Tragic Love as Excess over Duty and Honour in Anthony and Cleopatra

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Abstract:
Hence Cleopatra is depicted as a voluptuous, feminine other that unmans and undoes Anthony and proves to be his fall. And yet, one is brought to admire their peerless love, which indeed, somewhat immortal between the great Anthony and his grand seductress Cleopatra, their endings in death may imply ruin and failure but may also be read as an attempt to conquer fate, that is rather than suffer physical defeat, their suicides are their triumph over physical defeat, conquest and imprisonment. The grand and peerless nature of their love is thus celebrated even as Cleopatra proves to be the ruin of Anthony.

Keywords:
Shakespeare, Love, Duty, Inconstancy. Honour
The fall of Anthony is the fall of a great man and his line of duty to the whims and manipulations of the seductress Cleopatra, it is the sacrifice of worldly honour for love, Anthony’s tragedy is that he is led to sacrifice his military prestige and honour as well as the line of duty “as bellows to a fan to cool a gypsy’s lust”. (Anthony and Cleopatra 1:1) Anthony attempts to straddle the worlds of duty and love but is unmanned and feminized by the wiles of Cleopatra, who is depicted unflatteringly as a whore with ravenous sexual appetite and barely any consideration of Anthony and his obligations to Rome and empire.

Indeed Cleopatra is depicted as Anthony’s ruin, manning him and feminizing him while leading him to neglect the call of empire and duty. As she is described in Act 2:

*Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale*

*Her infinite variety. Other women cloy*

*The appetities they feed, but she makes hungry*

*Where most she satisfies, for the vilest things*

*Become themselves in her, that the holy priests*

*Bless her when she is riggish (II ii 240-5)*

Cleopatra is thus depicted as a great seductress, who lures into her trap men whose sexual appetite for her prove interminable, she is also depicted as wanton, coy, fickle, coquettish, a seductress of infinite variety whose nature is to beguile men like Anthony from their line of duty. Indeed, Cleopatra devices ways and means to keep Anthony away from Rome which she views as the greatest threat to their romance. Unlike her charms, mutability, changeability, frivolity and fickleness, Rome is the formal and cold world of rules, formality, regulations that threaten to lure Anthony away from their great romance. As she puts it in Act 1:

*But sir, forgive me*

*Since my becoming kills me when they do not*

*Eye well to you. Your honour calls you hence*

*Therefore be deaf to my unpitied folly*

*And the gods go with you! (I iii 95-9)*

Indeed Cleopatra proves to be Anthony’s ruin again by betraying him on three counts. Firstly, when she leaves the sea battle, second when she entertains Thidas with courtesy, and thirdly when her fleet surrenders to Caesar. Cleopatra was cowardly to abandon Anthony at the first battle. It is her great mutability and frivolity as well as inconstancy to Anthony that proves to be Anthony’s undoing and defeat. Having exhausted him as a lover, she proves to be no military ally and her frivolity frequently leads her to desert him on all counts. As such Anthony is unhinged and unmanned by her behavior:

*Here I am Anthony*

*Yet cannot hold this visible shape, my knave*

*I made these wars for Egypt, and the Queen*

*Whose heart I thought I had, for she had mine*
Which, whilst it was mine, had annexed unto’t
A million more, now lost- she Eros, has
Paced cards with Caesar, and false played my glory

Unto an enemy’s triumph (IV xiv 13-20)

Anthony is divided by the masculine world of Roman duty and Egypt’s feminine love, and it is the mutability, inconstancy and frivolity of Cleopatra that proves to be his undoing. Anthony’s tragedy is that he cannot balance the worlds of honour, duty and pleasure and love and is indeed undone by the mutability, inconstancy and frivolity of Cleopatra.

We see the conflict between honour and pleasure in the opening scene:

CLEO You must not stay here longer. Your demission
Is come from Caesar. Therefore hear it Antony.

Where’s Fulvia’s process? Caesar’s I would say! Both!
Call in the messengers. As I am Egypt’s Queen
Thou blushest, Anthony, and that blood of thine
Is Caesar’s homage; else so thy cheeks pay shame
When shrill tongued Fulvia scolds. The messengers!

ANT. Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arc

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Anthony’s portrayal of Cleopatra as being ‘cunning past man’s thought’ (I. 2. 144) Indeed Anthony may be seen to place excessive blame of his own faults on Cleopatra but he is undeniably bitter about her frivolity and unmanning of him, calling her his “Serpent of Old Nile (I. 5. 25) But...
for fear that “You’ll heat my blood. No more! he refuses his request to “play one scene/ Of excellent dissembling and let it look/ Like perfect honour(I. 3. 80 78-80). Indeed Anthony calls Cleopatra other names. Coming upon Thidias kissing her hand, he calls her ‘kite’ (3.13.89) which implies that she is a sexual predator and whore. Shortly after he accuses her of having “been a boggler ever” (3.13.113) Indeed Anthony confesses to feeling manipulated and beguiled by Cleopatra. He advances a theory that “The wise gods seal our eyes” (3.13. 113), that is blind and beguile him, so that he can “make us/Adore our errors, laugh at’s while we strut/ to our confusion. (3.13. 114-16)

Hence Cleopatra is depicted as a voluptuous, feminine other that unmans and undoes Anthony and proves to be his fall. And yet, one is brought to admire their peerless love, which indeed, somewhat immortal between the great Anthony and his grand seductress Cleopatra, their endings in death may imply ruin and failure but may also be read as an attempt to conquer fate, that is rather than suffer physical defeat, their suicides are their triumph over physical defeat, conquest and imprisonment. The grand and peerless nature of their love is thus celebrated even as Cleopatra proves to be the ruin of Anthony.

References:
