

Performative Rhetoric and Spatial Dynamics in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*

A Case Study of Pedagogical Practices
in a Literature Classroom

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Abstract

This paper explores a pedagogic approach to teaching literature with the knowledge of rhetorical practices and spatial dynamics of the time period in which the text is located. A case study of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1608), a Roman play, focuses on the political and cultural importance of spectacles, pageantry, and visual practices in the Roman Imperium under Augustus as well as monarchical government in early-modern England. This paper focuses on the elaborate rhetorical performances of Shakespearean protagonists on the streets delivering epideictic rhetoric to display their political authority in front of the onstage and offstage spectators and traces how deliberative rhetoric (argumentative speech), enjoyed by the political elite, has been a characteristic of the Roman Republic. The fall of the Republic and the rise of the Imperium resulted in a shift from deliberative rhetoric to one-sided praise or epideictic rhetoric. A close reading of a few scenes displays exhibitionist rhetoric, commonly employed in court pageantry and spectacles.

Keywords: Pedagogy, Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, rhetoric, performative space, visual

How does one teach literature in higher educational institutions? Varied pedagogical practices are employed to teach a literary text to

college/university-level students. Most teachers and literary scholars would focus on the historicist/ contextualist paradigm while a few would engage in a close reading of the text to critically analyse the narrative style. Teachers in a classroom approach the literary text as a tool to cultivate the aesthetic sensibility of the students. Often, a literary text is read for its larger political implications and radical potential. Over the past decade, a descriptive approach in literature has gained critical attention. Guido Isekenmeier (2017) explains that the “descriptive may be seen to comprise all textual means of performing visuality, of appealing to the imagination and guiding visualization” (p. 80). This does not mean that any of these approaches are exclusive of each other. A good pedagogical practice might be to use many of these different methodologies simultaneously. For instance, to teach a text, like Shakespeare’s play, we might require an understanding of the spatial dynamics, that is, the cultural geography of London in the early-modern period and the knowledge about the conversion of public places for purpose-built playhouses. Focusing on the rhetoric in Shakespeare’s play offers us a new insight into power politics. What is the relationship of rhetoric with power? Language can express degrees of authority as evident in an individual’s variation of intonation, accent, vocabulary and even form. While language can be an instrument of coercion, intimidation, or abuse, it can also be an intermediary between motivation and symbolic action. Since Shakespeare’s text was primarily written to be performed, a knowledge of visual/ performative rhetoric is essential to get the essence of the play.

As a case study, I focus on the *Cambridge Shakespeare* (1997 edition) of Shakespeare’s Roman play *Antony and Cleopatra* (1608) to understand the political and cultural importance of spectacles, pageantry, and visual practices in the Roman Imperium under Augustus as well as the monarchical government in early-modern England. I have found this pedagogical method a useful entry point to the text since it is focused on a close reading of certain scenes of the play. Though a performance-based approach to teaching Shakespeare has gained validity, few scholars focus on the space/place dynamics of the play. I have explored the use of dramatic and performative space of the public street in this play to conceptualize the construction of political identity and rhetorical agency in a particular form of government. It is commonplace to talk about the politics of exhibitionism, notably gladiatorial combat, chariot-racing

and theatrical practices in ancient Roman culture. On the other hand, bear-baiting, falconry and drama in the public arenas were as popular as the royally approved performances of masques and pageantry in the Jacobean court. I specifically focus on the elaborate rhetorical performances of Shakespearean protagonists on the streets delivering epideictic rhetoric to display their political authority in front of the onstage and offstage spectators.

Aristotle in *The Art of Rhetoric* classifies three kinds of rhetoric: judicial, involving past action; deliberative, directed towards the future; and epideictic or demonstrative concerning the present. The end of epideictic rhetoric is praise or blame of the subject and is often involved in celebrating the accomplishment of the heroic individual. In this context, it is important to understand how deliberative rhetoric, that is argumentative and free speech, enjoyed by the political elite, has been a characteristic of the Republic in Rome. The fall of the Republic and the rise of the Imperium have been equated with the shift from deliberative rhetoric to one-sided praise or epideictic rhetoric. Monarchical regimes ushered in a private dynasty after the fall of the Roman Republic which stifled political debate and championed individual charisma. For instance, while deliberative rhetoric can be seen in the speeches of Brutus, Menenius and Sicinius in Republican Rome in the play *Coriolanus* (2.1); Mark Antony delivers an exemplary epideictic speech ironically praising Brutus for assassinating Caesar in Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*. The body of the dead Caesar is a unifying spectacle that aligned the group of participants and spectators against the perpetrator Brutus. Paul A Cantor (2017) opines that 'Thumos' or public-spiritedness rules the republic in *Coriolanus* while 'eros' or desire characterizes Shakespeare's empire in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Critical interest has concentrated on the constant interplay of spatial dichotomies such as Rome and Egypt; public and private; masculine and feminine in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. William Hazlitt has succinctly explained the polarities in the play as Roman pride versus Egyptian magnificence. Octavius Caesar's Rome represents the world of political ambition and military prowess while Cleopatra's Egypt is the epitome of pleasure, Oriental luxury, and profligacy. Antony abdicates his military responsibilities as a Roman general and spends his time with Cleopatra in Egypt, playing "a strumpet's fool" (1.1.13). Critics thereafter have complicated the dichotomy associating Rome with

masculine ideas of duty, practical reason, action and restrictive morality; and Egypt with feminine principles of love, pleasure, spontaneity, leisure and luxury. Northrop Frye (1967) sums up the polarity between the Roman “day world of history—an Apollonian realm of order, rule, and measure versus the Egyptian “night world of passion”—a Dionysian domain of gigantic feasting, drunkenness, and love-making” (pp. 70-71). However, Jonathan Dollimore (1984) has argued that the binary structure is not static but continuously intersects each other. My pedagogical intervention is to demonstrate that the conflict between Rome and Egypt needs to be understood in a more nuanced way. The streets can be inscribed within the political, cultural, and gendered dimensions of space/place in the play. My reading explores how the public display of power through elaborate pageantry and spectacle on the streets of Alexandria are rhetorical strategies of Antony and Cleopatra in contrast to Octavius Caesar who crafts a policy of concealment of power from the public eye. The streets thus become a site of real and imagined contestation of power in this play.

The period covering the end of the Roman Republic and the formation of the Imperium under Augustus served as a classical model in legitimizing the imperial ambitions of late Elizabethan and early Stuart England. English Humanists avidly read and translated books on the classical history of Rome by Seutonius, Tacitus, Livius and Plutarch. Thus, Shakespeare stimulated the Jacobean audience’s imagination with a visible reconstruction of Plutarch’s ‘The Life of Marcus Antonius’. Teaching the text should include a discussion about the spectacles on the streets of Alexandria as Roman cultural practices and the politics of *populares* (populist politics) in the nascent stages of the imperium. A knowledge of rhetoric, an essential Renaissance art taught to every student in Latin Grammar schools, is necessary to understand an early-modern play. It would explain the decline of deliberative rhetoric in the Roman Republic and the shift to epideictic or demonstrative rhetoric under the emerging Principate. Deliberative rhetoric carries out civic function and is often in the form of advice/counsel/persuasion in the republican courts while epideictic rhetoric includes ceremonial discourse and encomium to promote and perpetuate the royal policies and ideologies of a ruler. Reading Shakespeare’s play through the lens of rhetoric offers an understanding of the political forms of government from the fall of the Roman Republic to the rise of the Augustan Principate.

Lynn Enterline (2012) reminds us that rhetoric has two branches that continually interact: tropological (requiring formal literary analysis) and transactional (requiring social and historical analysis). Before venturing into a close reading and literary analysis, I examine the historical context covered in the play *Antony and Cleopatra*. The play captures the period after the second triumvirate (formed by Octavius Caesar, Antony, and Lepidus) defeats the legions of Brutus and Cassius in 42 BC, putting an end to the Republican cause. Thus, the play traces the transition from a Republican Rome to the formation of the Principate under Octavius Caesar. The crisis of the Republic was caused by the conflict between the plebian tribune and the oligarchic senate that formed the political authority of the *Res Publica*. An example of such a crisis can be seen in Shakespeare's other Roman play *Coriolanus* where the patricians and plebians are in conflict at the time of starvation and economic crisis of the state. Classical Roman statesman and rhetorician Cicero mentioned how there were two categories of men who endeavoured to participate in civic life—one faction who desired their words and deeds to be agreeable to the masses were considered *populares* while the other group who won the approval of the best citizens or the senators were called *optimates*. Cicero preferred the *optimates* over the *populares* since he mistrusted the plebians and favoured the oligarchs. The *populares* according to him, was a threat to the senate's authority and the state's political stability. Cicero might have partisan views, but historians have warned us to shun the natural temptation to equate the *populares* as champions of the poor and oppressed. However, Cicero's conceptualization helps to propose an alternative way of reading Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. I argue how, in this play, Octavius Caesar appears to be an *optimatus* while Antony and Cleopatra together follow the path of the *populares*. Octavius Caesar proceeds to outmanoeuvre Lepidus (the third partner of the triumvirate), overcomes Antony's army and declares himself the Principate after a strategic negotiation with the senate, a step towards his absolutist tendencies. On the other hand, Antony, along with Cleopatra, undertakes populist measures of articulating the structure of civic bonds with the plebians in the streets of Alexandria. In this historical context of the crisis of Republicanism and the emergence of monarchic absolutism, the significance of visual rhetoric in the public street at the Alexandria marketplace is analyzed.

A close reading of a few prominent scenes located on the streets requires

critical analysis: the first of such scenes that attract our attention is the brilliant rhetorical description provided by Enobarbus about the first meeting of the Egyptian queen Cleopatra with the Roman general Antony. The voluptuous Cleopatra is seated in a barge which,

... like a burnished throne
 Burned on the water. The poop was beaten gold;
 Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
 The winds were lovesick 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. (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 2.2.201-207)

Cleopatra fashions herself as a Venus who lies “in her pavilion—cloth of gold” (2.2.209) and on “each side her stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids, with divers-coloured fans, whose wind did seem to glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool” (2.2.211-214) while her “gentlewomen, like the Nereides, so many mermaids tended her I’th’eyes” (2.2.216-217). Enobarbus explains that the barge on the sea overlooks the marketplace where “a strange invisible perfume hits the sense” (2.2.222) and enamours the people of the city. This elaborate paraphernalia is aimed to attract the attention of Antony who “Enthroned i’th’market-place, did sit alone/Whistling to th’air” (2.2.224-225). Streets and marketplaces, in the early modern context, have often been viewed as spaces of fetishist culture and nascent consumerism. However, there is no mention of any activity of trade or mercantile exchange in the play. Instead, Cleopatra is the fetishized object, a spectacle of material opulence, oriental delight and sexual profligacy for the Roman rulers and Egyptian subjects alike. The elaborate spectacle of Cleopatra is to legitimize both her erotic and royal power over her audience. She displays a practised nonchalance and an artful naturalness in her disposition as she fashions herself as Venus aided by Cupids, nymphs, and mermaids. The poetic image in abstraction transcends the sheer sensory experience of smell (perfumed water), vision (richly coloured barge), touch (burnished throne burning in the water) and hearing (tune of the flute) on the audience to create an enigma, mystery, which is revelation and concealment; speech and silence at the same time. Andrew Feldherr (1998), explaining a spectacle or *Enargeia*, quotes Cicero from *Rhetorica and Herennium*, as “the expression of things in words in such a way that an affair seems

to be taking place and the subject to be present before the eyes" (p. 4). Shakespeare uses ekphrasis, (verbal representation of the visual image) and hypotyposis (a vivid description of scenes) to transform the visual spectacle onto the printed pages of the text.

The second example cited by Enobarbus relates to Cleopatra's amorous display of her sexualized self in a public place where she:

Hop[s] forty paces through the public street
and having lost her breath, she spoke, and panted,
that she did make defect perfection
and, breathless, power breathe forth" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 2.2.240).

The description of Enobarbus is not simply an imaginative construction of the 'Oriental lascivious Other' for the Roman military men as most critics would like to point out. I would suggest that Cleopatra's spectacle in the public space creates a tense network of social, sexual, and political ties as she participates in the courtly ritual of flattery, cajolery, dissimulation, stylized artifice, and decorum in the rest of the play.

In another such scene, Octavius Caesar is infuriated to hear reports of Alexandria,

I'th' marketplace, on a tribunal silvered, Cleopatra and [Antony] in chairs of gold were publicly enthroned; at the feet sat / Caesarion, whom they call my father's son, / and all the unlawful issue that their lust / since then hath made between them. Unto her / he gave the stablishment of Egypt, made her / of lower Syria, Cyprus, Lydia, absolute queen. (3.6.3-10)

Antony is a parodic image of Octavius in his rival claim to the Roman imperium; though his strategy of controlling power differs from the latter. The attempt to anthropomorphize power is displayed by Antony while concealed in Octavius Caesar. Antony displays power by setting up a counter empire with Cleopatra as the Egyptian goddess; Octavius however does not believe in the public manifestation of power and conceals the true nature of power like a Machiavellian prince. Ronald Syme (2002), the historian of *The Roman Revolution* reminds us that "the convenient revival of republican institutions, the assumption of special title, the change in the definition of authority, all that made no difference to the source and facts of power. Domination is nevertheless effective for being veiled" (Syme, p. 2). Octavius' (Augustus's) power was founded on the control of the military.

Antony's public ceremony of display of power before his subjects is not so much 'staged' as 'enacted' to borrow Clifford Geertz's (1999) formulation. Jeffrey Tatum (2010) explains charisma as formulated by Geertz as the authority individuals acquire from their connection to "the active centres of the social order" (p. 14). The marketplace in Alexandria is such an active centre of social order, an arena that can confer charisma onto the two resplendent protagonists Antony and Cleopatra. The coronation ceremony of Cleopatra in the public street by Antony is thus a visible manifestation of power that functions to create rather than reflect their authority. Earlier in a scene, Caesar's triumphant march and purposeful stride are parodied by Antony and Cleopatra when they leisurely plan to "wander through the streets and note/ The qualities of people" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 1.1.55-56). Though Cleopatra's Egypt does not maintain a strict demarcation between the personal and political spheres, this entertainment of the mature lovers seems superfluous rhetorical exercise unless we understand how practised exhibitionism is a part of their identity formation. These rhetorical acts of the lovers can be read as a late Republican strategy appearing to be *populares* by seeking the approval of the plebians. However, the imperial tendencies of Antony and Cleopatra can be recognized in the absence of *vox populi* or the voice of the people in the marketplace. Thus, there is a clear absence of deliberative or argumentative rhetoric. On the other hand, Octavius Caesar distances himself from a potential populist stance and disdains exercise in 'common show-place as vulgar' (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 3.6.12).

We are thus not sure whether Octavius Caesar in the last act actually intends to capture and display Cleopatra as a war trophy on the streets of Rome as Cleopatra visualizes. It is probable that Cleopatra, threatened by Octavius, imagines herself being displayed like "an Egyptian puppet" to a group of "mechanic slaves with greasy aprons" and parodied by "scald rhymers" and "comedians" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.207-19) on the streets of Rome. Repeated ceremonial acts on the streets of Alexandria have conferred subjectivity and political sovereignty to her earlier; she is anxious that a similar public demonstration on the streets of Rome would objectify her as a war trophy and deprive her of her rhetorical agency.

To conclude, I have explained that a pedagogical approach to reading Shakespeare would be to trace a dynamic relationship between

Shakespearean theatre, rhetorical strategies, and political forms of government. The ceremonial and performative rhetoric of Antony and Cleopatra constructs their public identity and displays their populist agenda. Shakespeare's conceptualization of rhetoric is not limited only to speech acts, but it includes language which is implicated in political relationships and in power structures. His focus is on subtle rhetorical strategies as tools of political governance rather than the language of power and dominance. Envisioning the function of rhetoric as 'symbolic action' or 'inducement to action' (borrowing Kenneth Burke's definition), I have argued that in this play, demonstrative rhetoric and public spectacles help in shaping the political culture during the transition in Rome from an oligarchic Republic to the Augustan Principate and have shown how Antony and Cleopatra legitimize their authority through a variety of communicative and performative practices, from self-fashioning to public ceremonial rites, and a series of spectacles in the streets before the audience.

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Note: A very small portion of the article is taken from the author's unpublished PhD thesis *Rhetoric of Love and Politics of Power: Speeches and Writings of Queen Elizabeth I* available on the Shodhganga repository.

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