagnorisis*. In fact, he recognizes the folly of his attachment to Cleopatra and, by extension, to the Eden-like setting and existence he led in Egypt. Addressing Cleopatra, he laments:

You have been a boggler ever,
But when we in our viciousness grow hard
(O misery on't!), the wise gods seel our eyes,
In our own filth drop our clear judgments, make us
Adore our errors, laugh at's while we strut
To our confusion.

(III. xiii.110-5)

Almost suddenly, the gods' stratagem to sink the irrational ambitious mind in disillusionment is acknowledged, tolerated, and even praised. The gods, as he contends, are "wise" while he and Cleopatra are "vicious" and their minds' eyes are blinded with "filth". For having confused boundaries between the life above the moon and the life below the moon, Antony confesses the "errors" and "confusion" to which he and his queen were subjects. Antony's words function as a moment of self-awareness, a confession of some "adore[d]" "errors", those of having blown with the winds of fate. The punishment of the gods strikes the mutual pair when Antony is defeated by Caesar at the Actium battle. Caesar

is indeed Fortune's favourite and, most importantly, the very personification of the gods'

judgments. In Cleopatra's words, Caesar is "Fortune's knave", that is, Caesar is fortune's

servant, the one who changed the course of events bringing about what fortune decided

regarding what is to happen to Antony and Cleopatra. His deeds and accomplishments are

but Fortune's wishes—wishes that stipulate that both Antony and Cleopatra shall be damned

to disgrace and servitude.

The word 'fortune' is a recurrent term in the play. Antony, worried about his

soldierly fate against Caesar, asks the soothsayer "whose fortune shall rise higher, Caesar's

or mine?" (II.iii.15-6). Looking to the soothsayer for information hints at the characters'

obsessive wish to read into "[n]ature's infinite book of secrecy' (I.ii.7) and, therefore,

predict the whims of fortune. What fate or fortune had at stake for the couple is a disarrayed

destiny: Antony is defeated in the war against Caesar and Cleopatra will have to go as a war

prize to Rome.

Although Proculeius promises that Caesar will give her his grace, the Egyptian

queen, fallen from her royal glory, does not trust the Roman leader and fears being paraded

like a trophy of victory. She imagines the "mechanic slaves" (V.ii.208) with their "greasy

aprons, rules, and hammers" (V.ii.209) watching her being paraded. The thought of them

with their "thick breaths" cheering the triumph of Rome adds to her determination to commit

suicide. In her state of revulsion, she explains:

Nay, 'tis most certain, Iras: saucylictors

Will catch at us, like strumpets, and scald rhymers

Ballad us out o'tune: the quick comedians

Extemporally will stage us, and present

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Our Alexandrian revels: Antony
Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
I'th'posture of a whore.

(V.ii.214-9)

Cleopatra gives voice to the dreaded fate awaiting her and her companions in Rome. Direct attacks on them—such as the lictors pawing them—reinforce the demise of the Egyptian queen: she will be the topic of bawdy songs and low-quality theatrical impersonation of her that certainly do not do justice to her "greatness". Not only will the Romans mock and judge them as if they were morally superior to them, but, also, shame and dishonor will be intensified as Cleopatra and her companions will have to witness the dreadful spectacle. The insults and mockery will be to their faces (Blits, 207), and while a disguised boy will stage her as a whore, Antony would be presented as a drunkard. In her fearful expression of what awaits her in Rome, Cleopatra seems to be stripped of her former divine aura and Isis-related glamour. She appears to be in the most vulnerable position screaming:

He words me, girls, he words me, that I should not Be noble to myself

(V.ii.190-1)

For the first time in the play, it is Caesar who now assumes a divine position. His sentence on Cleopatra's fate has a cosmic reverberation as it is the sentence of the gods too. The short conversation she has with Iras in the second scene of act V shows the crack in the relationship between the queen and the gods. When complaining about the atrocities awaiting her in Rome, Iras twice supplicates the gods to forbid this disarrayed destiny. Horror-stricken, she cries out:

The gods forbid!

(V.ii.213)

O the good gods!

(V.ii.220)

Counting the ills to which she is subjected, Cleopatra laments any misfortune added to all the misfortunes she already has:

The gods! It smites me

Beneath the fall I have.

(V.ii.170-1)

Charmian later states that the gods weep:

The gods themselves do weep!

(V.ii.297)

Interestingly, all references to the gods are no longer invoked in relation to Cleopatra. In other words, it is not Cleopatra anymore who the characters address as a goddess or a godlike being. When Cleopatra seems to have fallen from grace, only the gods can still enjoy a high status and a most privileged position in the chain of being. A gap is even noticeable when stylistically the word "gods" (V.ii.297) stands by its own, no longer characterizing Antony and no longer invoked in the description of the queen.

Like Cleopatra, Antony, too, runs the risk of being paraded in Rome as a war captive. He imagines the disgrace awaiting him, asking Eros if he would bear to witness the public humiliation:

Wouldst thou be windowed in great Rome, and see
Thy master thus with pleached arms, bending down
His corrigible neck, his face subdued
To penetrative shame, whilst the wheeled seat
Of fortunate Caesar, drawn before him, branched
His baseness that ensued?

(IV.xiv.74-80)

Antony who previously looked like the heavens and outgrew the oceans in magnificence is now depicted according to the most horrid image. The legendary soldier foresees the humiliation awaiting him in Rome through a plethora of verbs in the passive voice: "windowed", "pleached", "subdued", "wheeled", "branched", and "ensued". These verbs stress the passiveness and helplessness in face of what fate has ordained. Again, fate is embodied in Caesar who majestically occupies "the wheeled seat/ Of fortune".

Though he wanted Antony killed (III.xii.23; III.xiii.17-9), Caesar changes his mind and demands that Antony "be took alive" (IV.vi.2). Parading enemies as war trophies is a common Roman practice. Just as celebrating a Roman triumph is a Roman's greatest glory, being held prisoner in a Roman triumph is the greatest shame for a leader or a soldier; no fate could be worse (Blits, 179). Brutus and Cassius themselves feared that, if they lost at Philippi, Octavius and Antony would lead them "in triumph / through the streets of Rome" (Julius Caesar, V.i.107-8). It is their suicide though that spared them the shaming practice. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, it is also the protagonists' suicide that averts the disgraceful captivity and parade of Antony and Cleopatra in the streets of Rome.

With her persistent theatricality, the queen of Egypt vows: "Rather a ditch in Egypt / Be gentle grave unto me! Rather on Nilus mud / Lay me stark naked, and let the water-flies.

Blow me into abhorring!" (V.ii.57-60). To her, the worst death and burial in Egypt is better than being a slave to Caesar and a spectacle to his people in Rome. In the line: "that I should not [...] Be noble to myself," by "noble to myself' Cleopatra means 'to kill myself'. As Jan Blits notes in *New Heaven, New Earth*: "noble', in the play, almost always refers to suicide" (206). Strikingly, death is Cleopatra's response to Fortune's ill-deeds. Glorious and unbreakable, she does not submit to the tragic fate ordained on her but, through killing herself, modifies it.

And it is great

To do that thing that ends all other deeds,

Which shackles accidents and bolts up change,

Which sleeps and never palates more the dung,

The beggar's nurse and Caesar's.

(V.ii.4-8)

Cleopatra avoids the word "death". She either refers to it using the expression "noble act" as when she says: "Methinks I hear/ Antony call; I see him rouse himself/ To praise my noble act" (280-2) or uses descriptive clauses where she elaborately praises death. To her, death is the ultimate finality, the "thing that ends all other deeds", the bringer of constancy against change and probability, and ultimately the deed that kills the body, the "dung". Surprisingly, the queen seems to covet a spiritual existence with her new desire to end up the life lived through the body. She further declares: "This mortal house I'll ruin,/ Do Caesar what he can (V.ii.51-2). This unprecedented interest in death hides a certain feeling of anger, this feeling, however, is not directed to Caesar as much as it is directed to Fortune. Railing at fortune, she cries out:

[...] and let me rail so high

That the false housewife Fortune break her wheel,

Provoked by my offence

(IV.xv.43-5)

Cleopatra is aware that her pride and wrath are an "offence" to Fortune and, by extension, to the gods too. Interestingly, she carries on defying the powers controlling the universe, not caring about the outcome of such sacrilege. She seems to have found in death the key to reverse Fortune and end up living the tragedy ordained for her by despicable fate:

Where art thou, Death?

Come, hither, come! Come, come, and take a queen

Worth many babes and beggars!

(V.ii.45-47)

Using a begging, yet proud, tone as if she were playfully taunting Antony, Cleopatra courts death. The repetition of the verb "to come" four times connotes the queen's desire to finally embrace death. In order to convince the latter to finally come to her, she lingers on praising herself, showing how precious she is and how lucky death should be to have a queen "[w]orth many babes and beggars". Death comes easily to babies and beggars but because she is worth many of them, death should be impressed and lured by her value into "tak[ing]" her too.

Interestingly, Cleopatra regains her goddess-like status even after being deceived and degraded by Fortune. Instead of accepting her fate and the gods' judgment, she is again powerful, divine, and invincible. Not only does she rail against Fortune but also she, once more, glows with a divine aura. Despising the gods, Cleopatra seems to have acquired more power, a power so threatening to her subjects, to the gods, and to the whole universe. She indeed implores the sun to consume the cosmos and sink the world in darkness: "O sun,/ Burn the great sphere thou mov'st in; darkling stand/ The varying shore o'th' world!"(IV.xiv.9-11). Henceforth, Cleopatra draws an apocalyptic image of the world where

the natural order is flouted. Her wrath, resembling that of the gods, showcases a revengeful desire to attack them for the fate they obliged her to endure:

It were for me

To throw my sceptre at the injurious gods,

To tell them that this world did equal theirs

Till they had stol'n our jewel.

(IV.vi.75-8)

The scepter, carried by kings and queens during ceremonies as a symbol of authority, will be thrown at the gods. Cleopatra will do so while telling the gods that the life she had with Antony and the heavenly world the couple were immersed in did equal theirs. This world, however, is lost because of the gods. Throwing the scepter at the gods conveys that Cleopatra no longer desires this life without Antony; she relinquishes her authority but does it in a defying way as she blames and opposes the gods whom she calls "injurious". In her untamed fury, Cleopatra is more impressive and flamboyant than ever. Antony, too, speaks with a grandiloquent, yet threatening, imagery suggesting how unique and legendary this Roman soldier is. Even when dying, his persona appears as larger-than-life, disturbing more than ever the order that governs the universe. The very universe even seems to dissolve when Antony dies:

The crown o'th'earth doth melt. -My lord? -

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 level remarkable

Beneath the visiting moon.

(IV.xv.63-8)

The first line refers not only to the imperial crown but also the melting of the pole while the withering garland signals a general infertility along a total negation of life and bounty that

nature is usually praised for. With the world flat and barren, nothing is remarkable beneath the moon anymore. Blits asserts:

The gods inspired Antony to challenge them. But when he succeeded, they destroyed not only him, but the world in which such a man could aspire to do so. Having stripped the world of greatness and nobility, they have left nothing to love admire. There is no longer any glory in the world (187).

Caesar's words in the first scene of Act V highlight a more apocalyptic vision of the universe after Antony's death:

The breaking of so great a thing should make

A greater crack. The round world

Should have shook lions into civil streets,

And citizens to their dens.

(V.i.13-6)

According to Caesar, Antony's death should have shaken the world and made the human and the bestial realms exchange positions. In this way, Antony's death has cosmic reverberations that throw into chaos the whole chain of being and the universal harmony of creation. In addition, the death of Antony is not the death of a single person but the death of a "moiety of the world" (V.i.18). Presumably, the other "moiety" will die with Cleopatra. Cleopatra's death seems to have dangerous cosmic reverberations as well. When the "soul of Egypt" (IV.xii.25) commits suicide, the world becomes invested with a cosmic grief, the skies are darkened with clouds and Charmian wishes that the gods would weep with sorrow: "Dissolve, thick cloud, and rain, that I may say, / The gods themselves do weep!" (V.ii.296-7). The glorious gods perform a human deed (that of weeping) while the world, barren and deprived of rain, is drained of all life force.

In Greek drama, death is a willed act by most of the tragic heroes. Like Antony and Cleopatra, Greek tragic heroes glorify and wish for death. In most of the Greek tragedies, however, death is not an act of defiance against fate but an escape from fate itself. In other words, the Greek protagonists do not commit suicide as an act of rebellion against the gods and the gods' judgment, but they do so mainly to escape the shame and disgrace they experience when fallen from glory.

Echoing Cleopatra's words "golden Phoebus never be beheld / Of eyes again so royal!" (V.ii.315-6), Ajax laments: "But this bright day, this chariot of the sky,/ I shall not see again. Farewell for ever,/ Light" (860-2). However, when Cleopatra puts emphasis on her royal eyes showing how the sun will no longer have the chance to capture her sight, in the Greek tragedy, it is Ajax who assumes a position of a loser, not the sun-god. Ajax's final soliloquies indeed revolve around the notions of shame and loss. For Ajax, death is pictured as an escape from this state, also from a greater tragedy. The soldier who slaughtered a herd of sheep mistaking them for his Greek enemies fears the Greeks' revenge. He prays to Zeus to allow him to try once more to kill Odysseus, Agamemnon and Menelaus before killing himself and escape a possible revenge or blame:

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Zeus, O father of my fathers,
Let me but kill
That fox, and those two brother-kings
Who lord it over us —
Kill them and die!

(392-7)

After murdering the cattle, Ajax is not only sought by the Greeks for punishment but also by the Furies who condemn his act. Despised by the gods, such as Athena, and threatened by the Greek leaders, death is his only refuge. He cries out:

O darkness that is my light,

O night of death, my only day,

Take me, take me, I pray,

Into your house for ever. I have no hope

Of mercy from the gods, I am not worthy

To ask the help of man.

One irresistible

Daughter of Zeus

Hunts me to death.

And where should man *escape* that enemy?

(400-9, my emphasis)

In *Philoctetes*, death is equally an escape. For all the injustice, deception and wretchedness he witnessed in life, the deserted protagonist wishes to die. He rejects any possibility of reconciliation with the men who deceived him and deems all bonds with life broken:

O why am I condemned to live so long?

Can I not die? Ye Gods, can I not die?

What can I do? I cannot turn deaf ears

To my counsellor. But can I go

From this long wretchedness back to the light of day,

Back to the sight of men? Can eyes of mine,

Seeing such things as they have seen, see this,

My meeting again those two, my murderers,

And the evil-hearted son of Laertes? ... No

(1347-55)

Interestingly, Oedipus the king, the tragic hero does not commit suicide. However, what is striking is that Oedipus accepts the sentence of the gods without challenging the tragic fate in which he was entrapped. He even urges Creon to apply the gods' judgment against him, the killer of Laius:

Oedipus: Cast me away this instant

Out of this land, out of the sight of man.

Creon: Be sure it would have been done without delay,

But that I await instruction from the god.

Oedipus: Is not his instruction already plain?

(1434-8)

When Oedipus dies in *Oedipusat Colonus*, death is not self-inflicted. It is rather granted by the gods to relieve the old man's suffering. As H. Kitto holds: "Oedipus does indeed end in peace, but it is a peace that is accorded him, not one that he wins for himself" (392). Oppositely, Antony and Cleopatra do not await the forgiveness of the gods and certainly abhor the idea of being pitied. They keep their ideals intact even if opposed by the gods. Their death, self-inflicted, is a final demonstration of how the couple is not ready to give up their ideals.

Antony and Cleopatra fashion their ends under the conviction that their ideal cannot be embodied in this world. To attempt to convert their ideals into reality is synonymous with quarrelling with stronger forces that control the universe. They must fail and die in order to point the incessant need for a better existence in which their larger-than-life persona may find a "new heaven, new earth" (I.i.17).Death is the pathway to this "new heaven new earth"

and the bringer of liberty from a vile world ruled by intolerant fate. As George Wilson Knight states in *The Imperial Theme*:

Death is 'liberty'; it 'enlarges' the 'confine' (III.v.13) of even her infinity. Cleopatra's pulsing variety begins to show a marble stillness; and, after our long pageantry of empire, it rests with a 'rural fellow' to bring Cleopatra the key to a wider empire, to speak her sailing orders as she puts out on the brighter seas of death (315-6).

When embarking on the "brighter seas of death", Cleopatra is no longer a wrangling queen and her variety has finally found constancy. She stoically declares:

My resolution's placed, and I have nothing

Of woman in me: now from head to foot

I am marble-constant; now the fleeting moon

No planet is of mine.

(V.ii.239-42)

Her resolution attests to her enduring fame and greatness; it wards off any sense of womanly frailty or cowardice. Added to that, it is not simply feminine inconsistency that Cleopatra rejects here but also Egyptian fluidity and flux; she associates herself to an image of statuesque constancy, marble from head to toe. Her determination is, indeed, unyielding. This aesthetic stabilization as marble-constant perpetuates her myth, her remembrance, and, ergo, her identity as a powerful leader. No planet, no moon, no space or time can rule over her or alter her decision.

The stony fixity of the statue is paradoxically the very instance of a long process of metamorphosis that the queen has to go through. The outcome is that Cleopatra triumphs over fate and attains a higher status than the status she had occupied during her lifetime. 'Becoming' is indeed a key word in the play, especially throughout the suicide scene. Just as 'act' in *Hamlet* is invested with a special meaning, that of doing an action and playing a

theatrical role, the word 'becoming' in *Antony and Cleopatra* evokes a change, a transformative—and certainly transcendental—process. Mark Rose maintains that 'becoming' is interwoven with the idea of "decorum" and "adornment" (9). Cleopatra is a "wrangling Queen! / Whom everything becomes" (I.i.48-9). Describing her to the Romans, Enobarbus states:

vilest things

Become themselves in her, that the holy priests Bless her when she is riggish.

(II.ii.239-241)

All these references to becoming and changing put a lot of emphasis on fulfilment and 'reaching-out'. They also hint at Antony and Cleopatra's final becoming. Things will indeed become themselves in Cleopatra when she reaches out for a nobler existence. Then, as Julian Markels states: "death comes [...] not in dissolution but as transcendence, a sign of having approached as close to immortality as a poet may dare to imagine by becoming everything that it was in him to be" (24). At the end, the queen is finally immortal. The clown describes the worm's "biting" as "immortal: those that do die of it do seldom or never recover" (V.ii.45-6). Cleopatra repeats the word 'immortal' when she expresses the "immortal longings" in her:

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.

(V.ii.277-9)

'Becoming immortal' implies that Cleopatra assumes a truly divine nature. This is conveyed through her famous assertion:

I am fire and air; my other elements

I give to baser life

(V.ii.286-7)

Following the idea of the hierarchy of creation, the elements themselves are ordered hierarchically. E.M.W.Tillyard asserts: "The property of air and fire was to go upward in a straight line, as was that of earth and water to go down" (68). Accordingly, Cleopatra, being fire and air, rises upward. This vertical motion further emphasizes the idea of ascension and transcendence. Cleopatra has become air, ethereal, and divine. She even negates her body giving it up to "baser life". The body, made of earth and water, is common to human beings and animals, therefore, relating the former to the latter instead of linking mankind to the angels. Cleopatra now rejects her body asserting: "This mortal house I'll ruin" (V.ii.51). She

Downy windows, close;

And golden Phoebus never be beheld

Of eyes again so royal!

even adds:

(V.ii.314-6)

More glorious and arrogant than ever, the Egyptian queen urges her eyes,referred to as "downy windows", to shut. Because she is a distinguished queen, the very "soul of Egypt" (IV.xii.25), her death is an "unparalleled" loss. Even the sun-god will not have the privilege of beholding the queen's most royal eyes anymore. Her addressing the gods with such a pretentious tone conveys that Cleopatra has become finally equal—or maybe superior—to them. Interestingly, as the asp sucks at her breast, Charmian cries out: "O eastern star!" (V.ii.306) implicitly referring to Cleopatra as the love-goddess Venus.

Through her gesture of applying the asp to her breasts, Cleopatra recalls the myth of the fall. The transformative process she indulges in is, however, far from being a fall. Cleopatra uses the serpent that causedAdam and Eve to become mortal in order to reverse the myth of the fall. This time, the serpent evokes immortality, a counter-fall, a myth of transcendenceand victory instead of loss and decay. Cleopatra could be said to be claiming an Edenic existence that was proper to mankind before the fall. Therefore, and as Julian Markels holds:

For her and Antony death is not a limitation but a transformation of existence into a state of peace where the energy and the sweetness of life are at last unfettered. Their deaths signify not that one half of life is well lost for another but that both halves are found at last and hinged upon each other, in order that the whole world may be won (24).

The "whole world" that is won by the couple is ablaze with sprightliness, liveliness, and immortality. This is clearly described in Antony's visionary speech:

[...] for now

All length is torture: since the torch is out,

Lie down and stray no farther. Now all labour

Mars what it does; yea, very force entangles

Itself with strength. Seal then, and all is done.

- Eros! - I come, my Queen. - Eros! - Stay for me.

Where souls do couch on flowers, we'll hand in hand,

And with our sprightly port make the ghosts gaze:

Dido and her Æneas shall want troops,

And all the haunt be ours. - Come, Eros, Eros!

(IV.xiv.46-55)

Mark Antony urges his servant Eros to strike him dead thus sparing him the servitude and disgrace in Rome. Echoing the words of Cleopatra "Yare, yare, good Iras; quick" (V.ii.280), he insists that Eros has to be quick for "all length is torture". Meanwhile, he insists on being

brave in face of death "force entangles itself with strength". Death promises a great reward: he will be reunited with Cleopatra in a better world, a world fertile with flowers, and bathed in serenity. Antony envisions life after death where even the ghosts of Dido and Æneas will be amazed at the couple's death-defeating love. The repetition of the word "Eros" is also a pun on the name of the love-god. Again, a certain notion of transcendence could be read in Antony's speech: he indeed yokes the material "flowers" and "hands" to insubstantial "souls", "ghosts" and "haunt" hinting at a pivotal moment that separates him from a spiritual existence in Elysium where he is to meet his queen.³³

Antony insists on being together with Cleopatra in Elysium. Similarly, Caesar talks about the couple buried together and not separately:

She shall be buried by her Antony:

No grave upon the earth shall clip in it

A pair so famous. High events as these

Strike those that make them; and their story is

No less in pity than his glory which

Brought them to be lamented.

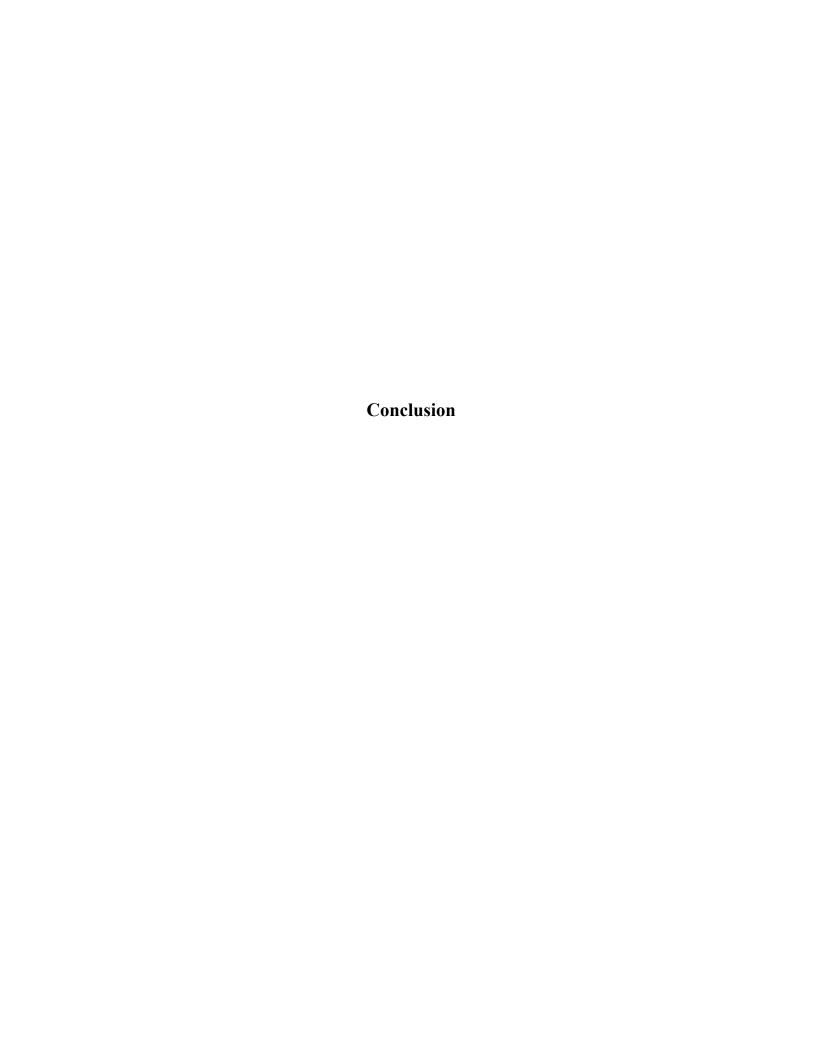
(V.ii.354-8)

Antony and Cleopatra are to be buried together in the same monument. Their grave is by far the most distinguished for enclosing "a pair so famous". Surprisingly, Caesaracknowledges

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³³ It is interesting to compare Antony's vision of life-after-death to Othello's. The two tragic heroes believe that after death they will meet the women they love. However, Othello's reunion with Desdemona is drastic and apocalyptic. In her desire to take revenge, Desdemona will toss Othello's soul from Heaven to Hell condemning him to suffering and torture in the company of Hell's demons. Othello says: "When we shall meet at compt/This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven/ And fiends will snatch at it" (V.ii.273-5). Antony, however, envisions a more serene and joyful encounter with the queen of Egypt. They lazily "couch on flowers" hand in hand and make the ghosts of other lovers gaze at them in amazement. Theodore Spencer who commented on the difference between the 'after-death' existence of Othello and Antony states: "Antony's vision is of another kind; he and Cleopatra are to be *together* in the next world, not separated by the gulf between heaven and hell. The contrast marks the contrast in tone between two kinds of tragedy" (174, author's emphasis).

that the couple deserves to be lamented and that he has a hand in these "high events". The death of the 'mutual pair' evokes his desolation but also admiration for the dignified end of the Egyptian queen and the Roman soldier. "Pity" is interlocked with "glory" and the Roman army is to attend the funeral in "solemn", quasi-religious, "show". Antony and Cleopatra, once again, stand in a position where they are paid tribute to, where they are at the center of the universe, even in death. They are the spectacle, the human gods, and the world is the abhorred but equally amazed and intrigued audience. Their story is a story of triumph against change, flux, inconsistent fortune, and wrathful gods. At the end, the word 'clip' echoes Antony's exultant: "clip your wives, your friends" (IV.viii.8); it is, moreover, the last of a whole range of verbs—"buckle" (IV.iv.11), "shackle" (V.ii.6), "bolt up" (V.ii.6), "untie" (V.ii.302), "make mingle" (IV.viii.38)—uttered by the protagonists toward the end the play, and collectively signalling a final movementtowards union and oneness (McAlindon, 256). At the close of the play, Cleopatra appears as "a most triumphant lady" (II.ii.190) carrying an impressive "sense of fulfilment," to use Mark Rose's expression (1). Antony regains his dignity and also his charming embrace choosing death but delaying it till he gives Egypt's queen "the poor last" of "many thousand kisses" (IV.xv.20). Failing to rule over this world the way they wanted, the two characters will majestically "haunt" Elysium, the abode of the dead. Accordingly, their humanism touches upon life, death, and what comes beyond it.



Egypt is Antony's utopia. It is a delightful escape from Roman obligations and an opportunity to connect with basic human instincts that fuel grandiose pleasure-seeking practices. Although it is aimed at scorning Antony's excessively hedonistic behavior, Caesar's description of Antony as "he fishes, drinks, and wastes/ the lamps of night in revel" (I.iv.4-5) does not go without drawing a portrayal of the serene and joyful life in Egypt. With its sensuous and simple pleasures, Cleopatra's Egypt recalls Prospero's island in *The* Tempest. The latter, with its "subtle, tender, and delicate temperance" (I.ii.35), is reported as having "everything advantageous to life" (Tempest, II.i.52). Like the magic island of Shakespeare's last romance, Egypt is a distinctive world where "sounds, and sweet airs [...] give delight and hurt not" (*ibid*, III.ii.20). A similar parallel can be drawn between it and the Arden forest in As You Like It for they both offer the possibility of a benign escape from either courtly obligations or soldier duties. In Egypt, luxury abounds and beds are soft and welcoming; Egypt's "love of love and her soft hours" (I.i.44) stand in sharp contrast to "the conference harsh" (I.i.45) of Rome. Giving in to Egypt's pleasures, visitors grow fat with feasting³⁴, sleep "day out of countenance, and made the night light with drinking" (II.ii.183-4). The thought of Antony fishing, dining, and wasting is equally evocative of the "Naturamodosprimumdedit." 35 The abundance of food and the sanctimoniouslife of luxurious ease recall visions of utopia. Egypt as the locus of delights and prosperity presents

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³⁴ Caesar was reported to have grown fat after the time he spent in Egypt in the company of Cleopatra and the "Egyptian cookery" (II.vi.63).

³⁵ In his essay entitled 'Of Cannibals,' Montaigne refers to the "Naturamodosprimumdedit" as the manners or behaviors first ordained by nature (Montaigne, 145).

a revision of the golden age with its peace and plenty, absence of striving and presence of spontaneous natural fruition. Because of its charming serenity, joyfulness, and the plethora of Epicurean and Dionysiac experiences, Egypt is also Edenic. Antony and Cleopatra, like Adam and Eve, enjoy a pre-lapsarian-like existence with no toil or despair. Their health, love, and immersion in heavenly pleasures make them stand in postures divine. Forgetful of their military duty and enjoying Egypt's multiple charms, Antony and his Roman companions dance "the Egyptian Bacchanals" (II.vii.100) and drink themselves into stupor. Following the Egyptian tradition of revelry, Antony urges the Roman leaders to:

Come, let's all take hands,

Till that the conquering wine hath steeped our sense
In soft and delicate Lethe.

(II.vii.102-4)

Interestingly, in this heavenly context, the two protagonists are staged in the most divine and heavenly mise-en-scène. Like Greek tragic heroes, the protagonists defy the gods through pretending to be gods themselves. Like Adam and Eve, they are tempted to discover knowledge beyond their human condition. It is because of this self-deification and lofty pride that Antony and Cleopatra meet their tragedy. Like in Greek tragedy or the Bible, a reversal of fortune occurs, and the pleasant existence now assumes dismal shadings.

However, Antony and Cleopatra's humanism resists fatality imposed by fortune. Rooted in Renaissance humanism, as much as it is rooted in Edenic imagery and the Greek tragic pattern, the play shows how the greatness of the humanist spirit overcomes cosmic circumstances. Antony and Cleopatra facing the sentence of fate, that is, to end up as slaves

and war prizes in Rome, choose to die. This choice is not a cowardly escape but a modification of fate, a refusal to submit to it. Renaissance humanism and intellectual culture stress harmony and greatness in mankind and often encourage human beings to rise to a better position in the chain of being. Antony and Cleopatra could be said to be epicurean humanists (because of their pleasure-seeking life) and radical humanists (as their humanism knows no limit). The two protagonists' humanism is limitless because it further defies the sentence of fortune and seeks to, once again, demand what was once a human property: immortality and divine-like existence. Because they could not establish this in Egypt, they decide to find their Eden in Elysium. Possibly finally divine, Antony and Cleopatra appear more glorious in their final scene. As Wilson Knight states:

[...] blue seas and the teeming earth, the winds and gleaming clouds, the languorous beauties of a tropic night, the silver and gold of moon and sun, all intermeshed to the bridal music of the spheres, and, at the last, all indistinguishable from a human voice, a human form. We see the protagonists, in love and war and sport, and death or life or that mystery containing both, transfigured in a transfigured universe, themselves that universe and more, outspacing the wheeling orbs of earth and heaven. (Knight, 262)

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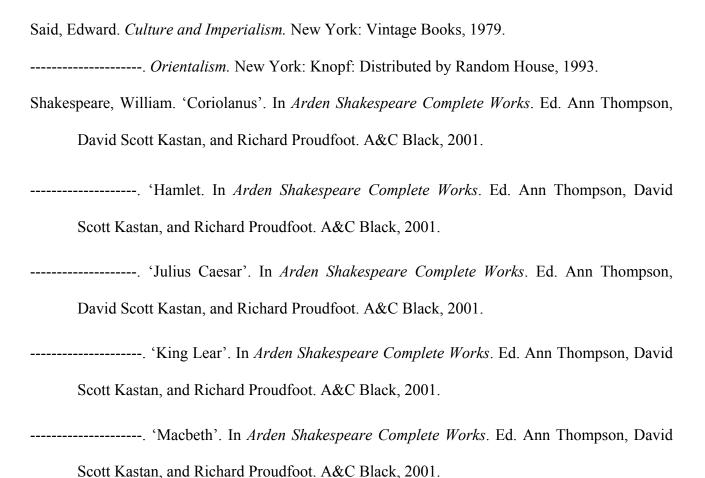
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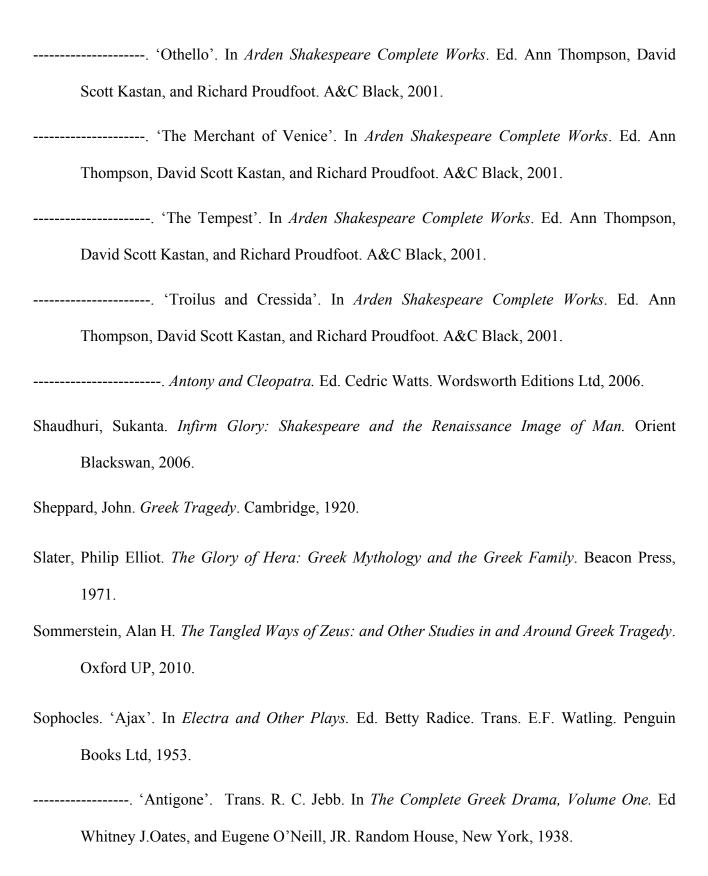
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