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Three Shakespearean Liars

Rowland Cotterill

In this paper I'll be offering a few remarks about three major Shakespearean characters who, by common consent or by their own admission, are greatly involved with and by lies and lying—some lies of their own, some lies by others (as I'll suggest) to which they, by lying, attempt appropriately to respond. These characters—Iago, Falstaff and Cleopatra—are three of the four whom A.C. Bradley long ago designated as Shakespeare's "most wonderful," the fourth being Hamlet. Given the overwhelming amount of critical commentary their roles and their plays have elicited, my comments on them will be brief and perhaps rather dogmatic. An extensive treatment of the ways in which they, and many other characters in these plays, fail or refuse to make good on the commitments in which their words involve them can be found in John Kerrigan's recent, excellent and very long book *Shakespeare's Binding Language*, to which I am indebted. Kerrigan, however, considers many different ways in which utterances fail fully to commit and bind their speakers; I will be concentrating, rather, on a small group of such utterances—namely, deliberate lies, uttered and/or perceived as such by on-stage characters and listeners.

As a working definition of a lie I will be making use of the formulation of Bernard Williams: "A lie is an assertion, the content of which the speaker believes to be false, which is made with the intention to deceive the hearer with regard to that content" (Williams 96).

It will be clear that the load-bearing elements of this definition lie at three points: its limitation to assertions, its stress on a speaker's belief as to falsity, and the equal stress on the deception of a hearer with regard to its content. These specifications will tend to exclude, from present consideration, a very wide range of interpersonal verbal encounters in the plays—encounters involving such things as self-deception, assumptions of disguise and consequent confusions of identity, conflicts of allegiance in love or war, and undiagnosed conflicts of basic beliefs and mind-sets. It is a familiar thought that most or all of Shakespeare's comedies and historical dramas (to go no further) are propelled in their actions, and enriched and complicated in their themes, by such dramatic motifs as these. Deliberate lies are something else.

Such deliberate lies, in fact, are far rarer in the plays than one might think. Not that Shakespeare lacks interest in the telling of lies, the perception of lies, or the situations in which they are uttered or diagnosed. The words "lie(s)," "lying," and "liar" occur frequently.

Hubert in *King John* offers a definition of a liar—albeit one satisfying only the first of Williams's three essential stipulations:

> Whose tongue so'er speaks false,
>
> Not truly speaks; who speaks not truly, lies.
>
> (*King John* 4.3.91-92)[1]

Sonnet 138 opens with resonant paradoxes about the role of lying (in several senses) in affairs of love:

> When my love swears that she is made of truth,
>
> I do believe her though I know she lies [...]
>
> Therefore I lie with her, and she with me,
>
> And in our faults by lies we flattered be.
>
> (*Sonnet* 138, 1-2, 13-14)

Hamlet is declared, on the authority of a love-letter intercepted by Polonius, to have invited Ophelia to decipher, amidst a poetic game of professed scepticism, his own "true" emotions:

> POLONIUS [*Reads*] "Doubt thou the stars are fire,
>
> Doubt that the sun doth move,
>
> Doubt truth to be a liar,
>
> But never doubt I love."
>
> (*Hamlet* 2.2.115-118)

Lying Villains

One would expect villains to be liars, and this isn't wrong. Richard of Gloucester, Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, Claudius, and Edmund in *King Lear* do all demonstrably lie. Yet it is interesting to observe that these lies often fail, as far as concerns their role in serving any merely utilitarian advancement of villainous projects and ambitions. Richard lies to Lady Anne, about his responsibility in the killing of her former husband Prince Edward, and is at once challenged effectively by her—

[1] All Shakespeare quotations are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare* (2016 edition).

GLOUCESTER I did not kill your husband.

LADY ANNE Why then, he is alive.

GLOUCESTER Nay, he is dead, and slain by Edward's hand.

LADY ANNE In thy foul throat thou liest. Queen Margaret saw
Thy bloody falchion smoking in his blood…

(*Richard III* 1.2.89-92)

—without any rejoinder on his part, despite the fact that an audience will have seen Edward (of York, subsequently established as King Edward IV) in *3 Henry VI*, to have indeed been the first to stab the victim. Aaron's lying deception of Titus, which leads to Titus's amputation of his own hand, serves, by his own later admission, a mere spirit of malice:

AARON I played the cheater for thy father's hand,
And when I had it drew myself apart
And almost broke my heart with extreme laughter…

(*Titus Andronicus* 5.1.111-113)

Edmund's lying imputation to Edgar of his own resentments against their father seems more to express his own psychic needs than to confer any added security upon his resultant advancement in favour with Gloucester or Cornwall. At a later stage in Edmund's rise to power, Cornwall explicitly sets aside the relevance, to considerations of power politics and *raison* d'état, of any issue of truth—

EDMUND If the matter of this paper be certain, you have mighty business in hand.

CORNWALL True or false, it hath made thee Earl of Gloucester.

(*King Lear* 3.5.12-15)

—despite the irony, available to an audience, of the fact that Edmund's "paper" does indeed support his claims for it concerning his father's ambiguous political commitments.

Claudius, for his part, manages for much of *Hamlet* to keep in his control the management of people (his nephew excepted) and of events without any direct recourse to lying—for he has, from the start of the play, both the physical support and the rhetorical unanswerability of a seemingly-accepted monarch. What I take to be his most direct and significant lie is uttered late in the play, at a point when his authority is undergoing a challenge whose full force he cannot—for reasons which go to the heart of his own false position—afford to acknowledge. Laertes is demanding the full and due reprisal, against Hamlet the killer of his father

Polonius, which Claudius has failed to accomplish—and Laertes requires not simply action but explanation:

LAERTES [...] But tell me
Why you proceed not against these feats,
So criminal and so capital in nature,
As by your safety, greatness, wisdom, all things else,
You mainly were stirred up.

CLAUDIUS Oh, for two special reasons,
Which may to you perhaps seem much unsinewed,
But yet to me they're strong. The Queen his mother
Lives almost by his looks [...]
[...] The other motive
Why to a public count I might not go
Is the great love the general gender bear him [...]

(*Hamlet* 4.4.5-12, 16-18)

These "reasons" have sometimes, in the criticism of the play, been taken at face value, and the assertions they contain are not implausible; moreover the claim that Hamlet commands great public popularity is well calculated to give pause to Laertes's hopes of leading any open insurrection against Claudius and the current royal family. Hibbard, however, with other editors, notes what is at stake here: "The reasons are *special* in a sense Claudius does not intend. Neither is the true reason: the King's knowledge that Hamlet can accuse him of fratricide" (Hibbard, *Hamlet* 312).

Moreover he cannot admit to Laertes that he has already (he supposes) sent Hamlet to meet his death in England. What is at stake here, in fact, is not a villainous ambition but a desperate cover-up (itself rather typical in the domain of Shakespearean villainy)—a cover-up of the crimes committed by him in his earlier path to power. It should appear, indeed, that Laertes has inadvertently exposed, to an audience if not to his own awareness, the "falsity," hitherto but now no longer devoid of direct false assertion, upon which Claudius's whole rule has been and continues to be based. Claudius adduces considerations which are, however true in themselves, lies with regard to his actual motivation—namely his need to obscure, as the true reason for Hamlet's immunity hitherto, his own knowledge of Hamlet's knowledge of his murder of Old Hamlet.

If villains characteristically lie both in self-defence (like Claudius) and as a default mode of self-expression (like Richard, Aaron and Edmund), how far might one find such motivations operating in lies told by other characters? One of the clearest cases of Shakespearean lying involves a character altogether admirable: Paulina, in *The Winter's Tale*. Addressing the insanely jealous King Leontes, she claims, of Queen Hermione his wife, that

> I say she's dead: I'll swear it.
>
> (*The Winter's Tale* 3.2.200)

This strong assertion, on which editors rarely comment, may reasonably be heard not as a justifiable belief later disproved (at some point, presumably, soon after the scene ends and long before Hermione's eventual reappearance, in the play's final scene, in the guise of a statue mysteriously animated before Leontes and his court), but as a straightforward lie, justifiable on familiar and intuitive grounds by the "Murderer at the door" argument. Leontes has been shown to have no regard either for oracular revelation or for the manifest truth of his marital relationship—and, as his treatment of Paulina's husband Antigonus and of his own baby daughter have shown, no hesitation in punishing those he misperceives as his enemies.

Iago's Lies

Still, even if good characters lie defensibly, even if villains rely on an armoury of techniques much larger than the telling of lies, what about Iago? Surely his case confirms an instinctive association of a practice of lying and—beyond the needs of self-defence, or the general social diffusion of evasive half-truths and excuses—a project led by sheer sustained malevolence. Iago, in two long conversations, leads Othello into the false belief that Desdemona is conducting an adulterous affair with Othello's junior officer and friend Cassio. This belief leads Othello to murder Desdemona. Challenged with responsibility, for this and much else, Iago offers as defence no more than the lines

> Demand me nothing. What you know you know.
>
> From this time forth I never will speak word.
>
> (*Othello* 5.2.296-97)

—lines superbly encapsulating the diabolic blend of pride and shame characteristic of a confessed villain and a confuted liar.

Now certainly Iago does lie, perhaps more often than anyone else in Shakespeare, by my count (and using Williams's criteria) just five times; yet the number may seem surprisingly low. His last lie, moreover, inculpates him directly—yet in a way that, welcomed as it must be

by any audience, the detail of the play's text cannot in fact justify. Challenged by his wife Emilia to clear himself of misleading Othello, he replies

IAGO I told him what I thought, and told no more
Than what he found himself was apt and true.
EMILIA But did you ever tell him she was false?
IAGO I did.
EMILIA You told a lie, an odious, damned lie!

(*Othello* 5.2.171-176).

But in fact, and despite an audience's predictably immense relief at the force of Emilia's ground-clearing question and accusation, Iago has never told Othello that Desdemona was, or is, false. The force of his "temptation" of Othello lies elsewhere; first, in general remarks too unspecific to admit ready disproof—

In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands [...]

(*Othello* 3.3.200-201);

—second, in one specific and significant truth—

She did deceive her father, marrying you.

(*Othello* 3.3.204);

—third and most important, in the "honesty" which, even without any proclamation of it on his own part, others consistently find in him—an honesty upon which, even at the climax, Othello insists as he declares to Emilia the fact of his reliance upon

[...] Thy husband—honest, honest Iago.

(*Othello* 5.2.149)

William Empson, across three chapters of his landmark book *Studies in Complex Words,* pursued the necessary question here: why do the play's characters take, as—until Emilia's devastating and belated realisation—they do take, Iago to be an exemplarily honest man? His answer, in its simplest terms, is twofold. Iago fits the bill for what they understand as honesty; Iago considers himself honest in the ways that matter most.

Iago's honesty consists in three things. First, he perceives and acknowledges to himself what he takes to be uncomfortable but real facts about the habitual behaviour, particularly the sexual behaviour, of his supposed and self-professed superiors. Secondly, he judges that the

concealment of such behaviour is, in all truth, unnecessary, while being, for those superiors of his, a site and a source of consistent deceptions, of themselves and others—deceptions which coexist with their patronising attitudes and language (including their backhanded praise of "honesty" in him) towards those, like him, inferior in rank and relatively immune from such systematic misprisions. Thirdly, he parades a personal commitment, in this area, to what, given appropriate pressure and stimulus from others and from events, he can offer, and may even have the duty to assert, as a body of clear and systematic insight. For "honest Iago," Desdemona, Cassio and even (with least cause) Othello are pompous, foppish and self-deluded snobs whose *de haut en bas* attitudes to him amount to a back-handed tribute to his genuine—though by them misunderstood—honesty. In his late lying claim to have told Othello directly that Desdemona was false, Iago is therefore to be seen as concealing, on the one hand, the skills of verbal indirection which he has displayed earlier, while on the other hand openly professing a belief which, though previously not directly declared by him to his master Othello, is founded on a wide-ranging and, within the play, alarmingly plausible ideology.

The clearest indication of this ideology lies in a passage which, on most other readings, involves some degree of obscurity. In Act 4 scene 1 Iago invites Othello, already near madness, to attribute to Desdemona a habit

> [...] to be naked with her friend in bed
>
> An hour or more, not meaning any harm.

(*Othello* 4.1.3-4)

Iago's thought here, as I take it (the lines have resisted convincing interpretation), is that such a heroic test of chastity belongs to a world of Platonizing love inviting rampant self-delusion on the part of such upper-class and literate Italians as Desdemona and Cassio—delusion which allows hypocritical concealment of their actual, though at first mis-recognised, mutual desire. He, Iago, can see right through this mind-set; surely Othello, he suggests, must also have done so, long since. Given (Iago means) that Desdemona and Cassio have regular sex, this is how they must have got into the way of it, and such a (potentially) "honest" soldier as Othello must, like Iago himself, be able to understand though not to forgive the mental and physical processes involved. Such an analysis, at a very general level, is indeed not without force—it surely gets bang to rights the confusions of the Lords in the earlier play *Love's Labour's Lost*.

Still, "honest Iago" is a murderous villain, and analytic Iago is a master of envy, resentment and manipulation. (Here lies—let me say parenthetically—the defining contradiction, as of Iago, so of Shakespearean villains generally: they seek both broad and casual social

acceptance, for their shrewd insights, and stark singularity, in the quest to fulfil their amoral projects.) Honesty, in Iago's terms, won't of itself afford him the psychological relief required by—his most central emotion, surely—his envy of Cassio. Honesty may perceive falsity in others; for victory over them, Iago will feel the need, beyond honesty, of lies.

One of his lies, about Desdemona's handkerchief, is well-known:

> [...] such a handkerchief—
>
> I am sure it was your wife's—did I today
>
> See Cassio wipe his beard with.

(*Othello* 3.3.433-435)

In fact Cassio has had no opportunity, in the time and space of the play, to do what Iago claims he has seen him do—and it's important that an audience should regularly refer Iago's assertions to a consistent spatio-temporal framework operating throughout the play. (Hence the importance of the issues at stake in claims—and in properly-argued dismissals—of the notion of a "double time" at work in *Othello*.) Still, Desdemona has indeed lost her handkerchief, and, all too much in line with Iago's sense of her, does lie about this to Othello:

> It is not lost—but what an if it were?

(*Othello* 3.4.80)

The important issue here is the extent to which, Iago apart, other characters in the play maintain, hope to achieve, or fail to maintain, with each other, communicative clarity. In this area Iago maintains confusion with skill and to important effect. Yet when his wife Emilia correctly assigns responsibility, for Othello's deranged cruelty to Desdemona, to "some eternal villain," Iago's (lying) response is revealing in its weakness:

> Fie, there is no such man: it is impossible

(*Othello* 4.2.133)

Clearly there could be such a man—and he would be someone whom Iago would salute (had he, in the face of his wife, the courage to do so) as an "honest" man. It is telling that Iago, in face of Emilia's hostile description, has to deny his own achievement of the quality which, under a more positive interpretation, he has sought with alarming success to sustain.

Iago's instincts, and equally his manipulative techniques, impose upon him the need to erect a *cordon sanitaire* around Othello's military, social and political contacts, denying him casual opportunities for the emergence of spontaneously communicative clarity. This consideration governs the lie with which Iago initiates the "temptation scene":

OTHELLO Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?

IAGO Cassio, my lord? No, sure. I cannot think it
That he would steal away so guilty-like,
Seeing your coming.

(*Othello* 3.3.35-38)

In fact Iago knows perfectly well that the man Othello has seen evading conversational encounter with him was indeed Cassio—it was Iago who had urged upon Cassio the interview with Desdemona whose ending Othello has (almost) seen. His lie is the foundation of the network, already described, made up of general vague claims and partial limited truths—and made up also, we can now see, of dissimulated knowledge—which leads Othello, without any positive declaration by Iago, to infer Desdemona's and Cassio's guilt.

A similar disingenuousness was practised by Iago three scenes earlier, when denying (in the course of a narration otherwise broadly accurate) his own involvement in the drunkenness of Cassio which led to the night-time street fight upon which followed Cassio's disgrace and demotion. Othello (like a modern audience) might reasonably have felt—had Iago come clean about this—that someone in Cassio's position should be able to hold, or eschew, his drink, whatever temptation might be offered by someone in Iago's junior position; he might even accept that Iago the "honest" and hard-headed ensign was blameless in the matter. But Iago will not give Othello the materials upon which such a sober line of reflection might be based.

Thus Iago systematically strives to muddy the waters of any clear mutual understanding that others might achieve. Yet one could well ask how many effective efforts towards such understanding are made in any case—whether by Desdemona, who on important matters lies, twice; or by Cassio, who embraces idle conversation with Bianca but shrinks from crucial (and in fact life-determining) encounter with Othello; or by Othello himself, who at any time after the temptation scene could have called Cassio directly to account, but prefers to insult an uncomprehending Desdemona whose guilt he has assumed. If Iago's putative "honesty" involves the view that others, especially his superiors, deceive themselves habitually and as a matter of course on topics where the plain truth is open to them (Iago's dealings with Roderigo give him some reason to sustain this view), then the tragedy of *Othello*, beyond both mischance and villainous manipulation, consists in the failure of other characters to undeceive themselves. If Iago sees Cassio's promotion as an all-too-predictable outcome of flattery, flirtation and favouritism, do the conversations and actions of Othello and Desdemona and of Cassio do as much as they might to prove him wrong? Can Iago to some

extent justify his strongly-expressed sense that, for him as well as his chosen victims, in such a world as that of this play, "To be direct and honest is not safe" (*Othello* 3.3.375)?

The Lies of Falstaff and Prince Hal

If so, it would be worthwhile to compare Iago's perceived "world" with those of the two *Henry IV* plays. The great liar, in these magnificent historical comedies, is generally taken to be Falstaff. Yet it's often seen that King Henry himself deals—with friends, with enemies, and with his own family—in what are at best manipulative half-truths. In open battle, in the first play, he protects himself by the use, and self-sacrifice, of courtiers who deceptively assume his identity. Against the rebels in the second play he benefits from the Machiavellian and casuistic verbal ambiguities of his son Prince John's diplomacy. With some reason the chief of that rebellion, the Archbishop of York, remarks: "We are all diseased" (*2 Henry IV* 4.1.54).

King Henry's lies begin, in fact, *en route* to his succession to—or rather his usurpation of—kingship. He accepts and seconds, while still under the title of "Bolingbroke," the claim of his henchman Northumberland, in *Richard II*, that

> His coming hither hath no further scope
>
> Than for his lineal royalties [...]
>
> This swears he, as he is a prince and just,
>
> And, as I am a gentleman, I credit him.
>
> (*Richard II* 3.3.112-113, 119-120)

Northumberland's language, certainly, allows him some slippage. He may mean, by "lineal royalties," no more than those rights of property and inheritance, abrogated by Bolingbroke's exile, due to one who was not only a noble but, by cousinage, actually a member of the "royal family." Yet the ambiguity works so fully to the advantage of Bolingbroke's subsequent assumption of kingship that it's hard to see Northumberland's words as innocent or transparently true. Northumberland himself, in the *Henry IV* plays, recoils, from such professed confidence in the limits of Henry's ambitions, into a deep mistrust about the character of the new King, and specifically about the likelihood of his appropriate gratitude to his former, and now compromised, supporters. Northumberland's son Hotspur, after exchanging accusations of lying with the King (*1 Henry IV* 1.3.77-116), leads an armed revolt, in the first play, whose motivation is best seen as a fundamental disbelief in the reliability of the King's language, whether at the level of promises or of bare facts.

The second play is introduced by the personified figure Rumour, spreading the false report that Hotspur has killed the King's elder son Prince Hal in battle. The truth, enacted on stage

and witnessed by the audience at the climax of the first play, is the reverse: Hal has killed Hotspur. Yet in turn Hal's due credit for this, such as it may be, is obscured throughout much of the second play by two clear lies: the counter-claim—to be the victor over Hotspur, mounted by Falstaff—and Hal's support of that claim:

PRINCE Why, Percy I killed myself, and saw thee dead.

FALSTAFF Didst thou? Lord, Lord, how this world is given to lying [...]

PRINCE For my part, if a lie may do thee grace

I'll gild it with the happiest terms I have.

(*1 Henry IV* 5.4.139-141, 151-152)

In the overall economy of the two plays' roles and scenarios, in fact, between the lying King and the lies of Falstaff stands Hal, son to one, adoptive son and tutee of the other, and arguably the most effective and empowered liar of all three. For the matter of Hotspur's death isn't the first time that Hal and Falstaff have advanced, challenged and appropriated each other's lies.

In the first play's superb tavern scene, Falstaff's manifest and increasingly extravagant lies, about the "failed heist" which he claims, in the Prince and Poins's shameful absence, to have led by default and with initial success, have been belied and derided by Hal, whose counter-claim rests upon his eye-witness (though lightly disguised) presence and effectiveness as the successful robber of the band of incompetent highwaymen under Falstaff's fallible command. To this seemingly conclusive refutation by Hal Falstaff's magnificent response—

By the Lord, I knew ye as well as he that made ye.

(*1 Henry IV* 2.4.244)

—amounts, not only to an acknowledgement, that both men were deceivers and are now liars, but to an invitation. Hal is offered a Falstaffian fellowship in friendship, even in love, amidst a "world" where the combative lies of others are encountered and transcended—and may even be avoided—by a sincere mutual acknowledgement of partnership in a conversation of conscious imaginative challenge and understanding. This is an offer which Hal accepts, when, at the end of the scene, he shields (the by now soundly and sterterously sleeping) Falstaff, in the face of the Sheriff's police enquiries into the robbery, with the outright lie

The man, I do assure you, is not here [...]

(*1 Henry IV* 2.4.466)

This lie saves Falstaff's life.

But Hal, newly enthroned at the end of the second play as King Henry V, matches and largely cancels its effect with another monarchic lie, this time in direct encounter with a Falstaff at his supreme crisis:

FALSTAFF My King, my Jove, I speak to thee, my heart!

KING I know thee not, old man. Fall to thy prayers.

(*2 Henry IV* 5.5.44-45)

It needs to be said that—whatever else may be said positively or perhaps plausibly about the supposed necessity of his rejection of Falstaff—King Henry, here, is lying.[2] Henry's lie causes—the later play *Henry V* strongly suggests (*Henry V* 2.1.82, 113-116)—Falstaff's death. Moreover the lie runs directly counter to Hal's own proud words much earlier (*1 Henry IV* 1.2.170)—"I know you all." The point here goes beyond the question of the mere acquaintanceship of Falstaff and the Prince, now King. His denial of Falstaff seeks to silence the truth—the truth that their relationship extended, beyond mutual awareness, to powerful reciprocal acknowledgement and enjoyment of each other's balances of weakness and strength. This includes, certainly, enjoyment of each other's lies—and, no less, of the truths about the lies of their surrounding world, to which, by ironic and loving acceptance (of each other and of that world) they sought to respond. ("And in our faults by lies we flattered be.")

Cleopatra's Lying Truths

A comparable sense—of precarious love, amidst the lies of powerful rulers, sustained by the countervailing powers of mutually-acknowledged trust and ineluctable uncertainty—is at work in *Antony and Cleopatra*. In her first scene Cleopatra, with the words "Excellent falsehood!" (*Antony and Cleopatra* 1.1.41), gives the lie to Antony's claim that his love for her surpasses the power of secular worldly calculation. Caesar, in the play's last scene, offers to Cleopatra, vulnerable as never before after Antony's defeat and suicide, honour for herself and safety for her children—a lie at once seen through by Cleopatra:

He words me, girls, he words me, that I should not

Be noble to myself.

(*Antony and Cleopatra* 5.2.190-191)

[2] Melchiori notes that his words are those assigned by Jesus to the Christ-like figure of the bridegroom in St Matthew's Gospel's parable of the "wise and foolish virgins"; they are also, in effect, the utterance of the disciple Peter as he rejects knowledge of Jesus.

Antony, sovereignly adapting himself to the desires and expressed needs of Caesar and Cleopatra in turn, cannot, I think, be caught in a direct lie anywhere in the play; rather he resists all demands for moral clarity and ethical simplicity posed to him—except by those (and they are many, for they are his "friends") involved in and defined by his own sustained singularity of life and profession of inimitability. To those who find him undependable, or (like, eventually, Enobarbus) all too indefinable, he responds neither with truth nor with falsehood but—a very different matter, a main defining trait, and a major difference from Prince Hal—with generosity. Yet the play's structure partly veils the site of a putative lie, or misrepresentation—the site where Antony's promise to Cleopatra to behave as

> Thy soldier-servant, making peace or war
>
> As thou affects.
>
> (*Antony and Cleopatra* 1.3.70-71)

—encounters and runs counter to his declaration of no "impediment" (*Antony and Cleopatra* 2.2.155) standing between him and the marriage with Octavia proposed to him by Agrippa and Caesar. Antony's sense of generous nobility, for its part (and in its self-confident masculinity), sees zones of compatibility, between partners and between verbal commitments, where others, not least Cleopatra, may reasonably find transgressive falsehoods.

At a more general level, and with or without Antony, this Roman world, so fully extended in territory (for Egypt, it is clear from the start, is, for Romans, part of "Rome"), so hyperbolic in its resources of linguistic metaphor, is unsure of itself in many fundamental ways. It is unsure, above all, in its mode of governance—whether by triumvirs (and, if so, by which of the many "triads" proposed in the play's diplomacy and through its structures?), or by division between two fields of military conquest (Antony's and Caesar's, or Pompey's?), or by some single "emperor" (a title referring, in the play, more often to Antony than Caesar). Amidst such admitted and more or less accepted uncertainties—involving far fewer accusations of outright lying than in the *Henry IV* plays, but far more of a sense of semantic and representational flux—it is surely the lies of Caesar which find least justification in terms of self-defence against any real threat of deception practised against him, whether by Antony or Cleopatra. The point seems guaranteed, by Cleopatra's initial failure to specify to Antony any plan of action towards Caesar, by Antony's unguarded though not naive openness with Caesar in their first encounter (2.2), and by Antony's acceptance of the marriage with Octavia whereby Caesar seeks at once to enlist and ensnare him. Antony, arguably culpable in his casual and perhaps contemptuous acquiescence, nonetheless simply refuses to feel ensnared,

And though I make this marriage for my peace,

I'th'East my pleasure lies.

(*Antony and Cleopatra* 2.3.38-39)

while Caesar's animus against Antony remains, one Act later, as relentless as ever.

It's worthwhile, then—acknowledging Caesarean deceptions and Antonian vaguenesses—to concentrate, beyond them, on the situation of Cleopatra, both within the play's basic set-up, and in consequence of Antony's marriage to Octavia: a marriage which opens up for Cleopatra the possible justifiability, or necessity, for self-preservation amidst global diplomacy and warfare, of lying. (I am offering, here, a move beyond the weary misogynist commonplaces of a criticism that takes Cleopatra to be a liar because she is a woman.)

Both as Antony's lover, and as Queen of an Egypt thoroughly colonised and "developed" as a Roman resource, Cleopatra is, from the start of the play, deeply limited as regards any freedom of action. It is no surprise that her practical subjugation and heteronomy provokes from her a singular level of verbal and imaginative autonomy, not to say irresponsibility, in her range of verbal utterances. Yet her actual lies are rare. Rather she seeks advantage from the power—political, emotional, sexual and generally charismatic—by which she commands lies from her entourage and admirers. This appears early in the play, as she orders Charmian

[...] If you find him sad,

Say I am dancing: if in mirth, report

That I am sudden sick.

(*Antony and Cleopatra* 1.3.3-5)

Later she abjectly begs lies from the Messenger who reports to her on Antony's marriage with Octavia. The high comedy of these two scenes (2.5 and 3.3) should not conceal their salience for the emotional balance between, and within, the play's titular roles. The Cleopatra who seeks, in face of Antony's seemingly-proclaimed infidelity, reassurance not in Antony's character but in Octavia's supposed limitations is the Cleopatra who (one should surely assume, from the presumable consequentiality of the play's scenario) tests, to near-destruction, the willingness of Antony, once returned to her, to throw away a clear military advantage for the sake of a declaration of physical inseparability—inseparability in defeat and rout.

Most crucially Cleopatra orders her eunuch Mardian, after Antony's final military and naval collapse, to approach him with the lie that she has killed herself (4.13.7). Antony's consequent suicide attempt leaves him enough life to hear from his follower Diomedes that this was indeed a lie:

> [...] she [...]
>
> [...] fearing since how it might work, hath sent
>
> Me to proclaim the truth, and I am come,
>
> I dread, too late.

(*Antony and Cleopatra* 4.14. 126-29)

Antony's response is revealing—as is, sadly, the virtual absence of critical response which it has evoked; "Too late, good Diomed." No word of blame for Cleopatra; nothing, in fact, to detract from a full responsibility for his own action—in him this must seem, whatever else, generous, but for her it will be likely to feel extraordinarily frustrating; even as a liar she is accepted and, it would seem (the very absence of the word is surely telling), forgiven. Hence perhaps the terms of her expostulation as he dies—

> Noblest of men, woo't die?
>
> Hast thou no care of me? Shall I abide
>
> In this dull world [...]

(*Antony and Cleopatra* 4.15. 61-63)

Her last scene, and the play's, stages a sustained attempt by her to use, amongst many other resources of language, lying so as to make, upon the remaining "dull world," some abiding impact.

Her crucial pragmatic lie here is directed against Caesar. Central to their single long-prepared encounter (5.2.110-189) is Cleopatra's professed declaration to Caesar of her personal wealth, and the exposure of this inventory, by her Treasurer, Seleucus, as substantially mendacious. The terms of the scene are closely adapted from Plutarch's *Life of Antony*; Plutarch there professes uncertainty whether Seleucus's belying of Cleopatra was or was not pre-arranged by her. The logic of Shakespeare's drama seems strengthened by a sense that it was indeed pre-arranged—that Cleopatra offers, to Caesar, a lie about a lie, provoking him into a misplaced security and confidence about his powers to read off, from the two lies, the "truth"; that is (as he supposes) that Cleopatra, seeking secretively to retain wealth and powers of patronage, is, for all her eloquent grief, determined to prolong her life.

Caesar's embrace of this non-truth allows Cleopatra the (barely) sufficient time and space to achieve her own triumphant suicide.

Yet it's not clear that this had been, throughout the scene, her single-minded goal. Her language throughout it has involved two claims, and a balancing act between them. One claim is this: her nobility merits, and may, through duplicitous rhetoric, achieve a singular power of self-disposal—whether to Caesar or to death—comparable to the power so sovereignly but frustratingly exercised by Antony throughout his life in the play. The other claim is, that she may derive, from her true and mutually-acknowledged relationship with Antony, the power to elude in death the grasp, both physical and interpretative, of all others—all except Antony himself. Her first encounter with Dolabella, her most sympathetic "Caesarean" admirer, sees her depicting to him a quasi-deified Antony, while, in doing so, representing also her own powers as his belated bride and eulogist. Can Dolabella, and can an audience, determine, as between these two implicit claims of Cleopatra's, where (some) truth may lie?

CLEOPATRA Think you there was or might be such a man
As this I dreamt of?
DOLABELLA Gentle madam, no.
CLEOPATRA You lie up to the hearing of the gods!
But if there be nor ever were one such,
It's past the size of dreaming.

(*Antony and Cleopatra* 5.2.92-96)

Falstaff's lies sustained, against a King's lying power, a particular shared understanding and affection. Cleopatra's "dream" of Antony gives the lie to the false claims and lying manipulations of such a mere "universal landlord" (*Antony and Cleopatra* 3.13.72) as Caesar. In these respects, perhaps, as accepted and self-accepted liars, they deserve some credit for truth.

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