

Kevin Joseph Ryan
Shakespeare / Summer I
Dr. Clinton Brand
Thursday 12 June 2012

Humor Below Antony

"We say that we 'conduct' a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will 'come out' of a conversation ... All this shows that a conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within."

-- Hans-Georg Gadamer

Kevin Joseph Ryan
Shakespeare / Summer I
Dr. Clinton Brand

Thursday 12 June 2012

During a 1973 interview, filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky loosened from talk of the movie and, in his elegant yet broken English, defined the artist as jester of the universe. But where does this leave the *real* jester? An artist in his own right, the comedian speaks what the rest of us can but recite, translates the woe and artifice of life into a form we enjoy: humor.

Doubly interesting is when these two collide. I hold Joyce as personal favorite. Yet Joyce himself in *Ulysses* wrote: "After God, Shakespeare has created most" (Joyce 175). Shakespeare, if by repute alone, typifies -- perhaps even surpasses-- Jodorowsky's definition, while remaining a simple ole' jokester.

My objective herein is to better understand this duality, in which Shakespeare the tragedian merges with Shakespeare the joker, as seen in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

This relationship appears first and most broadly in the play's distinctive humanism, which extends -- *and* withholds -- a humor reflective of its deeper joys and anguishes, less canticle than snakelike. It is a comedic presence vital to what Rakin considers "the peculiar vision that informs the play" (Rakin 201).

The play's humor ranges from the smallness of a sigh to the magnanimity of a self-reflexive situational irony forever promising its author the punchline. It stretches from surface-level verbal sprints and physical wisecracks, to the middle ground of ironic situational metaphor, right up to an invasive irony caustic with reality.

In addition to its serving as a kind of foundation to this essay's argument, Schopenhauer furthered the Theory of incongruity in part by defining humor as an effect of "the sudden apprehension of an incongruity between a concept and the real object thought through it," process of overcoming incongruity as the ludicrous, itself "always the paradoxical, and thus unexpected." (Schopenhauer 91).

Well, given Antony' and Cleopatra's utter recklessness, it's no surprise that the play is jarred by such incongruities, which both release humor and serve to enliven the very disharmony that is "characteristic not only of the love and the lovers the play depicts but also of its dramatic technique"(Rakin 201). This relationship appears throughout the play in two forms: 1) as Humor, with seriousness hidden behind joke, and 2) as Irony, with joke hidden behind seriousness (Schopenhauer 100).

We'll start with the former, by calling it witticism -- the first of two forms of ludicrousness -- which occurs when a real thought is subsumed under an abstract thought, creating a "vastly different intention and tendency of the thought" (Schopenhauer 96).

Viz.:

Enobarbus: A' bears the third part of the world, man;

Menas: The third part, then, is drunk. Would it were well,
That it might go on wheels!

Enobarbus: Drink thou; increase the reels.

(II.vii.91-94)

By starting with the abstract thought of the man as a kind of Atlas, able to carry one pillar of the world, we're brought to "the sudden apprehension" of an incongruity, the abrupt response to which exchanges the ludicrous for the real thought (the truth), in which Lepidus, as one-third of the triumvirate, represents one of the "three pillars of the world," and, which if literal would be quite heavy, and he being carried drunk, the man doing the carrying must, therefore, have

strength enough to hold up one pillar of the world, etc, etc,...

Typically, these witticisms surface as unsalted invective or horny wordplay, multifarious and hid beneath innuendo equally sharp and priapistic or the blurring of gender, though their degree of subtlety ranges from impressively sly (e.g., "We cannot call / her winds and waters sighs and tears" (I.ii.154-155)), to violently sophomoric (e.g., "I'll spurn thine eyes like balls before me; I'll unhair thy head" (II.v.63-64)).

Occasionally-- and nearly always at the hand or proddings of Cleopatra -- this gives way to kinky bondage-tinged jest, as when the Queen feigns jealous of Antony's horse, crying aloud, "Oh, happy horse, to bear the weight of Antony!" (I.v.22).

The play is replete with what Bevington refers to as "transvestite debauchery" (Bevington 750). Partly, this is tribute to and product of the era's absence of female actresses. Regarding this, Juliet Dunisberre notes that "[i]n the history of women's acting of Shakespeare's female parts ... the fiction of gender identity has never been allowed to usurp the fact of biological sex" (Dusinberre 2).

Whether by chance or by consequence, however, this androgynous pursuit has been embedded into the play, making the discovery of an all-male cast all-the funnier, and allowing for great situations like Enobarbus's mistaking Antony for "The Queen" (I.ii.82); or the unabashed weirdness of the couple's cross-dressing, sword-trading night of drunken wildness, the reminiscence of which leads Cleopatra to flirtatiously beg the messenger to "Ram thou thy fruitful tidings in mine ears, / That longtime have been barren" (II.v.24-25). As well, the knowledge of Antony's cross-dressing adds concrete yet hushed levity to Caesar's grumpily complaining to Lepidus of Antony as "not more manlike / Than Cleopatra, nor the queen of Ptolemy / More womanly than he" (I.iv.5-7).

Just as men and women meld together, becoming either oversexed or sexless, the cuckold and the eunuch advene to submission -- e.g., the sardonic bite of Alexas' "if it lay in their hands to make me a / Cuckold, the would make themselves whores" fails to alleviate the possibility of its truth (I.ii.79-80).

The eunuchs are humorously sexualized insofar as they are likewise domesticated and obedient, while also incapable of a sexuality "in deed" (I.v.9-19). For example, the early dialogue between Cleopatra and Mardian, in which he admits to her that, despite being "inseminated," he's stirred by "fierce affections" that stoke thoughts of "What Venus did with Mars," a fantasy which conceals, perhaps, thoughts of what his Queen, who's thought of as Venus, and Antony, thought of as Mars (I.v.9-19).

Now, in departure from the zingers and dirty jokes, we shall discuss a higher stratum of humor within *Antony and Cleopatra*, a cast of jokes that relies on a balancing of statement and intension. Hence, the second form of the ludicrous. Its movement -- antithetical to the first -- is from an abstract thought to the real thing of perception, resulting in "an incongruity" with the overlooked concept, and resulting in absurdity, or foolish action (Schopenhauer 96). This transition involves a stronger involvement of the real, yet a great abstraction of it thereof. A good examine is the bouncy exchange which occurs when Enobarbus remarks, "Caesar? Why he's Jupiter of men," and Agrippa replies "What's Antony? The god of Jupiter" (III.ii.9-10). Or the self-deprecation of Charmian, who answers the soothsayer's presage that he'll be "fairer than you are now" with the quip: "He means in flesh," and again a few lines down, saying he "would rather heat my liver with drinking" prevail (I.ii.19.25.).

Next is a kind of wordplay that refers to situation -- either by irony of implication, or by irony of self-reference; and in which a subtle reference is simultaneously a part of the stageplay

and outside its self-knowledge. Here, our relationship to the play's drama shifts, with the joke now hidden behind seriousness, behind veil of irony, which, by nature objective, at the same time evokes a certain "subjective yet serious and sublime mood" that -- just like the inner workings or our two protagonists -- cannot avoid the external world so tragically at odds with its total well-being (Schopenhauer 100).

The first example of arrives not ten lines in, with the association between Philo's description of Antony -- who has "become the bellows and the fan / To cool a gypsy's lust" -- and the literal fans being used by the eunuchs to cool lustful gypsy Cleopatra (I.i.8-9).

First, the audience is *told* about Antony's uxorious nature; then this statement actualizes, is *shown*, made real through the interplay between Philo's metaphorical words -- which immediately precede same-worded stage directions -- and the literal, physical yet still symbolic action. From surprise, to sense, to truth, to catharsis runs "the elegant discovering and conveying to our minds some absurdity" (Hobbes 54). This perfect confluence transforms the abstractness of Philo's disdainful words into an indisputably real presentment of the words' exactness and truth, a small incongruity that slowly festers into two downfalls.

This iron-charged metaphor, of sexualized fan, reappears in Enobarbus's fanciful rendering of the two lovers' first meeting. Surrounding Cleopatra -- who is so seductive that it beggars all description -- are "pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids," fanning her so that "what they undid did," as if resigned to masturbation from a lust they'll be forever denied, while she encircled by all of her spellbound slaves teases (II.ii.211-215).

Or the earliest portrayal of Caesar (I.iv.1--86) -- which collects the disparate elements of absurdity (e.g., his vaulted characteristics of a warrior, namely the ability to drink horse urine (esp. so close to Cleopatra's BDSM horseplay)), vanity (e.g., his talking in third-person, and by Caesar's name), and royalty; then place them upon Octavius himself, who -- however dower and staid and unfeeling -- becomes a comical figure by virtue of these uncompromisingly solemn traits.

His very lack of humanity is at times so staunch that it's laughable. Just the kind of uptight persona necessary for a character like Cleopatra to feed off, whereby the villain to comedy is by that role its savior. As a condition, Schopenhauer avers, seriousness should make for an especially easy transition into laughter. This cannot be said for Octavius. Perhaps, however, it can shed light upon the humor within the play's darker moments: serious, but also on some level humorous -- in other words, ironic.

What are we to think during a scene so heart-jarringly awful as Antony's botched suicide? As Mel Brooks famously noted that, "Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you walk into an open sewer and die."

Israel Knox devotes much of "Towards a Philosophy of Humor" to this unusual paradox; this paradox driven by "Chaos, disarray, bewilderment, the incompatibility of means and ends, the pervasiveness of evil, the abortiveness of hope and happiness [as] a component of life and nature" -- and nature and life, he continues -- insofar as they inspire "the subject matter of tragic dramas" -- mandate that "the roots of tragic drama extend also into the soil of chaos" (Knox 542).

More important, the play's humor accomplishes something bigger. Shakespeare, that "passionate pilgrim," honors not a foolishness of living but a mirthful ode to soul, to what slowly fell below it, affirming something fundamentally human (Joyce 183).

Which brings us to the source: Shakespeare himself.

The playwright uses a variation of situationally ironic humor when, in the final scene

Cleopatra "describes for her women the treatment they will receive in the theater if they allow themselves to be taken to Rome" (Rackin 201), coaxing the very actor playing her to insult himself -- "Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / I th' posture of a whore" (V.ii.219-221) -- and pointing to the audience, who point at the dazzling queen and her actor himself, thereby pointing back to the author.

This sportive interaction between actor and audience -- whether all or none are even aware of it -- points to "the disparity between dramatic spectacle and reality, implying the inadequacy of the very performance in which it appears"; a dichotomy of reality and abstractness, abstractness and reality, ad infinitum... This mightn't be gut-busting stuff -- it's largely cerebral -- but it boasts a wit that overcomes convention rather humanistically.

But, more. It's as if Cleopatra will forever rise from the words. The earth itself is at variance with the cloying resplendence of our sex-wrung enchantress, whose every word squirms under the weight of lust and open legs. As a surfeit of half-trying guile, Cleopatra's humor often merely typifies her proclivity toward a kind of controlled mania, a disposition that, as Antony observes, assents only to a frivolousness its own, and so dramatically, in fact, he derisively suggests that, as "[her] royalty / Holds idleness [her] subject, [he] should take [her] / For idleness itself" (I.iii.92-93).

Arguably, the impulse responsible for the Queen's constant salacious jocularly is selfsame impetus for the virulent and slavish tantrum in which she holds knife to the messenger's neck. Both moods seem fettered to compulsion. An impetuous answering to childish ingratitude, in fear of losing spotlight, or waning of attention. An odd megalomania. As Alexas quips to Cleopatra herself, even "Herod of Jewry dare not look upon you / But when you are well pleased" (III.iii.2-3).

The actress, the siren, the goddess, the muse. The serpent of baleful entrapment, the host of darksome seduction. A role so hidden beneath a playfulness, so bounding with tongue-in-cheek discourse, so replete with naughty double-entendres, that its target can only chase the unpredictability, always a step behind.

"Laughter," writes Bergson, "appears to stand in need of an echo."

By chasing Cleopatra, Antony is that echo. That certain incongruity, captured within the "strange combination of degradation and sublimity that seems to lie at the center of Cleopatra's characterization [and] is best understood in connection with the ambivalence of the artist himself" (Rakin 206).

The artist himself, a part of the scene, like a landscape of sweat-dappled faces moving between shade and shine, while below, stared at, from the seat of a market, though rising-- jumping to feet at the sight, under which some far-glid wind-roiling barge, pouched servants serve as paddles, up the stream, banked by untilled fields gone to sand long ago, in shade of pudgy knots draping, spied, caught looking, where the pebbled thoughts seem to best cascade, moving like breeze through the marble archways and quarried steps and sculpted lions, through the jagged treetops and hunkering trunks, with the growl of the living lioness, by wavering sail like wind-leapt tunic, young tiny, whistling for all those hummingbird things which require concentration, if but futile, blur-damasked, tufted in gap from gaze -- speak, speak, can't you speak through the features of, as they all flood past in light of your eyes strained focus bleared, her, she-- yet still, yes still, so motionless with distance yet impossibly motionable with nearness, across the loveliness of youth eternal, dashing so rapidly that, tiny things, paltry, the mountains far behind the perfumed tangerine sun appear in an unmoved unmoving, sleeping giant nomads covered mauve with sodden towels, because words are those sails blurring by; speaking, the

mountain, the water burning, the whirring pastel, the candle-loaned flit of each passive spark of foaming water, the pallor of froth like drool across the muddy flow, so be beginning, be beginning: it's still -- still there, where even the water envies those emerald eyes, which see nothing until all others have surrendered to hers: whistling, whistling, should he keep whistling?

Works Cited

- Ascione, Lou. "Dead Sharks and Dynamite Ham: The Philosophical use of Humor in Annie Hall." *Woody Allen and Philosophy*. Chicago: Open Court. 2004.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. New York: Grover Press, 1982.
- Bergson, Henri. *Laughter*. Los Angeles: Green Integer, 1999.
- Bevington, David. "Introduction to *Antony and Cleopatra*." *The Necessary Shakespeare*. 3rd ed. pp. 748-751. New York: Pearson Longman, 2009.
- Dusinberre, Juliet. "Boys Becoming Women in Shakespeare's Plays" *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1996.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relations to the Unconscious*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1960.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. 2nd ed. London: Continuum, 1975.
- Gregory, J.C.. Some Theories of Laughter. *Mind New Series*, Vol. 32, No. 127 (Jul., 1923), pp. 328-344. Oxford University Press
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2249238>
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Human Nature*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999.

- Hopkins, Gerard Manley. "The Golden Echo and The Leaden Echo." *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*. pp. 155-156. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Ann Arbor, MI: AMG, 2005.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*. New York: Hafner Press, 1951.
- Knox, Israel. "Towards a Philosophy of Humor." *The Journal of Philosophy*. pp. 541-548. Vol. 48, No. 18. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2020793>.
- Lippe, Theodor. Komik und Humor. Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relations to the Unconscious*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1960.
- McCombe, John. "Cleopatra and Her Problems: T.S. Eliot and the Fetishization of Shakespeare's Queen of the Nile." *Journal of Modern Literature*. Vol. 31, No. 2 (Winter, 2008), pp. 23-38. Published by: Indiana University Press. Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3005326>
- Morreall, John. "Humor and Emotion." *American Philosophical Quarterly*. Vol. 20, No. 3 (Jul., 1983), pp. 297-304. University of Illinois Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2001401>
- Phyllis Rackin. "Shakespeare's Boy Cleopatra, the Decorum of Nature, and the Golden World of Poetry" *PMLA*, Vol. 87, No. 2 (Mar., 1972), pp. 201-212.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation*. Vol. II. New York: Dover Publications, 1958.
- Wallace, David Foster. "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness." *Consider the Lobster*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007.