

Spring Lectures 2016, for the Angel Foundation, by Peter Milward

No.4, Saturday June 18, on *Antony and Cleopatra*

Second of three Roman Plays, beginning with *Julius Caesar* in 1599

Then after a gap of 6 years including the 3 Jacobean tragedies

followed by *Coriolanus*, as completely different kind of play

change from Renaissance black and white to Baroque colour

only continuity in Roman history from Plutarch's *Lives*

in absence of Christian meta-drama

Response of Shakespeare to H Chettle's *England's Mourning Garment* (1603)

challenge to mourn the death of Queen Elizabeth

with Elizabeth as Cleopatra, and Essex as Antony?

Typical Shakespearian ambiguity/ equivocation

seeming glorification of their adultery and final suicide

as exaggerated by J Dryden in *All For Love*, as glorification

but contrast manifested in opening scene

Philo "This dotage of our general's/ O'erflows the measure.../ The triple pillar

Of the world transformed/ Into a strumpet's fool/ Behold and see!"

Ant. "Let Rome in Tiber melt and the wide arch/ Of the ranged empire fall.

Here is my space."

But "These strong Egyptian fetters I must break/ Or lose myself in dotage."

"She is cunning past man's thought."

Yet the description of her first meeting with Antony recalled by Enobarbus

The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne/ Burned on the water. The

poop was beaten gold,/ Purple the sails, and so perfumed that/ The winds

were love-sick with them, the oars were silver..." (cf. Eliot's *Waste Land*)

And again it is Enobarbus who sums up his favorable view of her

"Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale/ Her infinite variety. Other women

cloy/ The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry/ Where most she satisfies.

For vilest things/ Become themselves in her, that the holy priests/ Bless her

when she is riggish."

Meanwhile Antony returns to Rome on learning of Fulvia his wife's death

and to be reconciled with the other triumvirs, Octavius Caesar and Lepidus

to cement that reconciliation by marriage with Caesar's sister Octavia

They all arrange peace with Sextus Pompeius pirate son of the great Pompey

celebrating till all are drunk on board his ship

when Sextus loses his chance to kill them all (as advised by Menas)

Climax comes when Antony abandons Octavia for Cleopatra back in Egypt leading up to Battle of Actium (31 BC), with ships provided by Cleopatra but in the midst of the battle, Cleopatra turns back, followed by Antony and so the battle is lost, and Caesar becomes sole ruler of Roman world

Scarus "The greater cantle of the world is lost/ With very ignorance. We have kissed away/ Kingdoms and provinces."

Ant. "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."

Last resistance of Antony to Caesar back in Alexandria, but hopeless
Enobarbus gives up hope of Antony and dies

In despair Cleopatra takes refuge in the Monument, giving out she is dead but Antony on hearing the news tries to commit suicide, looking to land "where souls do couch on flowers".

Then on learning the truth, he is conveyed while dying to the Monument

Cleo. "O sun!/ Burn the great sphere thou movest in, darkling stand/
The varying star o' the world!"

And when Antony dies, she exclaims, "There is nothing left remarkable/
Beneath the visiting moon." Again, recalling Antony, she declares,
"His face was as the heavens, and therein stuck/ A sun and moon,
which therein kept their course, and lighted/ The little O, the earth.../
His legs bestrid the ocean, his reared arm/ Crested the world."

Finally, (in view of her own suicide, by means of an asp) she says,

"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."

"Give me my robe, put on my crown, I have/ Immortal longings in me.../
Husband, I come... / I am fire and air, my other elements/ I give to
baser life."

Comment of friend Charmian, "a lass unparalleled".

of Caesar, "She looks like sleep,/ As she would catch another
Antony/ In her strong toil of grace."

"Her physician tells me/ She hath pursued conclusions infinite/ Of easy
ways to die."

Problem, how the same dramatist could produce both KL and AC?