The Review of English Studies, 2025, Vol. **00**, No. 0, 1–16
https://doi.org/10.1093/res/hgaf052
Advance access publication 31 July 2025
Article

The Failing Messengers of *Antony and Cleopatra*

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This article studies a series of failed messengers across William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. It argues that these figures are fundamental to how Shakespeare engages with the play's genre by negotiating the play's relationship with classical and neoclassical tragedy. *Antony and Cleopatra* is in close dialogue with classical sources, such as *Aeneid* 4, as well as a tradition of English neoclassical Cleopatra plays by Mary Sidney, Samuel Daniel, and Fulke Greville. Through his emphasis on the role of the messenger, Shakespeare engages with an aspect of dramaturgy that was of great interest to neoclassical theory, as exemplified by early modern readings of Horace and Aristotle, as well as by Castelvetro. By writing a series of failed messengers in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare establishes a creative relationship with neoclassicism that is productive of his play's unique form. The essay ends by offering a close reading of the messenger missing from Antony's death scene. It argues that this messenger is modelled on a messenger missing from Sophocles's *Ajax*. By putting the messenger under erasure, Shakespeare achieves the generically complicated representation of Antony's shown death.

From September 2018 until March 2019, the Spiritmuseum in Stockholm hosted a solo show by the British artist David Shrigley.[1] The show was entitled 'Exhibition of Giant Inflatable Swan Things'. A Swan Thing is a three-dimensional plastic inflatable that has the basic shape of a swan (the basic shape of a swan when drawn by David Shrigley) and a sweet smile on its face. Fully erect, it stands at more than twice the height of its creator. During the exhibition, the Swan Things were inflated and then deflated again in front of the visitors. The full inflation took four minutes, but the artist directed attention onto the deflation, which was given double the amount of time. For eight minutes, visitors had the opportunity to think about form—about taking form in the first place, and then losing it. Every artwork has form, and usually the focus is on achieving it. But Shrigley draws attention to the creative potential of staging *de*formation. In the case of a bank of Giant Inflatable Swan Things softly shrinking to the sound of extracting air, the effect is intensely humorous. At the same time, I find myself strangely touched by their smiling demise and resurrection.

[1] Natasha Hitti, *David Shrigley's Inflatable Swan-things Collapse and Spring to Life in 12 Min Cycles* (pubd online October 2018) <https://www.dezeen.com/2018/10/12/david-shrigley-inflatable-swan-things-stockholm-spritmuseum-exhibition/> accessed 10 Oct 2024.

Shrigley's Giant Inflatable Swan Things are a great introduction to Shakespeare's experiments with literary form. First, because they give such immediate, sensual access to the abstract thought of form and the value, to artists, of thinking of form not as a cookie-cutter but as a dynamic process: not a shape, but a shaping. Second, Shrigley lingers over the act of actively extracting the air from the Swan Things, and this is a helpful way to start thinking about *Antony and Cleopatra* specifically. In this play, I will argue, Shakespeare is curious about what happens if an element necessary for the attainment of a certain literary form is taken away. The form I am speaking of is tragedy, and the element that is withdrawn is the tragic messenger. Here, the explanatory usefulness of the Swan Things ends. Although they never fold in exactly the same way, they do endlessly repeat the same aesthetic gesture to the same humorous effect. In contrast, Shakespeare's repeated removal of messengers achieves generic and affective variation. In the following, I will observe this in four interesting and instructive examples: the programmatic first messenger of the play, and the play's three missing messengers of death.

The value of these observations lies in a fresh way of appreciating Shakespeare's celebrated experiments with dramatic form. Additionally, they contribute to our understanding of his obsession with the messenger function in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Much has been written about the small army of men and women that scurry across the globe in this play.[2] Critics have considered individual messenger scenes, and they have thought about the overall pattern of motion created by the back and forth of the Roman and Egyptian messengers across the play's narrowing gap of space and time. But what I want to argue is that often Shakespeare's interest in these bit parts lies not with what they positively say or do, but, quite perversely, in the formal effects of their malfunctioning. What is the meaning of a messenger who does not speak? who comes too late? who, despite best efforts, fails to make it onto the stage, and ends up *missing* from his scene? These are questions that on-stage characters are asking themselves, and questions I will be asking as well.

It will quickly become clear (because Shakespeare makes it so) that some of the work these figures do is to negotiate the new play's relationship with classical and neoclassical tragedy. *Antony and Cleopatra* is, of course, in close dialogue with *Aeneid* 4, which tells the story of Aeneas and Dido and which is formally modelled on Greek tragedies.[3] Furthermore, Shakespeare's play comes as the fourth Antony-and-Cleopatra play written in English within 16 years. All three predecessor plays, by Mary Sidney, Samuel Daniel, and Fulke Greville, followed neoclassical rules. Shakespeare thus picked up a *Stoff* that was, at least in England, closely associated with this dramatic form. One of his ways of dealing with this legacy is through the repeated failure of the messenger function. One might expect such failures to amount to a

[2] The following discussions of messengers in *Antony and Cleopatra* are particularly useful: Marion Perret, 'Shakespeare's Use of Messengers in *Antony and Cleopatra*', *Drama Survey*, 5 (1966), 67–72; Maynard Mack, '*Antony and Cleopatra*: The Stillness and the Dance', in Milton Crane (ed.), *Shakespeare's Art: Seven Essays* (Chicago, IL, 1973), 79–113, partially reprinted as 'Mobility and Mutability in *Antony and Cleopatra*', in Mark Rose (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Antony and Cleopatra* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1977), 125–31; Ray L. Heffner, Jr., 'The Messengers in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*', *ELH*, 43 (1976), 154–62; Bernard Beckerman, 'Past the Size of Dreaming', in Mark Rose (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Antony and Cleopatra*, 99–112; Susan Snyder, 'Patterns of Motion in *Antony and Cleopatra*', *Shakespeare Survey*, 33 (1980), 113–22; Ronald R. Macdonald, 'Playing till Doomsday: Interpreting *Antony and Cleopatra*', *English Literary Renaissance*, 15 (1985), 78–99; Molly Maureen Mahood, 'The Varying Tide in *Antony and Cleopatra*', in *Bit Parts in Shakespeare's Plays* (Cambridge, 1992), 180–204; Alan Stewart, 'Rome's Letters, Egypt's Words', in *Shakespeare's Letters* (Oxford, 2018), 94–114.

[3] This has been recognized since antiquity. See for example Servius, *Aen.* 4.471, 664. For a short introduction to this much-discussed topic, see Philip Hardie, 'Virgil and Tragedy', in Charles Martindale (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil* (Cambridge, 1997), 312–26. For a recent book-length study, see Vasiliki Panoussi, *Vergil's "Aeneid" and Greek Tragedy: Ritual, Empire, and Intertext* (Cambridge, 2009). Especially interesting in the context of my discussion in Section 3 is D-Servius 4.664 because he suggests that Virgil kept tragic decorum by not showing but telling Dido's death: 'Non inducit occidentem se, sed ostendit occisam, & hoc Tragico fecit exemplo, apud quos non videtur quemadmodum fit caedes, Sed facta narrator', see *Pub[lii] Virgilii Maronis Bucolicorum eclogae X, Georgicorum libri IIII, Aeneidos libri XII et in ea, Mauri Servii Honorati grammatici commentarii, ex antiquiss[imis] exemplaribus longe meliores et auctiores ex bibliotheca Petri Danielis* (Paris, 1600), 356.

rejection of the (neo)classical tradition, and this would fit a standard interpretation of both the play and Shakespeare. But as we shall see, this would be far from the truth. As Lorna Hutson urges in *Circumstantial Shakespeare*, the age-old story of the antithesis between Shakespeare and neoclassicism needs to be revised, and we should begin looking for the 'common ground' between them.[4] One of the things both share is a deep interest in the function of messenger reports. Although Hutson does not move on to interpret any of Shakespeare's messengers, she stresses the importance of the *nuntius* both for neo-classical theory and Shakespeare's practice, and makes a suggestion:

> Shakespeare's dramaturgy makes extraordinarily varied and inventive use of *nuntius*-figures—that is, of persons who offer reports of past histories or offstage actions—as part of the process of implying a larger imagined world beyond the deixis or 'showing' of staged performance. This process is so familiar to us from Shakespeare that we take it for granted; we need, then, to estrange it a little in order to analyse it.[5]

'Estranging it a little in order to analyse it' is precisely the project of this article, which will argue that, through his failing messengers, Shakespeare enters into a creative relationship with neoclassicism that is productive of the play's unique form. The final messenger I will discuss—the one missing from Antony's death scenes—is a particularly exciting figure in this context. Potentially modelled on a messenger missing from Sophocles's *Ajax*, he helps Shakespeare achieve the odd shape of Antony's death, and to think about what it means to write new works within the (neo)classical tradition.

THE FIRST MESSENGER OF *ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA*, AND THE LAST

Hands, do what you're bid:
Bring the balloon of the mind
That bellies and drags in the wind
Into its narrow shed.
(W. B. Yeats[6])

Over the first 17 lines of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare builds a cluster allusion to three literary models that culminates in the entrance of the first messenger of the play at line 1.1.17. Shakespeare starts off as if he wanted to continue formally the English tradition of neoclassical Antony-and-Cleopatra tragedies: a room in an Egyptian palace, a close, oppressive atmosphere, a loving couple, the sudden, terrible intrusion from a messenger from Rome. Jan Kott felt this set-up could have been written by Racine.[7] At the same time as the play raises neoclassical expectations, a close parallel to *Aeneid* 4 is established.[8] Antony and Cleopatra are

[4] Lorna Hutson, *Circumstantial Shakespeare* (Oxford, 2015), 4.
[5] Hutson, *Circumstantial Shakespeare*, 6.
[6] W. B. Yeats, 'The Balloon of the Mind', in Richard J. Finneran (ed.), *The Poems: A New Edition* (London, 1983), 155.
[7] Jan Kott, 'Let Rome in Tiber Melt', in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, tr. Boleslaw Taborski (New York, NY, 1974), 169–77 (170).
[8] For an influential discussion of Shakespeare's relationship to this source, see Janet Adelman, *The Common Liar: An Essay on Antony and Cleopatra* (New Haven, CT, 1973), 68–78.

portrayed like Aeneas and Dido in Carthage: a once noble warrior who has lost his manly valour in the service of an African Queen. In *Aeneid* 4, Rumour spreads news around North Africa that Dido and Aeneas are spending the winter in amorous indulgence.[9] In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Rumour's role is taken on by Philo gossiping to Demetrius about the 'dotage' of his general Antony:

> those his goodly eyes,
> That o'er the files and musters of the war
> Have glow'd like plated Mars, now bend, now turn
> The office and devotion of their view
> Upon a tawny front. His captain's heart,
> Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst
> The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper
> And is become the bellows and the fan
> To cool a gipsy's lust.[10]

Just as Aeneas before him, Antony has abandoned his imperial mission and has begun to build a new home. At this point in both stories, a messenger arrives from the highest authority their world recognizes. In the *Aeneid*, Jupiter sends Mercury to command Aeneas to abandon Carthage (4.222–37). In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Caesar has sent a messenger to recall Antony to his duties as triumvir. The third component of the cluster allusion is a nod to Shakespeare's own literary universe: we witness a reprisal of Marcadé, who shows up unexpectedly in *Love's Labour's Lost* to disrupt the lovers' merriment with deadly news.[11]

The messenger who steps on stage at 1.1.17, then, has not simply come from offstage, or from Rome; he has crossed over from older literary works into the world of the new play. On one level, he carries a dispatch from Caesar, but on another, metadramatic level, he carries the import and authority of poets and scholars that have told this (kind of) story before. His arrival casts the long, dark shadow of the tragic tradition onto the scene. We all know what should happen next: tragic messengers are heard, and the catastrophe follows before the sun has set. In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas listens to Mercury and obeys Jupiter's command (4.279–91). Dido's love story becomes a tragedy and his romance wandering is set back onto its epic course. In *Love's Labours Lost*, Marcadé is bid welcome, and the lovers must separate. They will not come back together within the confines of their play. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, for one more beat, the play continues along the familiar lines prescribed by tradition. The messenger announces: 'News, my good lord, from Rome' (1.1.18). Antony turns to him and invites him to speak. It is as if cast and audience are caught in a terrible *dejà-vu* and nobody is able to do anything about it. Nobody, that is, apart from Cleopatra.

Just as Antony turns his attention to Caesar's *nuntius*, Cleopatra intervenes between the two men with the counter-intuitive entreaty, 'Nay, hear them, Antony.' (1.1.20). She starts to taunt Antony that he should hear the Roman news, while implying that to do so would be to subordinate himself to Caesar (to play the Aeneas to his Jupiter): 'Your dismission / Is come from Caesar. Therefore hear it, Antony.' (1.1.28–9). At the same time, she suggests

[9] Virgil, *Virgil*, ed. and tr. H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. G. P. Goold, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA, 1999–2000), vol. 1: *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid 1–6* (1999), 434 (*Aen.* 4.173–97). Further quotations from this text are taken from this edition and given parenthetically in-text, cited by book and line numbers.

[10] William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. David Bevington (Cambridge, 2005), 88–9 (1.1.1–9). Further quotations from this play are taken from this edition and given parenthetically in-text, cited by act, scene and line number.

[11] William Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, ed. William C. Caroll (Cambridge, 2009), 169 (5.2.690).

that, if he suffers *this* rude intruder, he could just as well open the flood gates and let them all in—all of the messengers from Rome that are still waiting outside. The audience is gradually being informed about the absent presence of these offstage characters as she needles Antony with repeated provocations: 'Call in the messengers.' (1.1.31), 'The messengers!' (1.1.34), and 'Hear the ambassadors.' (1.1.49). It is a feature of Roman comedy (one Shakespeare used in *The Comedy of Errors*) to suddenly conjure into being a whole company of unseen characters for a moment of metatheatrical delight. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the same ploy creates a different, ominous overcrowding of the offstage space. Caesar's minions are waiting just beyond the doors of the room in Cleopatra's palace, pressing up against the division between offstage and onstage space in worrying numbers. Thus, having admitted one Roman messenger, the scene draws around itself an innumerable host of invisible *nuntii*. The single on-stage Roman has become the representative of a menacing multitude. But he fails—they all fail. Cleopatra's clamouring turns Antony's attention back to her. The offstage messengers remain locked-out: Antony promises Cleopatra to admit 'No messenger but thine.' (1.1.53). The loving couple exits with Antony's final, forbidding 'Speak not to us' (1.1.57) in the direction of the dumbstruck Roman, who never got to say his bit.

Over the course of the scene, the first messenger of *Antony and Cleopatra* has not only been deflated from Mercury to man-with-his-mouth-open but transformed from a functioning dramatic device into the oxymoron of a mute messenger. After his first and only line, the man just stands there, the still centre of the scene. Shakespeare makes a spectacle of the greatest narrator figure of the theatre (another oxymoron), and thereby teaches us to look *at* him, rather than through him, to Caesar. He becomes a programmatic figure that heralds the other malfunctioning messengers yet to come. Furthermore, both internal and external audiences are invited to speculate about the meaning of such a failure of the function. Philo and Demetrius begin their interpretative work immediately: accepting the theatrical and political convention that a messenger is an extension of the sender, they ask 'Is Caesar with Antony prized so slight?' (1.1.58). But it is the privilege of the external audience to recognize that it is not only Caesar that has been prized slightly in the welcome this messenger received. With him, Cleopatra has rejected the entire tragic tradition of her *Stoff*. This makes her response slightly uncanny. It is as if she understands that, by disrupting the messenger function, she can disrupt the parallels to the models that began to give shape to the form and plot of her play. She succeeds, at least for the space of this scene.

What happens to the form of the play in 1.1, then, is the opposite of what happens to form in Yeats's little poem above. Yeats starts off with a balloon whose unwieldy bulginess is pushed and kneaded by the artist's hands until it is finally squashed into the tight rectangle of his four-line poem. There is a quality of red-facedness about this little poem that speaks of the hard work it takes to put the thought of form into a suitable form. *Antony and Cleopatra*, to the contrary, starts off in perfect shape, and holds it for an instant; *then* it begins to belly and drag in the air. The consequences for the play's form are enormous. By inhibiting the messenger function, Cleopatra causes a non-tragic, non-neoclassical delay: the messengers have to withdraw for the day and cannot return until the next. One day has been won, and from there the play's dimensions of time and space dilate across months and seas—until it is eventually stuffed back into the narrow shed of tragedy, or, rather, into the neoclassical narrowness of the room at the top of Cleopatra's tower in 5.2.[12]

[12] There is a parallel here between Shakespeare's use of the (neo)classical tragic form at the beginning and end of the play and Christopher Marlowe's use of direct translation from the *Aeneid* at the beginning and end of *Dido Queene of Carthage* (see Sheldon Brammall, '"Sound this Angrie Message in Thine Eares": Sympathy and the Translations of the *Aeneid* in Marlowe's *Dido Queene of Carthage*', *RES*, 65 (2014), 383–402), except that Marlowe's return to Virgil's voice declared the inescapability of Dido's tragedy, while Shakespeare allows Cleopatra to transform tragedy from within.

It is in this scene that the last messenger of the play appears. He, too, fails. Dispatched by Caesar to prevent Cleopatra's suicide, but arriving on stage seconds *after* Cleopatra has died, he occasions one of Charmian's best lines:

1 GUARD Caesar has sent –

CHARMIAN Too slow a messenger. (5.2.315)

This is a much-quoted line from this play. But why should a retort about a tardy servant make the heart leap so? Of course, there is the victory over Caesar. In so far as the messenger stands in for the sender, outrunning Caesar's *nuntius* means to outrun Caesar himself. As such, Charmian's half-line marks his final defeat. But her phrase is so proudly, defiantly triumphant because this messenger is significant also in himself, as the final appearance of the Tragic Messenger, of Mercury, and of Marcadé that would destroy love and give victory to the *raison d'état*. The first and last messengers of the play, who are also the first and last *failing* messengers of the play, thus form a bracket around Cleopatra's story. If the first messenger had embodied tradition's menacing claim on the unfolding drama and its protagonists, Cleopatra's ability to silence him (if only for one day), opened up a space to redefine the traditional tragic ending into something else. By the time the play returns into the confines of neoclassical form, the meaning of the traditional ending has been revised. 'An audience *wants* Cleopatra to die', wrote Anne Barton because her death resolves any 'uncertainty as to whether … she will keep her word and follow Antony'.[13] Yes, but that is not all. Death itself has been redefined. Her dying became a race for Antony's kiss. Her death spells political victory and happy marriage. And her end is transformed into a new beginning in the Blessed Fields. This is what the last failure of the last messenger confirms, and it is why 'too slow a messenger' is such a rousing line.

ANTONY'S FAILED MESSENGER AND ENOBARBUS'S DEATH

I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
(Sylvia Plath, 'Tulips'[14])

Enobarbus's death is triggered by the arrival of a messenger. He brings him good news. Enobarbus immediately decides to die. If this is baffling, it fits, because everything about Enobarbus's death is an enigma. There is no apparent illness (although he invokes the aid of 'the poisonous damp of night', 4.9.13), no physical injury, no weapon. His simply wills himself to die and falls to the ground. The event is so sudden and strange that the guards who watch it happen remain unsure whether he is truly dead even as they exit the stage with his body. No one else in Shakespeare's *oeuvre* dies like this: voluntarily ceasing to exist, while standing centre stage. Janette Dillon has written a classic essay on the isolation of Coriolanus, Antony, and Timon. In her account, their tragedies consist in 'a progress towards increasingly extreme solitude' and they die 'once this process has reached a kind of absolute'.[15] She notes 'the solitariness of Enobarbus, especially in that final cry of desperation and

[13] Anne Barton, '"Nature's Piece 'gainst Fancy": The Divided Catastrophe in *Antony and Cleopatra*', in *Essays, Mainly Shakespearean* (Cambridge, 1994), 113–35 (130–31).
[14] Sylvia Plath, 'Tulips', in *Ariel* (London, 1965), 20–22 (21).
[15] Janette Dillon, '"Solitariness": Shakespeare and Plutarch', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 78 (1979), 325–44 (342).

loneliness: "I am myself alone the villain of the world"'.[16] Coriolanus, who banishes Rome, Antony, who is deserted by his men, Timon, who flees into the woods, and Enobarbus, who seeks a ditch to die in, are for Dillon all men who either grow away from the world, or the world grows away from them. Dillon's parallels suggest that the ceasing of Enobarbus is a final, nearly imperceptible step on his retreat from the world, like the drifting off of David Bowie's Major Tom. And there is much to this critical account. From the moment he decides to leave Antony, Enobarbus moves to the margins of the stage, and speaks increasingly in asides and soliloquies. At the end, he has no one to whom he can address his last words but the moon. But I would like to retrain our eye from these grand external parallels to a parallel in miniature that is offered by *Antony and Cleopatra* itself and that is at least as instructive. Enobarbus is not the only one of Antony's men to die that day in the Roman camp. The other one is the bringer of the good news, a messenger who numbers amongst Shakespeare's *nuntii* who fail to deliver. If we focus on this pairing, Enobarbus's death is still a voluntary cutting-himself-off, but it feels less predictable, more violent, and generically more complex.

The movement of Enobarbus's death is set in motion by a messenger sent to him by Antony. As soon as Antony learns that Enobarbus has deserted to Caesar's camp, he bids Eros to send after him:

> ANTONY
> Go, Eros, send his treasure after. Do it.
> Detain no jot, I charge thee. Write to him –
> I will subscribe – gentle adieus and greetings;
> Say that I wish he never find more cause
> To change a master. O, my fortunes have
> Corrupted honest men. Dispatch. – Enobarbus! (4.5.12–17)

Antony is already very short of messengers at this point. Embarrassingly, he had to send his children's schoolmaster to Caesar in 3.12. And yet, against Eros's resistance, he dispatches one of the few trustworthy men left about him into the Roman camp to return to Enobarbus all of his treasure, and to bring him a letter full of good will and forgiveness.

In the meantime, Enobarbus has worked out that he has made a mistake. Caesar mistrusts the deserters. He has had Alexas hanged even though he did him faithful service at the court of Herod. Enobarbus concludes 'I have done ill, / Of which I do accuse myself so sorely / That I will joy no more' (4.6.18–20). He has reached a depressing impasse, but there is no reason to assume that he is either dying or planning to commit suicide. At this point, a Roman soldier enters to inform Enobarbus, and the audience, that Antony's messenger has arrived offstage:

> SOLDIER Enobarbus, Antony
> Hath after thee sent all thy treasure, with
> His bounty overplus. The messenger
> Came on my guard, and at thy tent is now
> Unloading of his mules.
> ENOBARBUS I give it you.
> SOLDIER Mock not, Enobarbus,

[16] Dillon, '"Solitariness"', 336.

> I tell you true. Best you safed the bringer
> Out of the host; I must attend mine office,
> Or would have done't myself. Your emperor
> Continues still a Jove. (4.7.20–30)

The Roman soldier is deeply struck by the divine magnanimity of Antony's gesture. Enobarbus is, too. He is mortally struck. In a classic tragic movement, a sudden and painful recognition of guilt and dishonour breaks in on the hero: 'I am alone the villain of the earth, / and feel I am so most' (4.7.31–2). It makes it impossible for him to live on. Antony's excessive, 'overplus', *superhuman* kindness crushes this mere mortal: 'This blows my heart' (4.7.35). Enobarbus, who, just a moment ago, was stuck in a dead-end, now finds a path newly opened for himself: to the tent, to Antony's messenger. But he finds he is unable or unwilling to walk towards this man, even though the Roman soldier bids him. Instead, he turns away (in a physical *peripeteia*). The pressure exerted by the offstage arrival of the messenger with his gifts has pushed Enobarbus off the stage and into death: 'No, I will go seek / Some ditch wherein to die. The foul'st best fits / my latter part of life' (4.7.38–40). The advent of this kindly messenger has killed Enobarbus. And in turn, Enobarbus's departure kills the messenger: the Roman soldier made it more than clear that the man's life is in danger. It is imperative that Enobarbus go to meet him at his tent and conduct him safely out of the enemy war camp. By turning the other way, Enobarbus seals both their fates. While the one finds a lonely onstage death, the other, we must assume, is getting murdered elsewhere in the camp.

The significance of this double death is to create a contrast so stark that it hurts. After Enobarbus's desertion, Shakespeare is not content to let him drift peacefully out of orbit. He is suddenly precipitated into crisis. Shakespeare allows the messenger, a figure of human communication, to intrude into Enobarbus's loneliness with the same cruelty with which the red flowers intrude into the white hospital room of Sylvia Plath's 'Tulips'. Plath's persona experiences the flowers sent to her by her loved ones as upsetting. 'Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.'[17] Awful and predatory messengers of love, they threaten to kill her: 'Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their colour, / A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck.'[18] Like the tulips, the *nuntius* sent to Enobarbus is both messenger and message, both loving and hurtful. His offstage presence alone is overpowering. It threatens to force Enobarbus back into dialogue—a dialogue that would speak to *his* wound by confronting him with his betrayal. The messenger may even threaten to reclaim Enobarbus, move him out of his tragic isolation and pull him back into the unwanted embrace of a romance ending. It is too much. Unable to bear, or bear up to, the goodness proffered him, Enobarbus permits this messenger to fail, and fails him. As he dies his lonely death, he also allows for dialogue, forgiveness and hope to be strangled offstage. Enobarbus's end is tragic. But this is not simply tragedy, it is tragedy that pops in front of the contrasting backdrop of a rejected romance alternative.

Shakespeare's audience would have found it easy to recognize the situation and its emotional structure from the Bible, from Church sermons, maybe even from their own spiritual struggles as Protestant Christians, because there is a parallel here to the painful process that Christian figures, from Paul onwards, undergo when a grace confronts them with their own sinfulness. Paul writes at 1 Corinthian 15.8–9: 'And last of all, he was seene also of me, as of one borne out of due time. For I am the least of the Apostles, which am not meete

[17] Plath, 'Tulips', 21.
[18] Plath, 'Tulips', 21.

to be called an Apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God.'[19] But while Paul can accept grace, Enobarbus cannot. For any viewer aware of it, this Christian parallel brings into sharp focus the drama of Antony's Jove-like gesture, the arrival of the angel(os), the annunciation of the good news (the *euangelion*), and Enobarbus's heart-breaking inability to accept Antony's free gift.[20] A psychological and generic reading of this messenger scene is hard enough to take. But the parallel to Christian narratives of grace yields the most despairing reading of Enobarbus's failed messenger, who gains by it the *umbra* of a failed redemptive angel.

ANTONY'S DEATH SCENE: THE MESSENGER UNDER ERASURE

I call first, Zeus, on you. Grant me one small thing:
send some messenger, please, to bring
the evil news about me first to Teucer,
so that he may be first to lift me up
when I have fallen on this fresh-stained sword.
I would not have some enemy spy me out
and cast me forth, a prize for birds and dogs.
(Ajax in Sophocles, *Ajax*[21])

After the death of Achilles, Ajax was the best of the Greeks. But the leaders of the Greek army awarded Achilles's shield to the smooth-tongued Odysseus. Enraged, Ajax goes on a killing spree to destroy them all. But Athena (always on the lookout for her favourite Odysseus) sends him delusions and Ajax kills cattle instead of men. When he recovers and discovers his mistake, he decides to kill himself. While the others are searching for him, he finds a quiet place to die. What follows is one of the most experimental scenes in Greek tragedy.[22] Ajax is alone on stage. (This is unusual: it happens only twice in the extant corpus that the chorus exits mid-play and leaves the hero to soliloquize.[23]) He fixes his sword into the Trojan soil with the intention of throwing himself on it in a moment. Then he makes a final address to the gods. He prays to Zeus that a messenger may come and report his death to his brother Teucer, so that Teucer can remove his body before anybody else may see and abuse it. This metatheatrical prayer makes us aware that we see what we should not see at this point. It is as if Sophocles had turned the stage by 180 degrees. What we would expect to see right now is Tecmessa, Teucer, and the chorus searching for Ajax, and then the entrance of a messenger who reports Ajax's offstage death. Instead, we watch the preparations for the suicide. Through this prayer, Ajax is trying to take control of the plot of his play, as well as direct the performance, or rather *re*direct it towards a more conventional tragedy. What he is praying for is a conventional scene, that is, a reported one. His words remind the audience of the most

[19] I am quoting from the Breeches Bible, a Geneva Bible with a Tomson New Testament: *The Bible, that is, The Holy Scriptures Conteined in the Olde and Newe Testament* (London, 1599), fol. 75r.

[20] The word angel is derived from the Greek word for messenger (*angelos*), as is evangelist (*euangelos*, the bringer of good news) and the evangelion (*euangelia*—good news). Through this etymology, messengers are linked closely with the process and logistics of Christian grace.

[21] Sophocles, *Ajax*, tr. John Moore, in David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, *The Complete Greek Tragedies, Sophocles II*, 3rd edn, ed. Mark Griffith and Glenn W. Most (Chicago, IL, 2013), 16–74 (ll. 825–30). Further quotations from this play are taken from this edition and given parenthetically in-text, cited by line number.

[22] For introductions to Sophocles's stagecraft, see Patrick J. Finglass, 'Stagecraft', in *Sophocles* (Cambridge, 2019), 29–38 and C. W. Marshall, 'Sophocles *Didaskalos*', in Kirk Ormand (ed.), *A Companion to Sophocles* (Malden, MA, 2012), 187–203.

[23] The other example is *Eumenides*, ll. 235–43: Aeschylus, *Oresteia: Agamemnon, Libation Bearers, Eumenides*, ed. and tr. Alan H. Sommerstein (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 354–485 (386).

important and most celebrated role of the messenger in classical tragedy: to report violent deaths so they are not viewed directly. It also attests to classical anxieties surrounding the possibility that the messenger might fail to come. Without him, the hero and the stage would be exposed to view in the moment of their greatest vulnerability, in the moment of their deepest shame.

But Zeus is not listening, and Sophocles is busy breaking all the rules. The messenger never comes. And so we see what we should not see: Ajax's suicide. (Although some modern classicists find it hard to believe that Ajax really dies in full view of the audience, there was no doubt about Ajax's onstage death in Shakespeare's time.[24]) The consequences of withholding the messenger prove potentially disastrous for both hero and play. Theatre itself becomes a scandal of visibility. 'He is not to be looked at!' (915), cries Tecmessa, when she shows Ajax's corpse to the chorus:

> I will cover him
> with this enfolding garment from all sight.
> Surely no one who loved him could endure
> to see the foam at his nostrils and the spout
> of darkening blood from the wound his own hand made. (915–19)

Tecmessa describes Ajax as *theatós* (something 'to be seen'), an adjective that evokes theatrical spectacle and continues the play's self-conscious reflection on tragic conventions of what can or should be shown. Her 'enfolding garment' does too late what the messenger report should have done from the start: shield her husband from sight. She is horrified that Ajax should be seen polluted by his own blood and slumped in an undignified position over his sword. This exposure to sight, not his suicide, is his tragic *pathos*: 'To be so great, and suffer this!' (923).

While Ajax's loss of dignity is one concern, the other is the emotion his body will produce in the onlookers. The withholding of the messenger and his narrative has resulted in Ajax's body becoming an ambiguous visual sign. He is both pitiful and risible. 'Even your enemies, I think, might weep for you' (924), Tecmessa presumes, but she prepares for the opposite response: 'Well, let them laugh their laughter and exult / in Ajax's downfall' (961–2). This ambiguity is a generic crisis for the tragedy, and it means that the hero's death cannot end the play. It has no power to confer a final meaning on the story of Ajax, so the play continues for another 600 lines while others try to decide how Ajax/*Ajax* ends: in honour or humiliation? Ultimately, only Odysseus (the man of many turns) has the flexibility of thought and the greatness of mind that can finish the story. He decides to pity the man that tried to kill him and requests that Ajax be buried. As a consequence, Ajax is removed from sight and with him the threat of laughter that has been hanging over the play. Only now does Ajax get what he thought the messenger could have achieved right away: invisibility, and an honourable burial. What Sophocles offers in the second half of *Ajax* by evoking the messenger of death and then

[24] The only available commentary on the play in the first half of the sixteenth century were the Greek scholia. The scholiast suggests that Sophocles, by showing the suicide, wanted to be innovative as well as create *ekplexis*, a stunning stage effect. See scholion 815a (4–10), in George Andrew Christodoulou, *Ta archaia scholia eis Aianta tou Sophokleous: kritikē ekdosis* (Athens, 1977), 185–6. A modern translation and illuminating discussion of this scholion can be found in Pat Easterling, 'Space in the Scholia', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies, Supplement 129: Images and Texts: Papers in Honour of Professor Eric Handley CBE FBA* (2015), 1–12 (6–7). The first modern commentor, Joachim Camerarius, concurs with the ancient scholia, while referencing Horace's explicit rule, formulated in the *Ars Poetica* (ll. 179–88), that deaths must be reported, see for example *Sophokleous hai hepta tragōdiai/ Sophoclis tragoediae septem una cum omnibus Graecis scholiis, & cum Latinis Ioach[im] Camerarii. Annotationes Henrici Stephani in Sophoclem & Euripidum, seorsum excusae, simul prodeunt* (Geneva, 1568), 39 [note that Camerarius's *Commentatio* has separate pagination]. According to Scott Scullion, *Three Studies in Athenian Dramaturgy* (Stuttgart, 1994), 92, the first person to suggest Ajax did *not* die on stage was probably Ludwig Purgold, who published in 1802.

withholding him is what I would call a tragic death with the messenger under erasure. This is not a case of simply 'showing' the suicide. It is about *not having it reported*, leaning into precisely the anxieties and courting the generic and affective distortions that the convention of the tragic messenger seeks to prevent. By doing so, Sophocles leads both the hero and tragedy itself to the brink.

Sophocles's experiment in *Ajax* with writing a tragic death that is neither 'reported', nor simply 'shown', but that is emphatically *not-reported* can teach us a certain way of looking at the onstage death of Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Encouraged by Sophocles, I am going to follow Shakespeare's invitation to appreciate Antony's death scenes as conspicuously missing the tragic messenger that should have reported it. As such, Antony's onstage death constitutes the most extreme version of Shakespeare's use of the 'failed messenger' in *Antony and Cleopatra*. But even though the messenger is missing altogether, he is the key for these scenes' aesthetic experiment—an experiment that throws new light on the much-discussed comic elements of Antony's death as well as on Shakespeare's relationship to neoclassical drama. To be clear, I do not wish to claim that every onstage death in Shakespeare could or should be read in this way. Tragic deaths in Shakespeare are usually 'shown' or 'reported'. I am proposing that Antony's onstage death constitutes a third option. And there are good reasons why we should read it as a tragic death minus the messenger.

Antony and Cleopatra stands in a strong neoclassical tradition in England. Before Shakespeare, Antony died three times in English tragedy and every time, his death was told by a messenger.[25] Fulke Greville's *Antony and Cleopatra* was burnt by its author, but we can still enjoy the magnificent *angelia* in Mary Sidney's *Antonius* and Samuel Daniels's *Cleopatra*—plays Shakespeare knew.[26] This tradition raises expectations of the fourth Antony-and-Cleopatra play in English, and suggests neoclassicism as an interpretative framework that is relevant to Antony's onstage death. Furthermore, Shakespeare represents Antony's death twice: it is shown in 4.14 and 4.15 and then told in 5.1 when Dercetus delivers the news of Antony's death to Caesar. The short scene, as it plays out between Dercetus and Caesar (the external audience has a different, ironic perspective on it), is Shakespeare's neoclassical tragedy in miniature. Dercetus enters, delivers a decorous speech about Antony's noble, Roman suicide, and his audience, Caesar, is duly moved to tears. The scene is rounded off by Caesar's appreciative definition of the tragic messenger speech: 'it is tidings / to wash the eyes of kings' (5.1.26–7). By putting side-by-side two versions of Antony's death, Shakespeare encourages a comparison between the neoclassical scene with the messenger, which effortlessly achieves tragic form and the correct tragic emotions, and the scene without the messenger, which has baffled attempts at generic categorization and left its audiences emotionally conflicted. Such external and internal parallels render Antony's onstage death remarkable vis-à-vis the (neo)classical tradition of this story.

What is more, Shakespeare makes the omission of the messenger conspicuous by his careful plotting of a breakdown of the messenger function around Antony. Although *Antony and Cleopatra* is positively crawling with *nuntii* from beginning to finish, Antony alone begins to run out of messengers after the Battle of Actium. At the same time, his relations to messenger figures as such sours. He begins to mistreat them cruelly: Thidias, a messenger from Caesar

[25] If we count Samuel Brandon's neoclassical *The Tragicomoedi of the Vertuous Octauia* (London, 1598), where Antony's death is related by the *nuntius* Byllius, he died four reported deaths before Shakespeare.

[26] For an overview of the *Stoffgeschichte* of Antony and Cleopatra, see Marilyn L. Williamson, *Infinite Variety: Antony and Cleopatra in Renaissance Drama and Earlier Tradition* (Mystic, CT, 1974). On Fulke Greville's play, see Ronald Rebholz, *The Life of Fulke Greville, First Lord Brooke* (Oxford, 1971), 131–2. For a summary of the standard view of Shakespeare's relationship to Sidney and Daniels, see John Wilders, 'Introduction', in William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. John Wilders (London, 1995), 1–84 (61–3).

who dared to kiss Cleopatra's hand when she offered it, is tortured on Antony's behest until he cries like a beaten child: 'Whip him, fellows, / Till like a boy you see him cringe his face / And wine aloud for mercy' (3.13.104–6). But it is in Act 4, in the run-up to his suicide, that things hit rock bottom. After Cleopatra's betrayal, Antony is mad with rage and imagines killing a messenger. He casts himself as a tragic Hercules, who, in Sophocles's *Women of Trachis* and Seneca's *Hercules Oeateus,* had hurled the messenger Lichas off the cliff:

> The shirt of Nessus is upon me. Teach me,
> Alcides, thou mine ancestor, thy rage.
> Let me lodge Lichas on the horns o'th'moon (4.13.43–5)

Antony's classical fantasy of *nuntius*-murdering breaks the most basic rule governing the reception of bad news: don't kill the messenger. As if in response, maybe in metatheatrical retaliation, the very next messenger breaks the most basic rule governing the messenger function (don't lie!): it is Mardian who brings the false report of Cleopatra's death. This false report causes Antony's suicide. Janet Adelman, who observed the deterioration of the reliability of messengers in the play, considered Mardian's message the ultimate step in this development.[27] But Antony's killing fantasy and Mardian's untruth are merely the penultimate steps towards a collapse of the function around Antony. The final step is the messenger not showing up at all, withholding himself and the great *angelia* and exposing the dying hero to the eyes of all onlookers. That is what happens to Antony.

His shown death begins with noble, Roman intentions, but soon runs into a comic delay caused by Eros, who does not want to play his part in the assisted suicide. Eros ultimately gets out of it by tricking Antony into turning his back to him and quickly stabs himself. Antony proceeds to do the deed with his own hands, and, at first, he is satisfied that he has imitated Eros's Roman suicide successfully:

> I learned of thee. (4.14.114).

This was clearly intended by Antony as a half line signifying the cutting short of life. But in the silence that follows, uncertainty grows. The body on stage is breathing, possibly quite heavily. Is this breathing that of the actor, or is Antony still alive? This uncertainty is only resolved, for Antony and for us, when Antony finishes the blank verse with the incredulous

> How, not dead? Not dead? (4.14.114).

The silence after 'I learned of thee' thus turns out to have been merely a caesura. Antony's realization of his failure to end his life initiates a recurrent uncertainty over the body on stage: Diomedes enters and wonders what the sight that presents itself to him means. He has to ask the guards: 'Lives he?' (4.14.120). The same is true for Cleopatra, who looks down from her tower on Antony and asks 'How now? Is he dead?' (4.15.6) and gets the comically precise answer from Diomedes: 'His death's upon him, but not dead' (4.15.7). There are many humiliations: Dercetus enters and steals the sword from Antony's bleeding wound to ingratiate himself with Caesar. Antony's body is taken on a long *schlepp* across Alexandria to Cleopatra's tower. There is further indignity for Antony when Cleopatra refuses to open the door of the

[27] Adelman, *The Common Liar*, 36.

monument, and then pulls him up into the monument using her own and her girls' muscle (reminding the audience that the women were played by men), while punning on the 'heaviness' of the occasion. This death scene invites pity as much as it invites laughter. It does not attain a definite form. In that it is like Antony himself: 'Here I am Antony, / Yet cannot hold this visible shape' (4.14.14).

Various elements that unsettle this death scene have been helpfully illuminated by scholars, first and foremost Shakespeare's borrowings of comic structures from Roman comedy (e.g., the 'clever slave' Eros).[28] But I would argue that the challenges that the scene presents as a whole can be best accounted for if we read it as a tragic death that is missing the messenger that should have reported it. For Renaissance readers, theories of classical tragedy, notably Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Ars Poetica*, attested to a persistent preoccupation with the need to narrate tragic violence, and were outspoken about the undesirable consequences if such a scene were to be shown instead.[29] The main concerns revolve around the dignity of the hero and the stage, artistic decorum, plausibility of plot, problems with the verisimilitude of the enactment of death and the negative effect of such problems on the suspension of disbelief, and, finally, as the dreaded response to any and all of these issues: the provocation of laughter. These classical reflections on the messenger convention were well known in the sixteenth century. They combined into a fascinating poetics of the tragic messenger in Lodovico Castelvetro's *Poetica d'Aristotele Vulgarizzata et Sposta* (1570). Castelvetro has much to say about the messenger function, but easily his most pressing point, which he repeats four times over the course of his book, is the imperative to use messengers for the representation of tragic death.[30] Failing to do so is a grave artistic error with catastrophic consequences for the genre. Castelvetro says that, in principle, a tragedian does well to select 'murder and other deeds of horror' as the object of his imitation, because these actions are very apt to produce the affective response proper to tragedy, pity and fear.[31] But violent death is an object that causes problems in practice, 'for experience has shown that deeds of cruelty and horror cannot be set before the eyes of an audience without violence to verisimilitude and that when they are they move to laughter rather than to tears, producing the effect not of tragedy but of comedy'.[32] For Castelvetro, showing a tragic death on the stage leads to the 'distruggimento

[28] See for example Adelman, *The Common Liar*, 50–52, as well as Martha Tuck Rozett, 'The Structures of Tragic Endings: The Suicide Scenes in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*', *SQ*, 36 (1985), 152–64.

[29] From the mid sixteenth century, Aristotle came to corroborate Horace's *dictum* that scenes of violent deaths must be replaced by messenger reports. As Bernard Weinberg explains, sixteenth-century scholars characteristically made 'systematic comparison or combination of two different texts of classical antiquity' (*A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols (Chicago, IL, 1961), 1. 53). Horace's *Ars Poetica*, in particular, was studied 'in a point-by-point paralleling of the text with Aristotle's *Poetics*'. This exercise was based on the assumption that Aristotle and Horace 'said essentially the same things about the poetic art and that if one sought carefully one could find identical statements in both'. Influential commentaries on Horace, such as those by Francesco Filippi Pedemonte (1546), Francesco Robortello (1548), Vincenzo Maggi (1550), Giacopo Grifoli (1550), and Giason Denores (1553), would separate Horace's poem into small sections and find equivalents for each in Aristotle's treatise. Horace's demand that onstage-murder or metamorphoses be replaced by messenger reports (*ArsP* 179–88) thus was paired with several 'parallel' passages in the *Poetics*. To pick just one example, Vincenzo Maggi connected *ArsP* 179–88 with three places in Aristotle: 1453b1 (poets must not rely on spectacle to achieve the tragic effect), 1460a11 (some actions, like the pursuit of Hector, cannot be staged), and 1461b26 (epic recital is a sophisticated pleasure in contrast to the vulgar delights of tragic enactment). See Weinberg, *History of Literary Criticism*, 1, 121. Other commentators found other places in Aristotle to elucidate Horace's rule. In this way, numerous passages from the *Poetics* were drawn into the orbit of *ArsP* 179–88, and Aristotle came to agree with Horace that killings should be reported. For the wide circulation, ownership, and interest in Latin, Italian, and Greek texts of Aristotle's *Poetics* in England, see Micha Lazarus, 'Aristotelian Criticism in Sixteenth-Century England', in *Oxford Handbooks Online* (Oxford, 2016) <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935338.013.148> accessed 31 Oct 2024.

[30] Lodovico Castelvetro, *Poetica D'Aristotele Vulgarizzata e Sposta*, ed. Werther Romani, 2 vols (Rome, 1978), 1. 79–80, 377–8, 387, and 2. 171. These passages correspond to pages 33, 144, 149, and 252 in the partial English translation of the *Poetica*, *Castelvetro on the Art of Poetry: An Abridged Translation of Lodovico Castelvetro's Poetica d'Aristotele Vulgarizzata et Sposta*, tr. Andrew Bongiorno (Binghamton, NY, 1984).

[31] Castelvetro, *Poetica*, tr. Bongiorno, 144. Castelvetro, *Poetica*, ed. Romani, 1. 378.

[32] Castelvetro, *Poetica*, tr. Bongiorno, 144; Castelvetro, *Poetica*, ed. Romani, 1. 378.

dell'effetto', the destruction, not of the hero, but of tragedy itself.[33] Shakespeare would have been familiar with this (neo)classical poetics of the *nuntius*, at the very least through Horace.[34]

Neither Aristotle, nor Horace, nor Castelvetro suggested anybody might wish to destroy the tragic effect in their tragedies. But even Castelvetro's formulation of the effects of enacting tragic violence on stage acknowledges that the breaking of this rule is not merely destructive (of tragedy, dignity, verisimilitude), but *productive* of something else (comedy, mockery, metatheatre, and the tensions they create within the tragic framework). It would only take an artist who is interested not in achieving formal neoclassical perfection but who is, for one reason or another, curious about the aesthetic of the ill-made thing, the damaged, or the not-quite-there for this neoclassical nightmare of artistic failure to become an exciting aesthetic choice. The equivalent would be a potter who, instead of throwing another perfect pot, labours to create an imitation of a badly thrown one. Shakespeare's version of Antony's death is the planned production of the formal and emotional effects of the non-reported death. It is a neoclassical death scene *sans* messenger, or—less Jacques and more Jacques Derrida—with the messenger under erasure.

The question remains why Shakespeare would withdraw the messenger from Antony and destroy the tragic effect of his death. Sophocles can offer some guidance here. Ajax's death happens early in his play, about 60% of the way through. Antony also dies quite early, in Act 4. What both Sophocles and Shakespeare dramatize is a fall that is incapable of achieving either proper form or closure. Although the hero has spoken his last words, the question of how we are to think of them is still open, and the options are quite extreme: are Ajax and Antony failed, risible figures, or do they possess a thrilling greatness? Deflating the tragic form at this point offers the opportunity of dramatizing the creative process of finding an ending and highlighting the imaginative power of the character who offers closure. The chief characteristic of both Odysseus and Cleopatra is their changeability—Odysseus is *polytropos*, Cleopatra possesses 'infinite variety' (2.2.246)—and this is what allows them to restore Ajax and Antony to their heroic stature. This mental flexibility, however, is also suspect. At worst, we could read Cleopatra as a parallel to the messenger Dercetus who shrewdly offers a false report of Antony's death to achieve selfish ends. At best, with Janet Adelman and Stanley Cavell, we can take the love story she proposes as a response to the problem of scepticism the play poses. They saw the death of Antony as the sceptical crisis of the play, a crisis of knowability.[35] If Antony commits suicide because of a false report of his lover's death, do we know anybody at all? The subsequent complete collapse of the messenger function is an apt figure for a sceptical crisis, because what are messengers but the fragile means by which we know of the world and of each other? When Cleopatra later inflates Antony to a stature 'past the size of dreaming' (5.2.96) and offers us her death as her complete satisfaction by him, should we believe her? As Adelman and Cavell stress, the gamble is ours. Scepticism can only be overcome by a reinvestment of trust (trust in the reliability of the messenger). The gap between what we see and what we hear about Antony's death cannot be closed by reasoning. We must take a leap of faith, and that takes courage.

I have been working with an instructive analogy between Sophocles and Shakespeare, but it is worth pointing out that it is, to borrow a phrase from Gordon Braden, 'not prohibitively unlikely' that Shakespeare had read what was Sophocles's most popular play in the

[33] Castelvetro, *Poetica*, ed. Romani, 1. 378.

[34] For Shakespeare's further and active interest in classical and contemporary poetics, and for the channels through which he would have acquired his knowledge of literary theory, see Sarah Dewar-Watson, *Shakespeare's Poetics: Aristotle and Anglo-Italian Renaissance Genres* (New York, NY, 2018).

[35] Janet Adelman, 'Character and Knowledge', in Mark Rose (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Antony and Cleopatra*, 118–25 and Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 1987), 18–34.

Renaissance.[36] By the end of the sixteenth century, *Ajax* was available in no less than nine different Latin translations. The one that had the most currency in England, the Wittenberg Sophocles, which had been prepared by Philip Melanchthon and Veit Örtl for presentation to King Edward VI upon his coronation in 1547, advertised itself as a Latin crib 'for the use of youths who study Greek'.[37] Even if we think of Shakespeare as having only 'small Latin and less Greek' for someone with a grammar school education, this would have been plenty to acquire knowledge of a play that was highly regarded during his lifetime.[38] The play's limited performance history attests to its prestige in England: Elizabeth I and James I and VI each were presented with a version of *Ajax* during a royal visit to one of the universities.[39] The performance for Elizabeth was cancelled because she was too tired. But it is interesting to note that James saw a version of *Ajax*, adjusted to courtly tastes by Inigo Jones, at Christ Church in August 1605, not long before Shakespeare wrote *Antony and Cleopatra* some time in 1606.[40] If Shakespeare was at all interested in the things that the patron of the King's Men was watching, reports of this performance would have brought *Ajax* to Shakespeare's attention.

If Shakespeare knew *Ajax*, this has two interesting implications. First, the series of allusions to Ajax's suicide during Antony's death really come to life. Just after Antony threatened to throw Lichas off the cliff, and just before Cleopatra decides to send Mardian with the false message of her death, Cleopatra exclaims 'Help me my women! O, he's more mad / than Telamon for his shield' (4.13.1–2). This is the first direct allusion to the story of Ajax's suicide. When Antony takes off his armour in preparation for his death, he thinks of Ajax: 'The sevenfold shield of Ajax cannot keep / The battery from my heart.' (4.14. 39–40). And, when Antony tells Cleopatra that he has stabbed himself, she says 'So it should be that none but Antony / should conquer Antony' (4.15.17–18), which adapts Ovid's 'ne quisquam Aiacem possit superare nisi Aiax' (*Met.* 13.390).[41] Arthur Golding translated this as 'that none may Ajax overcome save Ajax'.[42] In this way, Shakespeare keeps the death of Ajax in our minds throughout his hero's demise. If we assume that Shakespeare knew Sophocles's dramatic version of the story, this strengthens the analogies between Sophocles's daring dramaturgy and Shakespeare's into a literary imitation that Shakespeare wanted us to notice. And that, in turn, brings on the second interesting implication.

As I mentioned at the outset, modern scholars usually see Shakespeare's relationship to neoclassicism as antithetical: on the one side, there is a stiff, rule-bound, continental aesthetic and on the other, there is a free Englishman, the original genius, who ignores the rules. I agree

[36] For Shakespeare's knowledge of Greek tragedy, see Gordon Braden, 'Classical Greek Tragedy and Shakespeare', *Classical Receptions Journal*, 9 (2017), 103–19 (109); Tanya Pollard, *Greek Tragic Women on Shakespearean Stages* (Oxford, 2017); Louise Schleiner, 'Latinized Greek Drama in Shakespeare's Writing of Hamlet', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 41 (1990), 29–48; Emrys Jones, *The Origins of Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1977), 85–118.

[37] Vitus Winshemius (ed.), *Interpretatio Tragoediarum Sophoclis, ad utilitatem iuuentutis, quae studiosa est Graecae linguae* (Frankfurt, 1547). For this translation, and a tantalizing hint of its importance both for Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and his tragic poetics more widely, see Micha Lazarus, 'Tragedy at Wittenberg: Sophocles in Reformation Europe', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 73 (2020), 33–77.

[38] For Shakespeare's classical learning, see Colin Burrow, *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2013). He estimates that Shakespeare's Latin was equivalent to that of 'many classics graduates today', 2. The phrase 'small Latin and less Greek' is from line 31 of Ben Jonson, 'To the Memory of my Beloved the Author Master William Shakespeare and What He Hath Left Us', in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. Martin Butler, Ian Donaldson, David Bevington, 7 vols (Cambridge, 2012), 5. 638–42 (640).

[39] For details about these two performances, see Sarah Knight, '"Goodlie Anticke Apparrell"?: Sophocles' *Ajax* at Early Modern Oxford and Cambridge', *Shakespeare Studies*, 37 (2009), 25–42. We know of a third performance of *Ajax*, this time in an English adaptation, by the Children of the Royal Chapel in Windsor, in 1571. See F. P. Wilson, *The English Drama 1485–1585*, ed. G. K. Hunter (Oxford, 1969), 146.

[40] For the most likely date of *Antony and Cleopatra*, see David Bevington, 'Introduction', in William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. David Bevington (Cambridge, 2005), 1–80 (1–2).

[41] *Ovidii Nasonis Metamorphoses*, ed. R. J. Tarrant (Oxford, 2004), 386.

[42] See Bevington's note to 4.15.15–18. *Ovid's Metamorphoses Translated by Arthur Golding*, ed. Madeleine Forey (London, 2002), 384 (13.472).

with those who see Shakespeare as 'truly innovative' in *Antony and Cleopatra* and as a breaker of rules.[43] But the rule-break I have discussed in relation to Antony's death does not map onto a binary, nor does it constitute a simple rejection of a body of rules. Rules can be employed without having to be followed. In the case of Antony's death, Shakespeare leans into the classical and neoclassical anxieties about onstage deaths that gave birth to the rule in the first place and turns them into thrilling theatre. And if he did know Sophocles's *Ajax*, he broke with this crucial tragic convention *in imitation* of a classical tragedian who had broken the same rule for a similar purpose before. As Colin Burrow put it: '*Imitatio* does not mean just following a rule or an example; it can also mean following an example in breaking a rule'.[44] Such a scenario would turn the relationship between Shakespeare and neoclassicism from an easy antithesis into a complex *entrelacement*. It offers a Shakespeare who learned from and worked with the aesthetic concepts of neoclassicism, and it offers a (neo)classical tradition that is in itself decidedly edgy and breaking its own rules.

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[43] Bevington, 'Introduction', 46, John Wilders, 'Introduction', in William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. John Wilders (London, 1995), 1–84 (13).

[44] Colin Burrow, *Imitating Authors: Plato to Futurity* (Oxford, 2019), 418.