

BOOK REVIEW

Shakespeare. Antony & Cleopatra. Edited by JAN H. BLITS. Indianapolis, IN, Focus Books, Hackett Publishing: 2019. Pp. xxix + 262, \$16.00. ISBN: 9781585109340.

Blits has provided a very thorough, sometimes tendentious commentary on a difficult play, first published in 1606/7. It is self-evidently a Roman play, but is it a Tragedy, or a “Problem Play,” a label that may indict critics more than enlighten theater-goers? Blits’ introduction and commentary focus on historical context and political questions, even political philosophy in this follow-up to his deeply annotated edition of *Julius Caesar*. He aims to counter certain current trends in Shakespearian criticism such as that the dramatist had only superficial knowledge of ancient Rome, or that the Elizabethan author could only think in Renaissance categories. In his brief but potent schooldays, from age five to fourteen at King Edward VI Grammar School in Stratford, and thereafter employed, how much book-learning did this genius playwright, theater-owner and man about town master?

To this end, Blits’ annotations take up half of a typical page, rather than (say) the one-sixth of Barbara Everett’s 1968 Signet edition. Her footnotes (as the Series demanded) consist entirely of glosses on the language, e.g. “the holy priests/Bless her when she is riggish”: riggish: wanton (II.ii.246). Where that edition, however, offers eighty pages of “commentaries” (criticism from Dr. Samuel Johnson to Samuel Schoenbaum), Blits provides a running explication, not only clarifying stage directions but for the Classicists reading this review and their students, providing ancient sources far beyond Plutarch’s thrilling *Life* of a negative exemplar—paired/syncritized with the goofy Demetrius who set up his porn “girls” (Lamia, Chrysis, etc.) as Athena Parthenos in the Hotel Parthenon. Blits neatly provides relevant passages from the ancient sources in English translations available to Shakespeare.

For instance, in the 85 verses of Act 1, Scene iv, Blits cites some authors repeatedly—Caesar, Appian, Cassius Dio, Plutarch (several *Lives*), Valerius Maximus (v.1 on Lepidus), Suetonius, Aristotle, Cicero (several works), Polybius, Augustus, Horace and Apollodorus. Granted, this erudition will distract some students from the play, full of Hollywood-like rapid cuts and whipsawing changes of scene

from Caesar's camp to Antony's,¹ peopled with many big names and not a few little-shots. His footnotes support his vision of a Shakespeare deeply knowledgeable across the Classics, however little his Greek. *Blits* refers to English translations of, for example, Appian (Baker 1578) and Diodorus Siculus (Skelton 1489?) as well as oft cited but less read Thomas North's Plutarch (1579) and Philemon Holland's Livy (1600). Cassius Dio, on the other hand, was never Englished before the 20th century, and one doubts Shakespeare had Stephanus' edition to hand. But, we may suppose *Blits*—the author of seven other books on Shakespeare the political philosopher—is demonstrating Shakespeare's knowledge of late Republican conflicts and dissipation, not so much a particular source. Certainly, the poet vigorously delineates the character of triumviral degeneracy and the characters of scheming but ineffectual Lepidus, nasty and duplicitous Octavius "Caesar,"² pompous Pompey the younger and the repeatedly outmaneuvered, noble but lovesick Antony. Shakespeare delineates how the Republican public realm quickly shrinks into two moieties but soon only one realm, ruled by the devious, prudish and young Caesar.

Blits traces a Christian strand in this pagan play, a tinge of a transitional age foreshadowing Jesus' coming time on earth. Characters pre-echo the Gospels and Revelation, even if, of course, they know not what they do or say. He points out the parallels, the intimations of a virtuous Christianity ("Advent of, alluded to") in the mouths of sensuous, not to say villainous and ever-scheming pagans. He finds good parallels in Antony's suicidal despondency (IV.xiv.100-102) to Jesus as Bride of the Church, citing Revelations, Matthew, 2 Corinthians, John and Ephesians. The reader nevertheless wonders what the editor thinks was Shakespeare's intent in having this sensualist devil mouth scripture. Plutarch's and the historical Antony was a frequent drunkard, an adulterer and bigamist, a spendthrift philanderer, a poor strategist (in his ultimate, Cleopatra period) and a losing gamesman against Octavius³ and his henchman Agrippa in battles of propaganda and war.⁴ "Trust not to rotten planks," one of his loyal soldiers begs

¹ Act Four exhibits fifteen swift Scenes.

² "No one ... mentions Caesar's courage except to deny it," observed at III.xi.35-6.

³ Soon to be, as Thidias asserts, "the universal landlord," III.xiii.76.

⁴ II.iv. 24-32: Soothsayer to Antony:

"If thou dost play with him [Octavius] at any game,

Thou art sure to lose...

He beats thee 'gainst the odds...."

Antony: "Be it art or hap,

He [Soothsayer] hath spoken true. The very dice obey him [Octavius]."

Antony. The besotted epicure hardly qualifies as the suitable prophet or herald of a faith for the humble, the poor and oppressed. The bitter⁵ and suicidal, determined and wily Cleopatra also seems an oddly sexy vessel of Christian proto-evangelism.⁶ Her faith in Antony, at least, is repeatedly qualified. Like nearly every player in this drama, including Antony in despair, she suspects the motives of her interlocutors, correctly. The culmination of Blits' *interpretatio Christiana* of Shakespeare's grungy drama of betrayals comes with Antony's suicide. Here his language, when about to plunge his sword clumsily into his gut, is compared to the "new heaven of Christianity." He boasts (IV.xiv.100-2) "I will be / A bridegroom in my death and run into't / As to a lover's bed"). This blissful bee, however, requires Blits to find a better bonnet. Antony's sly subordinate Dercetus steals his bloody sword before his clumsy commander's blood dries.

A timeline and two maps, a bibliography, and a valuable index to the notes complement the introduction, text and notes. Blits explicated this singleton tragedy in detail in a previous monograph: *New Heaven, New Earth: Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra"* (Lanham 2009). This edition would serve well a course examining the Late Roman Republic-Early Augustan Age and its Reception. Classicists will welcome Blits' inclusion of more sources than Plutarch among Shakespeare's inspirations, but I don't imagine an ancient history or Roman literature course has time enough for Shakespeare's thought and dramaturgy.

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⁵ V.ii.54-8: Shall they hoist me up
And show me to the shouting varletry
Of censuring Rome? Rather a ditch in Egypt
Be gentle grave unto me; rather on Nilus' mud
Lay me stark naked," etc.

⁶ Blits on IV.2.10-45: Antony's "last supper echoes Jesus." V.ii.280-1: "Cleopatra echoes Jesus at his Last Supper;" 288-9: "I am fire and air": "She now sees herself as the decarnation of bodily life....[S]he, like Antony, unknowingly alludes to the vision of the new Jerusalem—he as the groom, she as the bride...."