

Irena Rima Makaryk

"Let's make the best of it": The Late Tragedies of Shakespeare

It is, by now, a commonplace, that a certain lightening in the atmosphere of Shakespeare's tragedies took place after the writing of *King Lear*. *Antony and Cleopatra* has been referred to as a "delightful tragedy,"¹ its heroine, the "queen of comedy".² Recent studies of the play have drawn attention to the comic features of the play.³ *Coriolanus*, too, has been referred to as "the greatest of Shakespeare's comedies" in a deliberately provoking statement by George Bernard Shaw.⁴ Like many of Shaw's audacious pronouncements, this one carries a germ of truth.

As well as the recognition of the presence of comic elements in the late tragedies, scholars have also noted the spectacular and public quality of the plays: *Antony and Cleopatra*, with the grandeur of Egypt and Rome; the allegorical banquet scenes, and the processions of *Timon of Athens*; the battles, large group scenes, and processions of *Coriolanus*. Both the comic and the spectacular elements of the late tragedies draw our attention to the "decidedly different"⁵ nature of these plays: the unusually "external" representations of the main characters, and, on the other hand, a concomitant emphasis on the societies of the protagonists.

While the late tragedies have many enthusiastic adherents, they also seem to elicit what Bertolt Brecht referred to as "discomfort."⁶ Not surprisingly, the creator of the *Verfremdungseffekt* found Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* a very congenial play. In his adaptation of the play, the characters "R" and "B" make the following point about the protagonist, Caius Martius: "R: But the crystal clarity of Martius' language! What an outsize character! And one who emerges as admirable while behaving in a way that I find beneath contempt!"⁷

The mingled yarns of good and evil, nobility and vileness, heroism and silliness, are, of course, found not only in *Coriolanus*, but also in *Timon*, as well as in *Antony and Cleopatra*. And the discomfort to which "R" and "B" refer is indicative of the response aroused by the late tragedies as a group. The mixture of admiration and contempt, wonder and detestation, antipathy and sympathy are sentiments often accompanied by regret that these are achievements of a lesser sort than *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Lear*. This an opinion recognized in the traditional terms in which the division of Shakespeare's canon is made; while the latter are "mature" or "great" tragedies, the former are more neutrally regarded as merely the "late" tragedies.

This paper will argue that the use of comic structures and strategies in the late tragedies is in part responsible for the discomfort to which scholars allude. In strategy, the use of comic structures in a tragic plot suggests the obverse of a parallel technique found in Shakespeare's experiments in comedy; in *Measure for Measure*, and *All's Well That Ends Well*, large doses of tragedy in comic plots resulted in similar discomfort, the creation of complex and morally ambiguous problem plays." In their larger patterns, the late tragedies resemble the structure of comedies, particularly in the underscored triumph of society at the end of these plays. The discomfort, I will argue, arises in part from a unusually mixed response to the loss of the hero, which involves both sympathy for him, and, more disturbingly, a tendency to side with society, and desire his death. The theatregoer thus seems to become an accomplice of the tragic action of the plays.

In describing the plot of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Bradley remarks that "We see hardly one violent movement." "People converse, discuss, accuse one another, excuse themselves, mock, describe, drink together, arrange a marriage, meet and part; but they do not kill, do not even tremble or weep."⁸ While this is something of an exaggeration, Bradley is not far from the truth; in fact, he hints at the special nature of the new tragedy that Shakespeare has created, for his summary of this Roman play sounds very much like a comedy with the group as its focus. This strong social interest seems to go against the grain of traditional tragedy that centres on the individual; moreover, the social focus consistently involves us more frequently in an intellectual, rather than emotional, fashion; again, a tactic resembling that of comedy.

The social focus of the plays may be found in a number of related elements. First of all, we might note the broad panorama of all of the late tragedies. *Antony and Cleopatra*, with its two worlds of Egypt and Rome, peopled by great men, plain soldiers, soothsayers, a schoolmaster, attendants, a treasurer, countless messengers, and a simple clown suggest a very full picture of society. The sprawling geographic boundaries of this world contribute to this effect of a peopled, grand canvas, perhaps in the manner of Rubens. In *Timon of Athens*, which contains an unusually large number of anonymous minor characters, representing different social classes, we also have a strong sense of the society of which the individual is a part, and which he will later abandon, although this society is not as well articulated as in the other tragedies; the Athens of Timon seems to be a romance simplification. In *Coriolanus* the detailed and complex political world that Shakespeare chooses to represent (particularly in act one) with patricians, tribunes, and plebs, and the Volscians poised just outside their state, points to the strong social and political context of Caius Martius' personal tragedy.

The heroes of the late tragedies possess not only a socially, but also a politically, important role, which is underscored by references to a symbolic (or what Traci calls "allegorical")⁹ aspect of that role. For example, Antony and Cleopatra are frequently referred to as Rome and Egypt, as well as Mars and Venus, Osiris and Isis. Coriolanus, who is also referred to as Mars, regards himself (as do his immediate followers, particularly his mother) as a representative of the real Rome – honourable, and aristocratic, not vulgarized by the commons. Timon's title, of Athens, clearly links him with his society, while his generosity, which outdoes that of Pluto, seems to make him superhuman. Later, even as Timon becomes Misanthropos (IV.iii. 54), he has no meaning without the society he rejects. Thus the individual hero is inextricably bound with his public, social self, his role in his society.

This emphasis on the unseverable links between the individual and society points to an important aspect of their tragedies: while tragedy glorifies the individual and his struggle, the constant reference in the late tragedies to society and the hero's place in it seems to show the limited room that exists for heroes. And the price which society exacts from the individual is nothing less than death when that individual begins to believe he is not subject to its laws, or when he believes that he is not expendible.¹⁰ The worlds of Athens and Rome conspicuously go on after the deaths of the protagonists. We do not (as we did in *Hamlet*) feel irreparable loss. The conclusions of the plays move us from Rubens to Breughel. "The dogs go on with their doggy life," and the tragedy of the individual, especially in *Timon* and *Coriolanus*, is distinctly removed from the centre of power. Timon dies outside of Athens; the audience does not even see his death represented. Coriolanus, far from another salvaged city, perishes in the hostile Voscian city of Antium, not as victor, but as traitor. These are, as Hunter has remarked, plays about outcasts, exiles.¹¹

The social interest of the plays and our complicity in the results of the action are established by a curious technique noted by many scholars. Both Janet Adelman¹² and Anne Barton¹³ point out the way in which we see the main characters through the eyes of commentators. In all three of the last tragedies, the protagonists and their actions are constantly the subject of conversation by minor figures, servants, messengers, rivals. We are always aware of society's opinions about their failings and their achievements, and thus an attitude of both sympathy and remarkable detachment is cultivated. Moreover, we are encouraged to observe and attempt to make judgements. In all three tragedies, the device of opening scene as synecdoche ensures a critical habit of mind, an intellectual, rather than a completely emotional, involvement with the central figure(s).

As scholars since Bradley have noted, the opening scene of *Antony and Cleopatra*, prepares us for at least two views of the main characters. We are invited to judge whether Antony's love is mere dotage, or grand

"lyric inspiration".¹⁴ We enter Philo and Demetrius' dispute in *medias res*. Beginning with Philo's negative judgement, we take the unheard arguments of Demetrius to be in favour of Antony. We are prepared, and expect, as theatregoers, to side with Demetrius, and to applaud the actions of the main characters. (We might by comparison think of the gross portrait that Iago draws of Othello in act one of that play, and how his caricatured image of the Moor leads the audience to disbelieve, rather than believe him. We thus expect a noble Othello despite, or because of, Iago's words.) In *Antony and Cleopatra*, however, the entrance of the famous lovers both confirms Philo's view and contradicts it. We approve the hyperbolic mode evident in such speeches as "Here is my space,/-Kingdoms are clay" (l.l. 34f), for this, as Maynard Mack tells us in his justly famous article, is the usual mode in which the hero speaks, and in which others speak of him.¹⁵ But in *Antony and Cleopatra* others do not support the hyperbole characteristic of such tragic heroes as Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, and Lear. First and foremost is the comic undercutting which Antony endures from Cleopatra herself. Employing the technique of Lady Macbeth, although in a teasing and more comic context, Cleopatra questions the manhood of Antony when she taunts him about his apparent servitude both to the "scarce-bearded Caesar" and to the shrill Fulvia (l.l. 20-21). Later (scene three) she parodies Antony's hyperbolic style, again deflating, rather than upholding, the characteristic verbal mode of the tragic hero. However much we may sympathize with lovers and wish for them a happy ending, the public, political nature of Antony's status also makes us disapprove. While we may not agree with Sir Laurence Olivier's assessment of Antony in his recently published autobiographical book, *On Acting* (1986), as "an absolute twerp . . . A stupid man," we must admit that he does have something there. "Cleopatra, she's the one. She has wit, style and sophistication . . ." ¹⁶ The heroic, but silly, nature of Antony revealed in this scene might remind us of some of the male figures of Shakespeare's comedies: Valentine, Navarre, Orlando, Orsino. By the end of the scene, we can at least understand how Demetrius might be swayed to take on Philo's position of censure. We may also think to apply to Antony and Cleopatra O. J. Campbell's description of Coriolanus as "partly an object of scorn."¹⁷

In *Coriolanus*, the mutinous citizens, who are agreed to kill Caius Martius, present the audience with a particularly unattractive portrait of the hero. Caius Martius' terse greeting, "Thanks," the shortest and most surly opening sentence a Shakespearean tragic hero ever uttered, and his subsequent verbal attack on the plebs further alienates the audience. As in *Antony and Cleopatra*, so here the opening scene has the effect of inducing an intellectual, rather than emotional, involvement in the fate of the character. Again, the audience begins the action of the play by partly sympathizing with a large portion of society that sees the Roman hero as

proud, contemptuous, and perhaps even deserving of death. As Norman Brittin persuasively argues, even sincerity, as it is revealed in *Coriolanus*, can be excessive, and appears to be "aggressive, offensive, provoking tactlessness."¹⁸

In the opening scene of *Timon of Athens*, the fawning painter, poet, jeweller, and merchant, as well as the nobles, reveal not only a corrupt society, but a Timon poised for a fall. Magnanimous though he is, his generosity is not discriminating, but rather knee-jerk and sentimental, as well as proud. "I am not of that feather to shake off/My friend when he must need me," (l.l. 103-05) remarks Timon, a little too smugly and self-righteously for the audience's full sympathy. As in *Coriolanus*, so in *Timon of Athens*, the audience hopes for the hero's fall. It does so looking forward to the hero's anagnorisis, to a new-found humility. In this wish the audience's desires parallel the desires of the society of the play. We become unconscious co-conspirators in the tragic fate of the heroes.

The opening scenes of all three tragedies force us to view the protagonists much more critically than earlier Shakespearean tragedies. The effect on the audience is not only to discourage too close an engagement with the main characters,¹⁹ but also to encourage an identification with the values of society, despite the clearly flawed nature of that society. This, I think, is something new in Shakespeare. In *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and especially *King Lear*, the perspective of the play suggests that we look to the individual as the touchstone of value, while society is corrupt, rotten, sometimes vicious. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, and *Timon of Athens*, we may still recognize the unregenerate aspects of society, its corruption and evil, its "policy" and lack of integrity, but we also notice something else: in its pragmatism it is at the same time partly right. To go back to the opening scene of *Antony and Cleopatra*, we might, at first, think that Philo's censure of the lovers is puritanical, "bourgeois," narrow-minded, unjust. And yet, especially as the play proceeds, we cannot divest ourselves of the Philo habit of mind. Antony's behaviour, particularly in his marriage to Octavia, his actions during and after the battle at Actium, and his botched suicide confirm his heroism and his humanity all right, but also show us how wrong-headed he is. Along with the plain-speaking soldiers, we ask why he chose to fight at sea. And with Cleopatra, we ask "what means he," when Antony draws tears from his troops. Neither entirely sympathetic to the hero, nor to his society, we nonetheless frequently view the characters from the vantage point of superiority; we exert a social judgment on them; they appear occasionally ridiculous or contemptible.²⁰

In *Coriolanus*, a similar dramatic strategy of detachment from the hero is at work. Coriolanus' bravery, his perfect sense of honour, his modesty (slightly comic perhaps, but sincere) mark him the tragic hero. But his petulance, his undisciplined pride, his cruelty, his aristocratic self-regard

push us to recall the sentiments of the crowd in act one. When Caius Martius wears the gown of humility, but wishes the citizens would "wash their faces,/ And keep their teeth clean" (II.iii. 60-61) we cannot help but agree with the citizens' assessment of his character. What we begin to desire is what is more common to the world of comedy: a defeat of absoluteness, and a reconciliation with society, the victory of commonsense. The ritual Coriolanus endures should bind him to society, confirm its values. Instead, Coriolanus resists his place in society, much like a figure of excess in a comedy. He wishes to "o'erleap" custom (II.ii. 136-37), rather than bow to it. Interestingly, while Coriolanus's devotion to honour is admired by the Romans, those closest to him, his mother and Cominius, disapprove of his "too absolute" (III.ii. 39) behaviour. Volumnia's sense of policy and opportunism reveal how isolated, truly honourable, and principled her son is. But his strengths can appear as petulance, as boyish refusal "to play the game." Act three scene two, like most scenes which contain the Roman matron, is both tragic and comic. After Coriolanus has been worn down by his mother's arguments, a note of fatigue is struck in his response, "Pray be content./Mother, I am going to the market-place;/Chide me no more." (III.ii. 130-33) Clearly it is not the first time Volumnia has won over her son using this same tactic.

When Coriolanus is exiled from Rome, and, in vengeance, takes up the attack against his own countrymen, he forgets the emotional bond we have just witnessed. Not unlike Richard III, Coriolanus attempts to discard his links with society: "Alone I did it." (V.vi. 116) The Volscians' insulting appellation of "boy," is calculated to attack the manhood of Coriolanus and provoke a predictable (and to Caius Martius deadly) response, but it also serves to remind the theatregoer of the fact that Coriolanus is never alone; he is a part of a family, a Roman society. Even at this moment, we share the thoughts of the tribunes and the plebs. However honourable, this man-machine of war deserves to die. There is no place for him in either Rome or Antium, as the modulated mirror scenes of acts three and five indicate: both the Romans, and the Volscians call for Coriolanus' death, citing his apparent treason. The alternate world, which would in comedy be a "green world," in tragedy becomes a world where the same problems are replayed, often in a more intense fashion, and with graver consequences.

Like the exile scenes of *Coriolanus*, the wilderness scenes of *Timon of Athens* serve the purpose of showing how slenderly the hero knows himself, and how little he has changed. Unlike Maynard Mack's formula, which sees the Jacobean hero become his opposite,²¹ the schema of the late plays seems to be that of showing how the main characters become more exaggerated versions of what they already were at the beginning of the play. *Timon* is no closer to understanding mankind in act four than he was in act one. Antony does not "fall" in act three; the long process of

his fall began in the past; what we see is "the inevitable destiny of a sensualist and opportunist."²² Coriolanus, too, is not only unchanged by his exile, but apparently even more firmly committed to ideals of war. "Here," as Bradley astutely notes about another of the last tragedies, is "the tragic excess, but with it the tragic greatness."²³ Ours is not a simple response: the heroes' behaviour elicits wonder, some understanding, even sympathy, at the same time as the bred in the bone quality of their "humours" makes us simultaneously understand the need for their fall and destruction.

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One of the effects of the increased importance of society in plot is that it tends to diminish the main characters. Our attention, if not dispersed, is at the very least directed to a multiplicity of views, rather than to a singleness of vision. By comparison, one may, without too much distortion, describe *Hamlet* as a play with the dominating point of view of Hamlet himself: it appears quite temptingly similar to a type of first-person narration. In parenthesis we may note in the past the number and the success of character studies of this play, culminating in the most notorious of all, Ernest Jones' psychological study. This kind of study is only possible because the dramatic construction of the play encourages us to believe that we see the action through Hamlet's eyes. Shakespeare's occasional adjustment of our vision thus surprises us, as, for example, when we overhear Claudius' realistic, even sympathetic, soliloquy.

In all three of the late tragedies, as we have already seen, we often view the protagonists through the eyes of others,²⁴ in what may be called an "external" manner. Soliloquies are few,²⁵ and those we have present us with little insight into the internal sufferings of the characters. They are, instead, a means of providing information, rather than revelation. Like the characters of the romances, the protagonists of the late tragedies are drawn from the outside. There is an opacity to them that is, yet, curiously akin to that of people in real life: for this is the way we perceive and judge others – by their deeds, their words, and through the comments of others. As Anne Barton remarks about the position of spectator in *Antony and Cleopatra*, "Our place of vantage is basically that of Charmian and Enobarbus: people sufficiently close to their social superiors to witness informal and often undignified behaviour, without participating in motive and reflection like the confidants in *Garnier* or *Jodelle*."²⁶ By contrast, the middle tragedies provide us with a special knowledge of the workings of Hamlet's, Othello's, Macbeth's, and Lear's minds. We are privy to their anguish, their meditations, their plans. Of Antony, Cleopatra, Timon, and Coriolanus we know little beyond what is needed for the plot. While we may speculate about their motivations, our attention is directed to the

consequences of their deeds, and to their emotional responses. Curiously perhaps, the primacy of plot over character in the late tragedies seems to conform more closely than do the Great Four to Aristotle's prescriptions for tragedy in the *Poetics*.

The opacity of the main figures makes judgement difficult. Our reflex action as playgoers is to make final sense of the tragedies, to impose (and to find evidence of) stability and order in the plot, particularly in its conclusion. The stuff of life is usually made malleable, understandable. The late tragedies, however, consistently resist such responses. As has been noted above, the usual pointers (soliloquies, the corroboration of foils, the unquestionable heroic status of the main character) are absent in these late plays. So, as Bradley notes,²⁷ when Antony claims, "The nobleness of life/Is to do thus" (I.I. 37), we take his remarks as only one perspective on the plot; a perspective not entirely false, but neither is it the whole picture. To re-phrase a question from contemporary criticism, we may wonder, is there an interpretation of the main characters in this play? The multiple opinions of the characters seem to deconstruct, as it were, the natural desire for a stable, fixed, easily understood portrait of the protagonists.

The multiplicity of views in these tragedies is yet another feature that they share with comedy.²⁸ In the last tragedies, the multiplicity of views is provided by various dramatic strategies. The "choral" comments of minor figures already mentioned is one device. Another is the extended use of counterpoint. Most obviously in *Antony and Cleopatra*, counterpoint, or the presentation of opposing motifs or views, is found in the juxtaposition of Egypt and Rome. While earlier criticism has stressed the difference between these two worlds – one a place of duty, obligation, order, the other of sensuous abandon and idleness – more recent criticism draws attention to the flaws in both. The rapid change of setting (in itself a comic device) in fact emphasizes the similarities of the two worlds, so that in the study it becomes difficult to recall where we are exactly. As Emrys Jones remarks, the "rapid succession of little scenes, together with the emotional instability of some of its characters, breeds a sense of irony, even of comedy . . . which does not allow an emotional response, although . . . it does not rule out what might be called an intense affectionate involvement."²⁹

Moreover, Rome constantly invades Egypt by its messengers and by "Roman" thoughts. Later, Cleopatra herself dies in something like the high Roman manner. In Rome, on the other hand, Egypt insinuates its power in many ways, but especially through Enobarbus' description of Cleopatra, and through the Roman's insatiable desire for information about the wicked and fascinating Egypt. The result of these complex views is that Shakespeare's story is not Dryden's. We cannot supply a simple interpretation: All for love. Nor can we accept the moral that Rome

and moderation are to be preferred to Egypt and passion. The opposed voices in both settings prohibit such a simple interpretation, but add to our discomfort. The mingled yarn of both the protagonists' natures, and of the qualities of the play that both distance and engage us make final judgements slippery.

Counterpoint is not only found on a larger scale, but also in the smaller arrangement of individual scenes. The great speeches of the play, Antony's and Cleopatra's, as well as the barge speech of Enobarbus, are continually framed by their opposites. Enobarbus's gaudily, but effectively, painted portrait of Cleopatra as Venus is sandwiched by the leering, gullible Romans, who seek their version of *The National Enquirer's* view of the lives of great ones. The Roman ideals of honour and courage, which Coriolanus lives, are offset by the wound counting of Volumnia and Menenius, in which Coriolanus is mere object. In *Timon of Athens* the opposing voices seem more obviously presented at first. The generosity of Timon is played off against the fawning greediness and selfishness of his pretended friends. Yet the oppositions are not that simple. Timon's benevolence is inherently evil; his foolish magnanimity serves only empty ideals, and thus suggests an inhibition of good, rather than an excess of it.

The frequent use of this structural pattern of counterpoint in the late tragedies suggests that it may be a vehicle for the expression of the themes: the inability to know with certainty and finality the whole picture of characters' histories; it is the flux, rather than the orderliness of life which is underscored.

More obviously than the earlier tragedies, the late tragedies are "mingled yarns" in terms of genre: Shakespeare integrates the comedy more fully into the point of view of these plays. It is, as we have noted above, difficult to separate the nobility from the villeness, the silliness from the heroism. By contrast, the earlier tragedies presented comic scenes in "lumps." We might think of the clown in *Othello*, or the gravediggers scene in *Hamlet*, where the serious action is usually kept more distinct from the comic.

Yet another means by which the spectator is asked by Shakespeare to keep re-appraising his view of the protagonists, and thereby maintaining a sense of discomfort, is in the endings of the plays. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, as Anne Barton has pointed out, the unusual device of the divided catastrophe (Antony's death in Act IV, and Cleopatra's in Act V), more frequently found in comedy, forces us to reconsider our perception of the heroes at the moment "when our complacency is likely to be greatest: when we are tempted as an audience to feel superior or even dismissive because we think we understand everything."³⁰ Where Antony seemed to be the focus of interest in the earlier acts, by Act V Cleopatra has taken command of the stage. The divided catastrophe, as

Barton convincingly argues, seems "In its unpredictability, its very untidiness" to mirror "not the dubious symmetries of art but life as we normally experience it."³¹

In *Coriolanus*, the surprisingly truncated epitaph which usually lauds the hero (First Lord: "Let him be regarded /As the most noble corse that ever herald/Did follow to his urn." V.vi.142-44) is followed by the Second Lord's near disclaimer ("His [Coriolanus'] own impatience/Takes from Aufidius a great part of blame./Let's make the best of it." V.vi.144-46). This doubleness of response, a feeling of admiration for the hero on the one hand, and, on the other, a sense that "he asked for it," is found in the endings of all three tragedies. This complex response is, in part, caused by the nature of the "crimes" of the heroes. Unlike Hamlet, Othello, and Lear, who battle with evil, the heroes of the late plays do not face such elemental, "clarifying" oppositions.³² Instead of metaphysical questions, the heroes of the late tragedies deal with social and moral issues. The behaviour of aging infatuated lovers, a taciturn but proud soldier, and a misanthrope seem to be the proper subjects of comedy, not tragedy. Hence it follows that the expectations aroused are not unlike those of comedy. It is instructive that in all three of the late tragedies society and policy triumph. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, despite the victory of fame and imagination which Cleopatra achieves, Octavius wins the battle, and, as Una Ellis-Fermor argues, "[a]ll reaches . . . forward"³³ to the survival of civilization. In *Coriolanus* and *Timon of Athens*, the cities of Rome and Athens are triumphant: yet we also sympathize with the heroes who die far away from the hurrahs of victory. While we may assent to the Second Lord's thoughts, we have seen Coriolanus understand the price he will have to pay for his mercy to his city. His awareness and certainty of impending death even as he chooses to go with the Volscians, rather than remain in Rome, adds a nobility to his character not accounted for by the brief interpretation of the Second Lord. As R. B. Parker has noted, "Coriolanus' decision is an affirmation of the familial link on which a healthy society has to be built and which Shakespeare had come to see as the truly *political* core of human society set against the constant flux of history,"³⁴ While noble, then, this decision is also "comic," in the broad sense of that term. Like Coriolanus's death, Timon's is also passed over briefly, and without the customary praise found in the ending of most tragedies: "Dead/Is noble Timon, of whose memory/Hereafter more." (V.iv. 79-81) Again, the audience needs to supply a silent epitaph of praise, when the play provides none.

Thus some of the discomfort of the endings of these tragedies seems to arise from an unusual sense of relief when the heroes die; extreme characters are purged. The exultation with which *Antony and Cleopatra* ends works two ways: it obviously suggests the triumph of the lovers, but also allows society to triumph. While the world may be robbed of

greatness, and may be ruled by an opportunistic, politic leader, it does survive; moreover, with historical hindsight, the audience knows that the great Augustan peace and the birth of Christ are to come.

The shouts of joy in Rome still ring out in the audience's mind, when Coriolanus is assassinated by the Volscians. And it does not seem entirely wrong for one man to die for a whole city. In *Timon of Athens*, Athens is saved, while Timon dies, almost forgotten, far beyond the city. Sapped of his purity and his rejection of evil when he subsidizes Alcibiades' campaign, and when he "rewards" the prostitutes, Timon loses his nobility and becomes vengeful and petty; there is something here of Malvolio's "I'll be reveng'd on the whole pack of you!" Hunter is right in remarking that there is a strong sense that the tragedy of these protagonists lies in part in their rejection of society. The heroes are left incomplete, and "maimed . . . diminished by [their] failure."³⁵ We are discomforted, I think, because the hero is so clearly in error, because he insists on his self-sufficiency. Ironically sharing this quality with villains like Richard III, and Iago, Coriolanus and Timon (and the plays) insist that they did it "alone." While admiring, or, more accurately, wondering, the audience does not share their view of the relationship between the individual and society.

While all three tragedies suggest that the hero must conform to society or be destroyed, the case of Antony and Cleopatra is slightly different from that of Timon and Coriolanus. Rejecting their society, Antony and Cleopatra seem to have successfully created an alternate universe of their imagination. Reconciliation, to which comedy proceeds, is found here in the references to their union after death, and, as pointedly, in the earlier allusions of Antony approaching death as a bridegroom, later paralleled by Cleopatra's cry, "Husband, I come!" The "baby" sucking at her breast is a dark parody of what comedy promises: the continuation of society through marriage and children. We both admire Cleopatra's tenderness, her audacity in the choice of metaphor, and the gloriousness of her death – and yet we recognize a certain barrenness here, too.

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As Bradley observed of *Antony and Cleopatra*, the effect of the last tragedies on the reader is one of both triumph and sadness, almost a "sadness of disenchantment."³⁶ It is not that "we are saddened by the very fact that the catastrophe saddens us so little," it is, rather, because perhaps we finally recognize what has happened is what we wanted to happen: society triumphs and the individual is destroyed. We recognize that there is no place for Coriolanus, Timon, or Antony and Cleopatra in this world of fact. The passionate attachment that Timon and Coriolanus

have to values can find no possibility for realization. They must die. The society that triumphs, however, is a society that is corrupt, but it is also one with which we have in many instances identified. All we can do is make the "best of it".

In moving from the middle tragedies to the late, Shakespeare yet again altered his vision and depiction of tragedy. No longer as concerned with the portrayal of evil (markedly absent in these plays), or with outsized, idealized heroes, but rather with the examination of the actions of human characters, subject to folly and even ridicule, he moves into a new realm, one more concerned with the group portrait, and more clearly focussed on the pattern of a plot. The use of comic structures in tragedy disrupts the expectations of the knowledgeable playgoer; it causes "discomfort," a more intellectual, rather than emotional, apprehension and experience of the tragic hero's predicament and of society's (and the audience's) part in it. And, finally, it underscores the humanity, rather than the superiority, of the main figures. In its concentration on the flux of life, and on the comic potential of man's behaviour, it also looks forward to the romances, which would raise some of these same concerns, but perhaps more satisfactorily unite the worlds of tragedy and comedy.

References in this paper are to the *Arden Antony and Cleopatra* (ed. M. R. Ridley, rpt. 1971) and *Timon of Athens* (ed. H. J. Oliver, rpt. 1982), as well as the Riverside *Coriolanus* (ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 1974).

Notes

1. J. L. Simmons, *Shakespeare's Pagan World: The Roman Tragedies* (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1973), p. 149.
2. Matthew N. Proser, *The Heroic Image in Five Shakespearean Tragedies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 189.
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