THE MESSENGERS IN SHAKESPEARE’S ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

BY RAY L. HEFFNER, JR.

In electing to present the story of Antony and Cleopatra not, as Dryden did, by compressing the action to a single climactic day in a single place but instead by shifting the scene rapidly over the known world and allowing ample time for almost innumerable turns, counterturns, and apparent vacillations by his protagonists, Shakespeare avoided some problems of dramatic construction and magnified others. In The Tempest, in which the unities are observed, a long and potentially tedious exposition by Prospero must be rather artificially introduced by assuming that, in all their years more or less alone together on the island, not until now has Prospero told Miranda one word about their past. But instead of suppressing this dramaturgic difficulty, Shakespeare boldly calls attention to it, as Prospero punctuates his narrative with commands to Miranda to pay attention. His concern lest she, along with the audience, fall asleep prematurely itself becomes a subject of dramatic interest and tension. And the playwright’s artful effort to bring all parts of his plot to simultaneous climax at Prospero’s cell is underlined and used in the play, as Prospero gets so engrossed in the love affair of Ferdinand and Miranda that he forgets about the homicidal plot of Stephano, Trinculo and Caliban, and as his necessary agent, Ariel, repeatedly threatens rebellion. In an amusing way, the playwright’s difficulty in imposing a rigid form on recalcitrant material becomes a subject of the play, or one among several metaphors for its central action.

These same problems and opportunities do not exist in Antony and Cleopatra, but there also Shakespeare makes a virtue and a metaphor of a necessity of stagecraft. Scattering his characters around the Mediterranean but wishing to keep the dramatic conflicts among them before the audience, Shakespeare commits himself to a very heavy use of messengers. At the beginning of the play Antony, at his “lascivious wassails” in Egypt, cannot confront Caesar directly but must be informed of Fulvia’s death and Pompey’s threat to the triumvirate by messenger. The contrary pulls of Egyptian lust and luxury versus Roman politics and honor are for a time...
focused on the question, to hear or not to hear the messengers? And, when Antony and Caesar do meet, the question of how Antony treated Caesar’s messengers is the first subject of their quarrel; Antony excuses himself gracefully if untruthfully by saying that the messengers came upon him at an inopportune time. Cleopatra, waiting impatiently in Egypt, must keep track of Antony’s moods and learn of his politic marriage to Octavia through messengers. Even in the last act, though Antony is dead and Caesar is now in Egypt, the struggle between Caesar’s power and Antony’s spirit for the final allegiance of Cleopatra must be conducted largely through a series of intermediaries.

Shakespeare obviously takes great pains to diversify this host of necessary messengers and to build dramatic interest in the scenes in which they are interrogated or give their reports. Some are named (Thidias, Alexas, Mardian, Dolabella), though many are simply called “Messenger” or “Ambassador.” Some, even of the unnamed, have distinct or slightly sketched personalities. A detail from Plutarch, when Antony, who “had superfluous kings for messengers,”¹ is reduced to sending his schoolmaster to Caesar in an ignominious plea that he be allowed to live a private life, takes on special significance as this incident is contrasted with the many other embassies of the play. So also does the irony of Antony’s dying words—“None about Caesar trust but Proculeius” (IV.xv.48)—for it is Proculeius who tricks Cleopatra and captures her but Dolabella from whom she is able to charm the truth of Caesar’s intentions. Proculeius is the “true” ambassador in his loyalty to his instructions from his master; but Dolabella, under the influence of emotional sympathy for Cleopatra and perhaps of her vision of the transcendent Antony, finds a higher truth to which to give his allegiance. Dolabella, though remaining nominally in the service of Caesar, becomes Cleopatra’s messenger rather than his, as he spies on Caesar and brings Cleopatra final confirmation of her suspicions.

Among the scenes of greatest dramatic interest are those in which the principals are characterized by their use or abuse of messengers. When, in I.ii, Antony finally consents to hear the news from Rome, the messenger is understandably reluctant to give him all the bad news at once:

Antony: Well, what worst?
Messenger: The nature of bad news infects the teller.
Antony: When it concerns the fool or coward. On.
Things that are past are done with me. ’Tis thus:

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Who tells me true, though in his tale lie death,  
I hear him as he flattered.  

(90-95)

In I.iv and I.ii, we also see Caesar and Pompey receiving unwelcome political or military news, and each maintains a properly dignified bearing. This “correct” or Roman attitude towards the bearer of bad tidings is of course contrasted with Cleopatra’s outrageous behavior in II.v, when she learns of Antony’s marriage to Octavia. “Strikes him down”; “Strikes him”; “She hales him up and down”; “Draw a knife”: these are the stage directions in the Folio, to accompany Cleopatra’s magnificent verbal pyrotechnics. Small wonder that, as this interrupted dialogue is resumed in III.iii, the Messenger is eager to tell Cleopatra exactly what she wants to hear to the disadvantage of Octavia, while Cleopatra is eager to give to anything he says a construction most supportive of her pride. The truth-telling function of a messenger is in these scenes completely subverted by passion and self-interest. All these scenes, of course, prepare for III.xiii, in which Antony demonstrates the deterioration in his reason and self-control as he orders Caesar’s messenger, Thidias, to be whipped and then relishes the poor man’s pain and degradation.

Two other aspects of the scenes in which Cleopatra learns about Octavia deserve comment. First, there are the surprising words with which she first greets the messenger:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Ram thou thy fruitful tidings in mine ears,} \\
\text{That long time have been barren.} \\
\end{align*}
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(II.v.24-25)

The violent sexuality of the image is a shock, even in this court where all activity (billiards, fishing, fortune-telling) is overlaid with pornographic innuendo. But the metaphor of the conveying of good news as vigorous sexual intercourse, and the actual beating of the messenger which follows, are but extreme or “primitive” versions of a necessary device of stagecraft, by which the messenger is treated as an extension of the personality of the sender of the message, and various dramatic tensions and conflicts are duplicated in the interaction of the messenger and the recipient of the message.

A second noteworthy feature of this portion of the play is the use of time. Though four scenes intervene, the action of II.v and III.iii is clearly continuous; Cleopatra resumes an interrupted conversa-

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tion, and the Messenger is still smarting from her blows. But in those intervening scenes, the peace of the world has been settled (temporarily) at Misenum, and Pompey's big chance to be "lord of all the world" has been presented and rejected. Moreover, Ventidius, whose expedition to Parthia was not initiated by Antony until after the wedding, has had time to travel almost the length of the empire, wage a campaign, defeat Pacorus, and decide for politic reasons that he will not "acquire too high a fame when we serve's away." Dramatic action which must take place in a few hours in Egypt is simultaneous with actions in the rest of the world which must require months. One effect of this striking combination of collapsed and expanded dramatic time on the love story is to make it credible that, as Julian Markels maintains in a recent book, Antony fulfills his promise to Octavia to "keep his square," and that only after extreme provocation by Caesar and after Octavia's voluntary departure on an ill-conceived mission of reconciliation does Antony turn finally towards Egypt. But Markels also points out, as one among many "discontinuities" in the play, Antony's statements in soliloquy back in II.iii, just after the marriage and in the same scene in which he promises Octavia, "to come / Shall all be done by th' rule":

I will to Egypt:
And though I make this marriage for my peace,
I' th' East my pleasure lies.

(38-40)

It seems that Antony must be convicted either of vacillation or duplicity. Markels argues, however, that he is trying to enjoy Roman honor and Eastern pleasure simultaneously, that no real blame should attach to this attempt, and that indeed Antony's ultimate triumph (as well as Cleopatra's) represents success in just such a reconciliation or engrossment of antitheticals. The ambiguous or paradoxical use of time in this section of the play seems to bear out the analysis of Markels. For Antony to fulfill the demands of his honorable commitment to Octavia requires that months elapse between Antony's promise in II.iii and their separation in III.iv. For Antony to fulfill the demands of his passionate, hyperbolic commitment to Cleopatra requires that no time elapse, that he be virtually on his way back to Egypt even as she interviews the messenger to learn of his marriage, and convinces herself by the second interview with the messenger that her attractive power re-

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mains unchallenged. Shakespeare seems to insist on having it both ways.

In terms of the "political" plot, interspersing the peace conference, the Ventidius episode, and the leave-taking of Antony and Octavia between Cleopatra's two scenes of continuous action with the messenger, has the effect of showing Antony almost simultaneously present, in person or by surrogate, in Athens, Rome, Parthia, and Egypt. And finally, the employment of Octavia as but one among so many messengers scurrying back and forth, even at her own urgent request, is for Octavius the ultimate insult to his narrow conception of family honor. The concept of carrying a message is, as Markels might say, being "platonized": the idea of the messenger is abstracted for contemplation. Ventidius must be careful to remember that he is but an extension, an emissary of Antony and must not achieve too many victories lest he be thought a competitor. Menas transmits an urgent message to Pompey: if you would be "lord of all the world," let me cut the cable and "fall to their throats." He is berated by Pompey: "Ah, this thou shouldst have done, / And not have spoken on't. . . . Being done unknown, / I should have found it afterwards well done" (II.vii.72-78). It was a time for independent action, not for urgent messages, for doing what Ventidius, in the next scene, prudently refuses to do. It is no surprise that after this bit of casuistry by Pompey, Menas tells us he can no longer serve him.

In these last examples, we have perhaps moved beyond the role of the messenger strictly conceived to that of the loyal subordinate, though questions of loyalty are certainly intermixed with those of truthful communication in the cases of Proculeius and Dolabella. But let us return to a narrower consideration of messengers in two strikingly parallel scenes: I.iv and I.v. In this early part of the play, though not in the same way later, the dramatic action consists largely of a contest between Rome, epitomized in Caesar, and Egypt, epitomized in Cleopatra, for the allegiance of Antony. Every effort is made to contrast the two symbolic environments and their two main exemplars. And yet, as almost always in Shakespeare's dramatic economy, between two mighty opposites there are also important similarities. In this case, the similarities involve messengers. In I.iv a messenger reports to Caesar:

Thy biddings have been done, and every hour,
Most noble Caesar, shalt thou have report
How 'tis abroad.

(34-36)
In the next scene, Cleopatra interviews Alexas, who brings the first news from Antony in Rome:

Cleopatra: Met'st thou my posts?
Alexas: Ay, madam, twenty several messengers.
Why do you send so thick?
Cleopatra: Who's born that day
When I forget to send to Antony
Shall die a beggar. Ink and paper, Charmian.

He shall have every day a several greeting,
Or I'll unpeople Egypt.

(I.v.61-65; 77-78)

Cleopatra’s boast is in tune with the hyperbole which sounds through so much of the language of the lovers and through so many descriptions of them by others: “Let Rome in Tiber melt!”; “Melt Egypt into Nile! and kindly creatures / Turn all to serpents”; “We cannot call her winds and waters signs and tears: they are greater storms and tempests than almanacs can report”; “His legs bestrid the ocean: his reared arm / Crested the world.” But in this particular context, her excessive use of messengers is clearly being compared to Caesar’s: his for efficient political and military intelligence, hers for her own strategic purpose of keeping her man, but still, as Enobarbus says, arising out of “the finest part of pure love.”

Caesar too is occasionally described in hyperbole, sometimes by his enemies. But Caesar’s amazing qualities are assumed to be less mythic and metaphoric, more literal and naturalistic, even when they compel fear and wonder. In III.vii, shortly before the battle of Actium, a messenger brings Antony confirmation of news he has already heard of the remarkable swiftness of Caesar’s approach:

Antony: Is it not strange, Canidius,
That from Tarentum and Brundusium
He could so quickly cut the Ionian sea
And take in Toryne?—You have heard on’t, sweet?
Cleopatra: Celerity is never more admired
Than by the negligent.
Antony: A good rebuke,
Which might have well became the best of men
To taunt a slackness.

(20-27)

Enter a Messenger.

Antony: Thy business?
Messenger: The news is true, my lord, he is descried;
Caesar has taken Toryne.
Antony: Can he be there in person? 'Tis impossible; Strange that his power should be.

(53-57)

As Antony, Cleopatra, and Enobarbus leave, Canidius and a soldier remain on stage, reviewing the argument about fighting on land or sea. But Canidius returns once more to the subject of Caesar's remarkable celerity: “This speed of Caesar's / Carries beyond belief” (74-75).

Mainly, in this scene, Cleopatra is asserting her unseemly and masculine pretense to generalship, while Antony is abetting her act, and demonstrating his own stubbornness in refusing to heed the advice of experienced soldiers. But also, in the heavy emphasis on Caesar’s “impossible” speed (again, the detail is from Plutarch), there is a suggestion of that mysterious and irreversible turning of the tide which occurs in so many Shakespearean plays, a tilting of the powers that make miracles possible, towards Caesar. A confirmation of this movement comes a good deal later in IV.iii, just before another battle (which Antony paradoxically wins), when the eerie “music of the hautboys” signifies that “the god Hercules, whom Antony loved, / Now leaves him.” But I think one of the most important functions of this passage is as further preparation for a remarkable touch in the great final scene of Cleopatra’s death and transfiguration.

Cleopatra is already dead; the loyal Charmian, a part of whose riddling fortune in I.ii had been, “You shall outlive the lady whom you serve,” now hesitates only a moment to adjust her mistress’s crown before applying the asp to her own bosom:

Charmian: Your crown's awry; I'll mend it, and then play— Enter the Guard, rustling in.

First Guardsman: Where's the Queen?
Charmian: Speak softly, wake her not.
First Guardsman: Caesar hath sent—
Charmian: Too slow a messenger.

(V.ii.317-20)

Augustus Caesar, now “sole sir o' th' world”; that Caesar who displayed his military skill by receiving messengers “every hour”; who dared to vie with Cleopatra, his superfluous messengers against hers, for the soul of Antony; who, when the time was right for him to campaign in his own person, crossed seas with miracu-
lous speed—now, in his final contest with Cleopatra’s wiles and Antony’s great heart, “hath sent too slow a messenger”!

In this case, there is no absolute necessity of stagecraft for the “rustling” guard, since Caesar himself and his train are hot on their heels and could have made the discovery. But delaying Caesar’s entrance gives Charmian a well-earned chance to hold the center of the stage for her own last gibe against Caesar’s power. In this scene, into which so much is packed of all that has gone before in this rich play, including the fulfillment of the soothsayer’s prophecies from I.ii, and the actualization of the hyperboles and paradoxes which seem to roll so easily from the tongue in the early scenes, Cleopatra becomes in her final apotheosis just about All: her former self at Cydnus, Snake-Goddess, woman of the people, boy actor, Roman wife, nursing mother, even the cold statue (“Now from head to foot / I am marble constant”) as which the pliant messenger described her rival, Octavia—“She shows a body rather than a life, / A statue than a breather” (III.iii.23-24). To this great coda, Shakespeare could not resist adding a final ironic and triumphant reminiscence of all those sweating, scurrying messengers who have so filled the stage, now all too slow to catch Cleopatra’s soaring spirit.

Indeed, there is also a final reminiscence of that odd but dramatic figure of speech or of thought which treats the messenger as a physical extension of the one sending the message, which we saw in Cleopatra’s metaphor, “Ram thou thy fruitful tidings in mine ears.” Now she fears that Iras, who has died first (and that Cleopatra has “the aspic in her lips” even before she has herself been bitten shows that she has become the Snake-Goddess), will steal her kiss from Antony:

This proves me base:  
If she first meet the curled Antony,  
He’ll make demand of her, and spend that kiss  
Which is my heaven to have.  

(V.ii.299-302)

Iras is but her messenger, sent before with the glad tidings of the imminent arrival of the queen. But Antony is courteous; as she had rewarded messengers by giving them her hands to kiss, he will be so joyful at the news of Cleopatra’s coming that he will reward Iras with a kiss. If Caesar has sent too slow a messenger, Cleopatra fears that her own messenger this time will be too swift, and she is determined to overtake her. In addition to all the other roles she encompasses in this scene, she will be her own messenger.

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There are in the play many messengers which have not been mentioned, including the lying message of her own death sent by Cleopatra to Antony through the eunuch Mardian, which starts the chain of love-deaths (IV.xiii, xiv), and the message from Antony to Enobarbus, which breaks the apostate soldier’s heart (IV.v, vi). But I hope enough has been said to demonstrate that, like disguisings, stage fools and madmen, listeners behind the bush or the arras, and all the rest, the messenger is a bit of necessary stage machinery which Shakespeare seems almost miraculously to transform. In the history plays, in the other tragedies, and even in the comedies, messengers are treated with great subtlety, but no play approaches the infinite variety of Antony and Cleopatra in the uses of this convention, because here the dispersed locations, sweeping scope, and rapid turns of the action required a heavy use of reporters and intermediaries. What convention or the exigencies of stagecraft required of Shakespeare, he almost always changed into something rich and strange. His was not the art which concealed art but that which flaunted it, and turned the dramatic process itself into an evocative metaphor.4

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FOOTNOTES

1 III.xii.5. All quotations from Antony and Cleopatra are from the edition by Maynard Mack for the Pelican Complete Shakespeare (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969).
3 Hyperbole and paradox in the play are well summarized in Maynard Mack’s introduction to the Pelican edition, to which I am greatly indebted.
4 After this piece was written, I read the discussion of messengers in Janet Adelman’s excellent book The Common Liar: An Essay on “Antony and Cleopatra” (Yale University Press, 1973), pp. 34-39. Her approach is different from mine; she stresses the purpose of the messengers as “not so much to convey information as to convey the sense that all information is unreliable” (p. 35) and thus to involve the reader actively in the play.

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