'KINGDOMS ARE CLAY': STAGING SEXUAL DESIRE AND POLITICAL STRUGGLE IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

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Resumo

Performances de peças de William Shakespeare têm grande potencial para a investigação de valores estéticos e configurações políticas, assim como lugares de resistência à ordem hegemônica. O presente trabalho objetiva analisar uma peça específica, Antony and Cleopatra, na sua realização em performance, demonstrando que a produção de 1972 da Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), dirigida por Trevor Nunn, pode ser lida a partir da ênfase nas relações entre desejo sexual e poder. Os procedimentos metodológicos para atingir esse objetivo são duplos: em um primeiro momento, propõe-se uma análise textual da peça para em seguida proceder à análise da produção, focalizando os elementos que ligam desejo e poder, procurando desvelar os significados que emanam da peça ao ser colocada no palco.


Abstract

Performances of Shakespearean plays are potential sites for the investigation of esthetical values and political configurations as well as locations of resistance to a hegemonic order. The present paper aims at coming to a broader understanding of one specific Shakespearean play, Antony and Cleopatra, as it was realised in performance, demonstrating that the 1972 The Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) production of the play, directed by Trevor Nunn, can be understood as emphasising the relation between sexual desire and power. The methodological procedures to achieve the proposed objective are two-fold, comprising a close reading of Shakespeare’s text and an analysis of the RSC production, focused on the elements that somehow link sexual desire to power and on the disclosure of the “fresh” meanings embedded in the performance.

Key words: Performance, William Shakespeare, Antony and Cleopatra, Desire, Power.
The study of William Shakespeare's play texts has been a fruitful source for academic debate, and in the last 20 years it has undergone a major shift in its perspective, after the so-called "Shakespearean revolution", which James C. Bulman defines as "the emergence of stage-centred criticism from traditional literary studies" (1996, p. 1). By studying Shakespeare's plays as play texts, written for the theatre, and diverging from essentialist readings that assert the authority of such texts (and thus imply the immanence of meaning, that is to say, the existence of a "true" meaning intended by the author), the viewpoint proposed by Bulman takes into account variables such as "the material conditions of performance, the dynamics of audience response, the possibility latent in live performance, and above all the physical presence of the actors themselves" (1996, p. 5-6).

The contingencies of performance liberate the critic to question issues such as the relations between power, ideology and performance, the condition of the actor's body and the position of the critic as a producer of meaning, a project which could be summarised by Christopher Norris' commentary against the imposition of meaning by the dominant ideology: "Shakespeare's meaning can be no more reduced to the currency of liberal-humanist faith than his texts to the wished for condition of pristine, incorrupt authority" (1985, p. 66).

This theoretical framework may, therefore, inform the understanding of the performance of a Shakespearean play in terms of its potential capacity to reflect certain esthetical values and political configurations as well as to provide locations of resistance to a hegemonic order. The present paper, however, does not intend to carry out a deeper post-structural reading of Shakespeare or of the question of performance. The attempt here is, by means of averting essentialism, to try to come to a broader understanding of one specific Shakespearean play, namely Antony and Cleopatra, as it was realised in performance.

The aim of this study is, thus, to demonstrate that the 1972 The Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) production of William Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra, directed by Trevor Nunn, provides a reading of Shakespeare's play which can be understood as emphasizing the relation between sexual desire and power. The methodological procedures to achieve the proposed objective are two-fold, comprising a close reading of Shakespeare's text and an analysis of the RSC production, focused on the elements that somehow link sexual desire to power and on the disclosure of the "fresh" meanings embedded in the performance. The critical commentary on the RSC Antony and Cleopatra will follow a specific methodology that includes the questioning of elements such as textual modifications, set design and costumes, lighting, subtext, character presentation and stage business.
It is important to mention that the study proposed here has for object not a proper “filmed play”, which would be the most suitable source for a “performance analysis”. The RSC production was made for the television and it would not be appropriate to ignore the fact that sometimes the camera is also “showing” the story. Consequently, these aspects will also be taken into consideration.

Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* presents a chapter of Roman history in which the articulations for the construction of a world empire were being made. At that juncture, Rome was ruled by the triumvirs Mark Antony, Octavius Caesar and M. Aemilius Lepidus, after the death of Julius Caesar, and Egypt was another territory to be occupied. This tension created by the political struggle is enhanced in Shakespeare's play by the sexuality of the characters. According to Jonathan Dollimore (1994), "*Antony and Cleopatra* dramatises the connections between desire and power; more exactly, sexual love and political struggle" (p. 144). Shakespeare's characters are textually and dramatically involved in a dispute for political survival: (i) Cleopatra strives to preserve the state of Egypt against the expanding forces of Rome; (ii) Octavius Caesar covets the establishment of his rule in Rome against a weak and decayed Lepidus and a weakening and decaying Mark Antony; (iii) Antony finds himself at a crossroads, between his duty to Rome and his sexual drive towards Cleopatra. And working concurrently with the political struggle to the development of tension and dramatic action in the play is the love affair between Antony and Cleopatra.

One way to approach the association desire X power is through the antithesis Nature X Civilisation, referring to the Greek gods Dionysius and Apollo. The cult of Dionysius encompasses, like that of Bacco, inebriation with wine and orgies, but also cannibalism and frenzy. Dionysius is also identified with liquids such as milk, blood, and wine and with the quick changes of nature. Apollo was the god of beauty, order and poetry, so handsome that even Zeus fell in love with him. Consequently, there are two conflicting principles: one standing for nature, absolute freedom, spending, lack of limits, sensuality; the other symbolizing order, limit, thrift, rationality.

Egypt is a Dionysian place insofar as it is identified with the river Nile. There is an air of revelry, dissolution and sexual permissiveness revealed, for example, in the presence of the eunuchs and the lack of hierarchy, which allows them to address Cleopatra, their queen, in clearly sexual terms. Cleopatra engages in double-meaning conversations with her eunuch Mardian and attendant Charmian, such as in II.v.4-7:

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CLEOPATRA
Let it alone; let's to billiards: come, Charmian.
CHARMIAN
My arm is sore; best play with Mardian.
CLEOPATRA
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As well a woman with an eunuch play'd
As with a woman. Come, you'll play with me, sir?
MARDIAN
As well as I can, madam.

In this dialogue, it is possible to notice the licentiousness that is characteristic of the Egyptian segment of the play, when the eunuch Mardian creates a joke from the double meaning of the word play, which also stands for sexual intercourse, using it to make fun of his emasculated condition. Moreover, the reference to Charmian's arm being sore indicates that he, being emasculated, cannot perform (pun intended) what he is asked to do because even the “natural” substitutes to his penis in a sexual intercourse, arms and hands, are inoperative.

Other instances of identification between Egypt and the Dionysian principle are the images of abundance. This can be noticed from the very beginning of the play, when Philo, a follower of Antony, says that Antony's dotage "o'erflows the measure" (I.i.1-2). Later (II.ii.185-93), Enobarbus, another of Antony's followers, refers to the debauchery and voracious appetite that he experimented during his stay in Egypt as "monstrous matter of feast, which worthily deserved noting" (II.ii.192-3). The presence of the Nile, out of which all the creatures were born, according to Egyptian mythology, is the absolutization of the abundance. Even the language used to refer to Egypt has this attribute of plenty, considering the several hyperboles present in the text. Enobarbus says that when Antony first met Cleopatra "Antony, enthron'd i'th' market-place, did sit alone / Whistling to th' air, which, but for vacancy / Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too / And made a gap in nature " (II.ii.214-8).

The counterpart to Dionysian Egypt is the Apollonian Rome. The play text gives luxurious descriptions of life in Egypt as, for instance, Enobarbus' detailing of the fist meeting between Antony and Cleopatra (II.ii.200-28):

DOMITIUS ENOBARBUS
I will tell you.
The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne,
Burn'd 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,
Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
The water which they beat to follow faster,
As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,
It beggar'd all description: she did lie
In her pavilion--cloth-of-gold of tissue--
O'er-picturing that Venus where we see
The fancy outwork nature: on each side her
Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
With divers-colour'd fans, whose wind did seem
To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
And what they undid did.
AGrippa
O, rare for Antony!
Domitius Enobarbus
Her gentlewomen, like the Nereides,
So many mermaids, tended her i' the 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 rarely frame the office. From the barge
A strange invisible perfume hits the sense
Of the adjacent wharfs. The city cast
Her people out upon her; and Antony,
Enthroned i' the market-place, did sit alone,
Whistling to the air; which, but for vacancy,
Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too,
And made a gap in nature.

Rome is rarely given life in the speeches of the characters, as if it had no physical existence, but were only
the product of a political liaison. Here, public duties are more important than private life: Octavia, Caesar's
sister, is given to Antony as a bond for the sake of the triumvirate. Morality is austere and temperate, so
Caesar censures Antony for his excesses with Cleopatra remembering former times when Antony "did
famine follow" (I.iv.60) and drank "the stale of horses and the gilded puddle / Which beasts would cough at"
(I.iv.62-4).

Whereas the play is permeated by the imagery of "melting" as in: Antony: "let Rome in Tiber melt" (I.i.34-5);
Cleopatra: "melt Egypt into Nile!" (II.v.78); Antony: "discandy, melt their sweat on blossoming Caesar"
(IV.xii.22); Cleopatra: "by the discandying on this pelleted storm" (III.xii.170), the Roman characters
confront their desire for stability. Caesar says he would pursue the "hoop" that could "staunch" him and
Antony (II.ii.121-24); after he wishes to "tie up" Pompey's "disconted sword" (II.vi.6-7); later he leaves the
celebration in Pompey's boat because "the wild disguise hath almost anticked us" (II.vi.124-125). The
triumvirs are called the "pillars of the world", the mainstay of the Roman hegemony in the historical pursuit
for world domination, thus allowing to read the Roman personality as being concentrated on the idea of
centrality.

It is possible to bring to light some implications of the tension between the Apollonian and Dionysian
principles to the dramaturgy of the play. As Alexander Leggatt (1988) remarks, "There's no sense of a fixed
political state; no sense, either, of a private self. Nor there is a fixed position from which to judge action" (p.
168). That is, the characters are fluid and the rapid succession of events impinges an almost contemporary
pace on the play. The flow of information is kept by the constant appearance of messengers. Transcending the Aristotelian postulate of unit, shuttling back and forth in space and leaping in time, Shakespeare offers a structure of the play which alternates between grave moments, like Caesar’s decision to have Antony back in Rome (I.iv), and frivolous, trivial instants, such as a yawning Cleopatra awaiting for Antony (I.v). Other examples of this succession of moods are II.iv and II.v, II.vii and II.i (with the special irony of Lepidus’ exit carried by completely drunk soldiers being followed by the entrance of Venditius with a dead body), V.ii (when the clown brings the basket of figs for Cleopatra's suicide).

The RSC *Antony and Cleopatra* seems to have adopted this perspective of antagonising Rome and Egypt, which can be perceived in the interplay of sets, costumes and lighting. Egyptian scenes are usually richly furnished, showing an impressive array of colourful cushions, tapestry and other ornaments whereas Roman scenes are generally empty and austere. The red and yellow lights also help produce an atmosphere of exoticism and languid sensuality in Egypt, contrasting with the bright white lights of Rome that resembles the asceticism of government buildings and hospitals. Costumes are another indicator of the duality which permeates the play: Egyptian costumes are exuberant, colourful and golden; Roman outfits are sober, usually white or black. Music also helps establish a contrast, for the musical score for Roman scenes has a martial cadence played by horns and snare drums and cymbals, while Egyptian music is basically Oriental, slow and exotic. Trevor Nunn also made use of TV language to present the suffocating heat in Egypt, manipulating the camera focus in order to produce the sense of optical illusion caused by the heat, thus enhancing the ambience of sexual and climatic fervour.

Divided as it is between the two principles (Dionysius and Apollo), the RSC *Antony and Cleopatra* seems to have been devised to emphasize the Egyptian segment of Shakespeare’s play. The opening titles show images of Egypt and the title roles are presented in Egyptian costumes. This is significant because as the performance develops the audience is already aware that the Dionysian principle will be prevalent, and, what is more relevant, the character of Antony will be much more identified with Egypt than with Rome (it may be said from the opening titles that he is more a Pharaoh than a Roman general).

An additional evidence of the choice for an "Egyptian Antony and Cleopatra" can be found in the study of the cuts and interpolations made in Shakespeare’s text. Most eliminated scenes and lines were Roman. To name a few: II.i was entirely cut; the characters of Menecrates and Menas removed; II.ii and II.iii had many lines cut; II.vi and II.vii were condensed with scene II.iii; the role of Antony had many more lines cut than Cleopatra. The election of Egypt, however, is not revealed only quantitatively, but also qualitatively, as it may be observed in the treatment of the two leading roles.
Juliet Dusinberre, in her article on gender and performance in *Antony and Cleopatra*, points out, when commenting a performance of the text from the very first scene, that "Shakespeare would perhaps have been the first to appreciate the appropriateness of such backing for a drama in which hero and heroine compete ceaselessly for prowess in the world of the play, in the theatre, and in the consciousness of the audience" (1996, p. 46). Dusinberre continues the discussion and notices that in the very core of this competition lies the issue of the "constructions of the masculine and the feminine" (p. 46). The audience bring their idea of gender to the theatre and specifically their notion of Cleopatra's sensuality. It is in the actress's body that the anxieties present in these impressions will find a place and, therefore, reflect the beliefs about the relations between men and women.

It is relevant to observe, in this context, that G. Wilson Knight states that there would be an “essential” woman which would be represented by Cleopatra: "Thus her two main qualities are (i) the essential femininity (…), and (ii) her profuse variety of psychic modes: which two are clearly one, since a profound and comprehensive delineation of essential woman is necessarily varied" (1990, p. 13). Such an assertion, however, must be confronted with the fact that the audience have their own perception of sexual roles and these perceptions will be either emphasized or destabilized by the performance. What a woman is supposed to be, therefore, very much depends upon audience’s preconceptions and prejudices.

The role of Cleopatra seems to be a very appropriate site for the questioning of the construction of sexual roles and power relations. She is a female character that engages in a dispute neck and neck with the male characters. In Shakespeare’s text, she is constantly challenging Antony in political or sexual terms. In I.i.19-55 she taunts him with the arrival of a Roman messenger; in II.V.18-23 it is revealed that she stole his sword, in IV.Xii. 9-17 she deserts him in the battlefield, sure that he will follow her, and even in his death, she stops his speech to assert her opinion:

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Ant. I am dying, Egypt, dying
give me some wine, and let me speak a little.
Cleo. No, let me speak, and let me rail so high
That the false huswife Fortune break her wheel
Provok'd by my offense (IV.xv.41-4).
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Anxieties are, thus, established by the constant competition between the two title roles. One of the reviewers comment on the RSC *Antony and Cleopatra*: "As the lovers’ fortunes decline, their audiences dwindle. In Antony's case it seems that the loss of an applauding public helps to sap this virility" (qtd. in Dusinberre, 1996, p. 47). In war, in love, on the stage in the RSC production Cleopatra seems to be winning. If Harold Bloom has once stated that "Shakespeare has given us the love of two titanic charismatics, and charisma disarms audiences" (1990, p. 2), the very intelligent stage business conceived by Nunn reveals the
disposition to enhance Cleopatra's charisma. In the initial scene, the first time the lovers are presented to the audience, Cleopatra is riding on Antony's back. This can be seen as ironic when compared to her line "O happy horse to bear the weight of Antony" (I.v.21). This image might, in fact, represent the *leitmotif* of the production: the public display of their love-affair is the stage for their performance which intends to seduce the two kinds of spectators – on stage (the servants, the soldiers and whomever surrounds them) and the theatrical audience.

Reviewers, when commenting the RSC performance, affirmed that "Janet Suzman, in a role created for a male actor, creates a woman who is only incidentally voluptuous", and that from the two lovers "Cleopatra seems the stronger. Janet Suzman has given her a touch of masculinity", and also that Janet Suzman is "tempestuous, gypsy, tomboy Cleopatra ... This was scarcely the highly intelligent shrewd Queen who ruled a vast empire with skill and cunning." (qtd. in Dusinberre, 1996, p. 53) Such reviews might be revealing the difficulty to access the role of Cleopatra without some kind of estrangement for a character which defies pre-established assumptions about gender. A parallel could be traced between the reviewers' opinion and the initial scene of the RSC production, where the Roman characters observe the sexually playful introduction of Antony and Cleopatra described above. Both Romans and critics look as if they were reproaching Antony's emasculation performed by Cleopatra. The male gaze is overtly presented in the performance as resisting the ambiguities, which the relationship between Antony and Cleopatra produce, as traditional critique is prone to do.

In a completely different perspective from the above-mentioned criticism, it could be said that Suzman's Cleopatra is not impoverished by her "masculinity". On the contrary, this only brings forth the implications of socially constructed sexuality, for it destabilises the expectations of gender hierarchy – what you have is a woman playing the part of a Queen who overstates her male counterpart and who used to be played by a boy. However, it can also be stated that Suzman's Cleopatra is not masculine. If she is assertive, cunning, playful with Antony's virility it does not necessarily mean she is being manly. Of course these are characteristics which common sense attributes to men, but those are not essentially inherent to them. The role of Cleopatra would be lessened if she came down to being a lover of Antony, a helpless Juliet or a daft Ophelia. In Shakespeare's text she appears as the "wrangling queen", a character who is a performer herself and who is constantly constructing her identity in order to survive sexually and politically. Alexander Leggatt remarks that "The needs of the characters and demands of the moment are in the foreground and the speeches have an impulsive, improvised quality" (1988, p. 167). This could be wholly directed to Cleopatra, because she is always "playing a part".

It can be stated, then, that Janet Suzman is not simply a "tomboy" Cleopatra. She presents the audience with not one, but many Cleopatras. She plays the role aware that her Cleopatra is an actress herself and that
gives a touch of camp to her acting, as in I.iii, when she desperately tries to convince Antony to stay in Egypt. But she is also the indolent queen lying half-naked among the eunuchs and the Amazon (however inept) in the battle of Actium, dressed up in tight costumes revealing voluptuous breasts. In these moments she has nothing of the "masculine" touch she was detracted for; on the contrary, she reveals a sensuous Cleopatra. And she is finally the great goddess Isis, the ancient Egyptian goddess of fertility, sister and wife of Osiris (Antony, as presented in the opening credits? Maybe…), dressed as a golden bird, in the performance's grand finale.

As the play seems to have been constructed according to the opposition Dionysius X Apollo, its end could be read as privileging the Dionysian aspect. The great triumph of Cleopatra is not political but moral, because in the combat between Roman rationality and Egyptian sensuality her death prevails and Octavius’ unfulfilled desire to have her exposed in Rome marks the defeat of culture by nature. The image of Cleopatra, as a matter of fact, erases the distinctions between civilisation and nature (Enobarbus’ description of her in her barge is a good example of this), as she, in Terry Eagleton words, “figures a politically subversive desire … the great pre-political matrix from which all creatures proceed, and which supposedly transcend their petty particularities” (1992, p. 398).

As for Antony, if Cleopatra has charisma, he has virtus. According to Jonathan Dollimore, the quality of virtus is such that he “appear[s] innately superior and essentially autonomous, [his] power independent of the political context in which it finds expression” (1984, p. 205). This moral authority, however, is no more than “an ideological effect of powers antecedent to and independent of him” (p. 205). Thus, the political transformations occurring in the play place Antony in a difficult position, while his world dissolves around him. The once essentially firm hero faces the melting of his manhood. Richard Johnson’s Antony could be seen as an example of this fading hero. Textual interpolations (as in III.xi.24-6) substitute "Antony" for "our general" and other titles, as if the characters had stopped believing in Antony’s virtus.

The RSC production reveals an ageing Antony, something like a contemporary man in a middle-age crisis. This can be perceived in the somewhat regretful, tired look in Richard Johnson’s face in II.ii, when he admits he had neglected his commitment to Octavius. As a matter of fact, as Dollimore puts it, “Bathos has accompanied Antony throughout, from the very first speech of the play, the last three lines of which are especially revealing (Philo is speaking of Antony):

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take but good note, and you shall see in him
The triple pillar of the world transform’d
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The character of Antony seems doomed to be pathetic, more than pathetic, especially if we consider the expectations of gender involving the figure of a man who is supposed to be a hero. It may be very frustrating for the audiences, with their notion of what a man is, to be faced with the melancholy image of Antony’s end, being raised to the temple, as one of the fishes Cleopatra wants to catch during his absence from Egypt: “my bended hook shall pierce / their slimy jaws; and as I draw them up, / I’ll think of them every one an Antony” (II.iii.12-4). This also concurs to the dynamics of exchange between sexuality and power, once it contradicts the common sense approach to gender: for contemporary audiences, the hook may resonate as a reference to the word ‘hooker’, in which case the act of fishing could be understood as the search for different partners in the absence of the loved one, a promiscuous attitude attached to male behaviour.

If it is possible to identify the Dionysian and Apollonian principles in the 1972 RSC Antony and Cleopatra, it may be reasonable to conclude that Dionysian Egypt is the prevalent force in the performance. What this choice meant for the audience the time the production was first released would involve a historical study that is not in the scope of this paper. However, it is still possible to affirm that the production presents less a love affair than the characters’ intense struggle to articulate their sexual identity in the context of a political struggle. The intended reading of the 1972 RSC Antony and Cleopatra, thus, aimed to propose a reading of the play which is aware of the limitations of its hermeneutical act, as Norris argues that “All we have are the readings which inevitably tell such partial and complicated stories of their own devising” (Norris, 1985, p. 66).

Notes

1 The methodological tools for the study of performance are those given by Jay L. Halio (1988) in Understanding Shakespeare's plays in performance.

2 By “proper filmed play” it is meant the taping of a live performance with a fixed camera, so that the only “narrative agency” would be the performance itself, without the interference of TV or film language.

3 Seymour Chatman (1990), when analyzing the problem of narration, says that “film and other performative media often have nothing like a narrative voice, no ‘tell-er’” (p. 113), but a “show-er”,
an agent which presents the story. He finds this differentiation useful to explain that, even though movies and plays are not vocally "told", they are narratives.

4 First printed in the folio of 1623. Since the folio is the main "authoritative" source, there has been little controversy about the text itself.

5 Bloom (1990) seems to use the word “charisma” in the sense Max Weber employed it to explain the Charismatic authority, which rests on the appeal of leaders who claim allegiance because of their extraordinary virtuosity, whether ethical, heroic, or religious.

6 The term virtus seems to have been drawn on Machiavelli’s The Prince and is one of its key-terms. It stands for the active principle which galvanises human action in the public sphere. It is a personal collection of merits that generates legitimacy.

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Data de recebimento: 14 maio 2007
Data de aprovação: 15 set. 2007