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"Pour out the pack of matter to mine ear" : Dramatization of Language in Antony and Cleopatra

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Dramatization of Language in *Antony and Cleopatra*

(Or, Language Becomes Itself)

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Antony and Cleopatra holds a critical claim as Shakespeare's imagistic masterpiece, a zenith of language and force, a modern narrative of love and power. The linguistic heights of the play produce an alternate world full of hyperbole, paradox, overflow, and dissolution. But an intriguing, yet little-considered, part of the play lies in the messenger figures recurrent in it. Amidst the heightened action and power of the play, they return over and over to convey information, recount a story, or advance the plot. The play's unusually large number of messengers becomes unmistakably vital to the narrative's theme and progression. The messengers take on an important role in this play; their function becomes clear when we examine the rhetorical background of Shakespeare's time and how the messengers embody it in the play. In this paper I explore their actions, effects, and performance on the plot of *Antony and Cleopatra*.

In the time period of *Antony and Cleopatra*'s production, leading Renaissance authors and critics were exploring, challenging, and ultimately defining the very nature of language. They set forth definitive rules for using it, and "rhetoric" became the ideal – a tool for structuring, formulating, and empowering argumentation. It was, as Thomas Wilson said, an "Arte to set foorth by vtteraunce of words, matter at large, or (as *Cicero* doth say) it is a learned, or rather an artificiall declaration of the mynd" (Hardison 29). Wilson believed in the persuasive power of eloquent language, and in his 1560 edition of *The Arte of Rhetorique* he taught specific techniques for men to "seeke to fashion as wel their speech and gesturing, as their witte or endyting" (Hardison 33). Another leading critic of the time, Roger Ascham, who designed the school curriculum and was the tutor of Queen Elizabeth I herself, published his teachings in *The Scholemaster* in 1570. He advocated learning by imitation of the master Greek and Latin rhetoricians, through a "choice of wordes, in framyng of Sentences, in handling of Argumentes,

and vse of right forme, figure, and number, proper and fitte for euerie matter" (Hardison 66). Teachings of the time emphasized the imitative practice as necessary to successful language. In his 1575 text *Certayne Notes of Instruction Concerning the Making of Verse or Ryme in English*, George Gascoigne, another prominent figure, laid forth specific rules for men to construct the "correct" forms poetry and prose. These authors and their elaborate instructions played a vital role in English Renaissance society. In this time of Queen Elizabeth's, and later King James', court, men were especially disposed to utilize a heightened language in order to fashion a courtly behavior. They realized that speaking articulate, powerful, and expressive words was the key to self-construction because a man's language is the only signifier of his self, the only aperture to the inward thoughts. The artful construction of an exterior persona, therefore, could be accomplished through eloquence – a craft reflected in Renaissance texts that specifically instructed men in ways to fashion a linguistic identity. They prescribed the decorum requisite for rhetoric and poetry of their day, and many writers followed these techniques to create the representative texts of the era. Authors focused on the specific technique of creation, learning how to imitate the masters in order to replicate the ideal form. They turned literature into an art; it was not merely an overflow of the emotions but instead a crafted, artful, theatricalized presentation.

Because Renaissance critics realized that language could be so constructed, a growing anxiety of rhetoric's power marked the era's literature. This anxiety centered on the recognition that representations in language could mask or alter, and thus become excess to, an original meaning. Teachings such as that of George Puttenham, who emphasized the power of persuasive technique, had an inherent contradiction because of rhetoric's performative nature. Stephen Greenblatt explains that for Puttenham, the meaning of writing is in *style*, but that style is itself

> an empty concept; to achieve its end, which is to persuade, it must *appear* to be grounded in the one thing still thought to lie outside style's aegis, namely "nature."… The most successful art is therefore precisely the art which seems most "natural," but which to achieve that natural illusion must of necessity be the most contrived and most conscious of all (Greenblatt 89)

Puttenham's method and the prescribed rhetorical style are an attempt to "mitigate a harsh reality, to turn what is ugly in fact to what is beautiful in appearance, *persuasion* substituting for *power*" (Greenblatt 80). This sculptability of language, and its tendency towards artfulness, becomes a performance upon the original concept that it attempts to represent, and this performance is always only a representation. Rhetoric is, as Madhavi Menon says in *Wanton Words*, "the study of linguistic dalliance – of wanton words – and [it] dabbles in definitional exactitude without ever achieving it…words will always be wanton even and especially when seeking controlled purity" (Menon 6-7). Rhetoric, theater, and performance show us that the creative power of language is also a cause for destruction; assuming a narrative always implies the appropriation and polished replacement of an original one, and hence the violent destruction of the prior voice. In *The Power of Eloquence and English Renaissance Literature,* Neil Rhodes points out that when language is a crafted representation it becomes an instrument of power over its listeners. He says that rhetoric was "closely associated with both poetry and magic, not as a means of providing aesthetic entertainment, but as an instrument of power. The model for rhetoric is the power of the poet to 'move,' 'bewitch', 'fascinate', 'ravish', or 'possess' his listeners" (Rhodes 8). Through the formal steps of rhetorical technique (invention, logic, arrangement, and style), a poet could fascinate and ultimately deceive the audience. This appropriation of words, although representative of a higher form and a mark of incredible skill, became a cause for distrust because of the inherent falsity of fashioned language.

William Shakespeare uses the contemporary functionality of poetry to fashion the text of *Antony and Cleopatra*, but his language stretches it beyond the normal measure of Renaissance literature. The play takes on the heightened world of language as prescribed by writers in the English Renaissance, filling the stage with splendor and amplified poetry. The speeches, descriptions, and imagery of the play display the poetical force that creates the linguistic extremes of Antony and Cleopatra's world, a world where no limit binds the imaginable human possibilities. In the very first scene, we witness Antony described as "plated Mars"; an incredible love of the main characters which requires a "new heaven, new earth"; and an opinion from Antony that "kingdoms are clay." From the first to the last scene, the play enters a rhetorical realm of unlimited imagination and unending desire. In her essay "The Significance of Style," Rosalie Colie claims that in this world, the lead characters "demand a language for their love which rejects conventional hyperbole and invents and creates new overstatements, new forms of overstatement… Nothing is enough for these two, not even the most extravagant figures of speech" (Colie 76-7). Colie shows how the words of the characters exemplify this: "Antony's and Cleopatra's speech is consistently vigorous, various, copious, vivid, liveliest in those remarkable passages where excessive behavior, excessive sensation, excessive emotions are given their due" (Colie 84). Theirs becomes a world of extreme love, extreme force, extreme language; they push the limits of the real world and make a new one in the space above it. The action of the play is clearly that of another realm, where excess is the norm and regulation fails in its process. Shakespeare artfully fashions this world as a dramatic representation of the very techniques it uses.

The linguistic extremes of the play become so great that the lead characters themselves come to embody two powerful rhetorical figures: hyperbole and paradox. As Janet Adelman sets

out in *The Common Liar*, the two lovers of the play embody the rhetorical figures of paradox and hyperbole, a character assignment logical to the world of the play. Cleopatra is the paradox: she is, for example, described as an "infinite variety" of the world, a paradox of everything and nothing and splendor and beauty. Her character seems to "embrace these contradictions; she is usually described in terms which confound all our logical categories" (Adelman 115). Enobarbus describes his first sight of Cleopatra as that of an immortal goddess who "beggared all description: she did lie / In her pavilion, cloth-of-gold of tissue, / O'erpicturing that Venus where we see / The fancy outwork nature" (*Antony & Cleopatra* 2.2.203-207). Antony later characterizes Cleopatra as a subsuming Nile crocodile that is shaped just "like itself, and it is as broad / as it hath breadth; it is just so high as it is, and / moves with it own organs" (*A&C* 2.7.43-45). Cleopatra's character embodies the paradoxical nature of the play: she is the excess between an individual and their linguistic representation, and yet also the image of everything and nothing, becoming a figure of complex rhetorical devices through Shakespeare's artistry.

At the same time, Antony is the hyperbole: his character embodies this figure, defined by images of great power, benevolence, sensuality, love, and joy. Adelman points out that "Antony is hyperbolical in all that he does: in his rage, his valor, his love, and his folly… he is seen in hyperbolic terms; and his own passionate use of hyperbole confirms its association with him" (Adelman 116). For example, Philo's first report of Antony initiates this perception of him as godly: "his goodly eyes / That o'er the files and musters of the war / Have glowed like plated Mars" (1.1.2-4). Cleopatra's remembrance of Antony further highlights his image; she says that "His legs bestrid the ocean: his reared arm / Crested the world: his voice was propertied / As all the tunèd spheres" (5.2.82-84). Antony is, throughout the play, a pinnacle of everything: emotion, action, being. While Cleopatra embodies the impossible combinations of everything

and nothing, Antony represents the impossible heights to which man can never reach. And when they are together, they become a picture of an endless pre-Enlightenment universe, as Cleopatra says "Eternity was in our lips and eyes, / Bliss in our brows' bent, none our parts so poor / But was a race of heaven" (1.3.35-37). True to the play's form, their love is boundless, indefinable, and rhetorically majestic. Through this linguistic construction they paint a picture of the ideal, bewitching, and fascinating Renaissance world.

But this positioning of the lead characters places *Antony and Cleopatra* in a world of magical and lavish language that becomes bombast; a language whose power is its very fault and cause for distrust. In this world, Antony, Cleopatra, and Egypt itself are always hyperbolical: "everything there overflows the measure, and excess is the normal state of affairs…" (Adelman 127). The boundaries dissolve, the rhetorical heights overcome the measure, and the linguistic excesses are all that remain. By the end, total knowledge loses its definition as all forms blur and merge, becoming, as Antony says to Eros, "indistinct / As water is in water" (4.14.10-11). In this place, the overflowing communication that exists in the space between the extremes provides an essential, and yet destructive, connection for the characters. These connective words, sent via the messengers, become the only source of contact for the extreme heights of the play.

ENTER A MESSENGER: "HERE'S MORE NEWS"

In the midst of the rhetorical heights and confusion, the messenger figures play a vital role to the communication between characters. The messengers scurry back and forth between Rome and Alexandria, crossing the boundaries that divide the two world powers, and providing characters with bits of information about all the other characters. They usually avoid much

controversy and many leave the stage never to return again. There are eight official "Messengers" named as such by the script, but in addition to them other characters function as messenger-figures in the play: Alexas, Menas and Varrius, the Schoolmaster, Thidias, Mardian, Proculeius and Dolabella, and even Antony and Cleopatra themselves. For a Shakespeare play, this number of messengers is extraordinary. Adelman points out that

> If the main function of the messengers is expository, surely Shakespeare could have found some simpler device. As it is, the audience is continually bombarded with messengers of one kind or another, not so much to convey information as to convey the sense that all information is unreliable, that it is message or rumor, not fact (Adelman 35).

This play makes far greater use of the messenger-function than other plays, and in effect the Messenger as a character becomes an independent rhetorical figure amid the background of linguistic hyperbole. I argue that the overwhelming appearance of messengers is not coincidental, but in fact carries a pointed statement about the anxiety of language during the Renaissance. An analysis of some of the emblematic messengers will begin to express their functionality and purpose in the play.

From the first moments of Act 1, the appearance of messages becomes overwhelming. In the very first scene, a messenger enters with news from Rome, but Antony refuses to hear his message. Not until the second scene does the messenger get to speak, but even then he does not tell his whole message for fear of Antony's anger. Instead, another messenger enters with a letter and immediately tells Antony that Fulvia, his wife, is dead. Following this, we see a variety of other messages:

In 1.3 Cleopatra tells Charmian to bring a message to Antony, but to construct the message according to his mood. She says to Charmian: "[tell him] I did not send you. If you find him sad, / Say I am dancing; if in mirth, report / That I am sudden sick" (1.3.3-5). Charmian cautions of the dangers of sending distorted messages like this to Antony, but Cleopatra

disregards her warning and puts on an act of being sick. In 1.4 Caesar reads a letter from Antony, then a messenger enters with news of Pompey's advances and a reminder that there will be constant messages with news from abroad; in 1.5 Alexas enters to relay Antony's actions and speech; then Cleopatra inquires after the twenty separate messengers that she's sent for Antony. From the play's beginning, we see how various the messages are, each one standing in for a separate piece of information. The messengers and the messages embody their respective senders, each representing the origin from which the information came. But even here the messages are subject to outside forces, interception, or becoming changed or indistinct between the dispatch and the target.

In 2.5, a messenger tells Cleopatra about Antony's marriage to Octavia. Cleopatra becomes angry at the messenger for the news he carries, and physically assaults him before he runs off. But she orders him to return so that she may hear the rest of his message. After many of Cleopatra's prompts and interruptions, the messenger finally reveals the complete story to her. But she then orders him to return with a physical description of Octavia, which he brings in 3.3 and delights Cleopatra because of its unfavorable image of Octavia. This messenger dramatizes the manipulation of messages that communication always entails. In forming a message, the sender considers the impact on the listener, and constructs the language to speak to its purpose. Cleopatra dislikes the message she hears, and batters it until it produces the information she desires. In this play messages are not pure and untouched, but instead they are manipulated during the process of their transmission.

The schoolmaster serves as an especially interesting messenger in Act 3. In 3.11, the first scene of this sequence, Antony simply informs his audience that they have sent their schoolmaster to Caesar. Immediately following this scene, the schoolmaster appears in front of

Caesar and Dolabella. He gives his message (Antony's requests), and leaves, but in the very next scene he appears again with Antony and relays the message sent from Caesar. Antony speaks to him of a second message to bring to Caesar, and the two leave together. [i]

This schoolmaster has the peculiar ability to transgress the barrier between Alexandrian excess and Roman self-containment. Although the rest of the characters are divided by location, unable to connect with their oppositional forces in the world of distinct barriers, this particular messenger freely permeates the army lines. He, unlike Antony, Cleopatra, and Caesar, has the freedom to break through these lines in the service of the message-carrying function, becoming a physical connecting force between the opposing hyperbolical apexes. As his body moves from space to space, it stands in for the moveable language that carries vital information between Caesar and Antony.

Furthermore, the schoolmaster's three-scene sequence is peculiar in its function. Antony's passing remark in scene 11, and the dialogue following the message delivery in scene 13, serve to frame the schoolmaster's appearance. His message is forewarned, dispatched, received, rejected, re-written, re-sent, re-received, and then re-rejected. In this one messenger, Shakespeare bestows almost all the qualities a message can take on. [ii] The schoolmaster's function becomes more than a simple delivery; he dramatizes the very moveability and transmutability of language between a sender and receiver. As we witness during the progress of his delivery, the message does not remain untouched: it is subject to discussion, variability, and redirection. Messages, and ultimately language itself, exist like a distinct character in the play. Taking on human form, they live in reality, in physical space with direct contact with objects and people in the world.

In 4.13, Cleopatra tells Mardian to tell Antony that she has killed herself ("go tell him I have slain myself: / Say that the last I spoke was 'Antony' / And word it, prithee, piteously" [4.3.7-9]). In Scene 14, Mardian enters, tells Antony the news of Cleopatra's alleged death, and leaves. Antony then stabs himself, just after which Diomedes enters to "proclaim the truth" that Cleopatra is still alive. In this sequence, Cleopatra has consciously turned Mardian into a false messenger in order to manipulate Antony, but the message effects his unanticipated death. Cleopatra shows that she does foresee her messenger's outcome, but she does not send the corrective message until it is too late. In this world, messages are not trustworthy representations of truth. Although they appear to provide a connection for disparate personalities and places, they are too often faulty and led astray, causing more damage than resolution. As Mardian so clearly enacts, the false message can be interpreted as truth, and render the truth delayed or inaccessible.

The messengers function as a source of instability to the play's narrative. Their information can be faulty; or partially true; or distorted; or too late; or irrelevant. They can be received, ignored, harassed, instructed, or coaxed. Despite the apparent simplicity of the messenger figure in this play, messages do not necessarily carry the truth. While their purpose is to connect the opposite sides of the world, their problematics in fact disrupt the continuity of information. And it is here, in this space between truth and the interpretation of truth, that the messengers perform upon the narrative and enact the very Renaissance anxiety of language.

THE PROBLEM OF KNOWLEDGE, WHEN LANGUAGE BECOMES ITSELF

The linguistic heights and overflowing boundaries that I previously discussed supply the indistinction and subsequent critical collapse of information in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and, as I will argue later, the messenger figure is paradigmatic of the complexities, fallibilities, and anxieties of this type of language. In the play, both Antony and Cleopatra have achieved greatness: they "overflow the measure," embody the world, have become more than they are. Adelman points out that in this hyperbolic realm, language and character become like the very land of Egypt itself: "the survival of Egypt is dependent on the mingled fertility of the overflowing Nile...In Rome, overflow is human vice; in Egypt, it is a natural necessity" (Adelman 127). They live in a world of continual metamorphosis, where "everything seems to become everything else. Nothing maintains its shape for long enough to be measured: the size and shape shifts that occur even in mid-metaphor and so baffle our critical senses are the manifestation of a world in which no scale is adequate" (Adelman 142). The metaphorical figures of Antony and Cleopatra highlight the excessivity of the land and the play itself. But while Adelman ends her argument here, I believe that for the characters of the play, living in such excess of identity generates a loss of connection with each other and the reality of their world. Despite – or due to – such hyperbole, [iii] the problem of unknowability persists; the characters' motivations and thoughts are ultimately a mystery even after the end of the play, and we still have questions about what really happened. Because everything in the world becomes everything else, total knowledge loses its definition. I argue that the abundance of messages in the play contributes to the diminishing truth in the narrative, since this world finds connectivity only in the unstable messenger figures. In effect, the messengers provide both a connective solution and a disruptive problem in this world of heightened language and dramatic discourse.

From the beginning of the play, it is clear that Shakespeare thematizes the issue of unknowability and disruption of truth. Despite the play's emphasis on judgment and information, it simply does not supply answers to many of the knowledge gaps in the narrative. Adelman has pointed to the "significant lapses in our knowledge of the inner state of the principal characters; and we cannot judge what we do not know. The characters themselves continually tell us that they do not know one another, that their judgments are fallible" (Adelman 14). For example, we never find out why Antony married Octavia if he had planned to return to Cleopatra. Cleopatra's flirtation with Thidias in 3.13 remains unknown in its truth and intent. Her scene with Seleucus in 5.2 is also questionable in the truth behind their interaction. The reason for the flight of Cleopatra's ships remains a mystery to the end, and we never learn who, if anyone, betrayed Antony. The characters continually ask what the others mean: while Antony makes plans for the battle, Cleopatra asks Enobarbus "What means this?" "What does he mean?" and then Enobarbus himself asks Antony "What mean you, sir" (4.2.13, 23, 33). Antony rages at Cleopatra's betrayal: "This foul Egyptian hath betrayèd me" (4.12.10), but shortly afterwards Cleopatra asks, seemingly without knowing the answer, "Why is my lord enraged against his love?" (4.12.31). And later, when he is confused and angry again, Antony says that Cleopatra's "heart I thought I had, for she had mine" (4.14.16). Shakespeare makes it clear that the characters know as little as we do about the plot, motivations, and history. It is as Stanley Cavell says, that "true knowledge is beyond the human self, that what we hold in our minds to be true of the world can have at best the status of opinion, educated guesswork, hypothesis, construction, belief…It is essential to language that words *can* be so turned…" (Cavell 7-8). This inability to know the truth behind the words becomes persistent in the world of the play. Just as in the real world itself, where others' thoughts are always unreachable, the play's characters remain humanly inaccessible. What these

critics believe is that the characters – and ultimately, all information – are as opaque within the play as to us in the audience. I argue that this concept can be applied to the messengers, as sources of the gaps in knowledge. By my account, through the act of language, all the information we receive comes to us from a messenger figure who, as it were, can only stand in for the sender and interpret the words to the best of their ability.

The multiple messengerial sources of information in *Antony and Cleopatra* destabilize the narrative and reproduce the infinite variety, and hence endless unknowability, of the world. We see that characters are continually relaying reports, constructing their own narratives, rearranging their stories, or making images of themselves. Adelman discusses this multiplicity of report:

> When [Antony] appears in act 2, scene 2, he has been absent for three scenes during which Caesar, Cleopatra, and Pompey have in their speculations created three distinct Antonys, each to their heart's desire. Which Antony do we know? We never actually see Cleopatra in mythological garb, yet she is twice described in the habiliments of a goddess: Enobarbus reports her appearance as Venus, and Caesar her appearance as Isis. These two reports are strikingly different in attitude; the difference between them suggests two possible perspectives on Cleopatra…*the audience is persistently told one thing and shown another or told two conflicting things*… (Adelman 30-31, my emphasis)

Cleopatra herself recognizes this multiplicity of perspective in her judgment of Antony, when she observes "Though he be painted one way like a Gorgon, / The other way's a Mars" (2.5.116-17); an object viewed from one direction can always appear in a different way from the opposite side, as Cleopatra, Antony, and eventually the audience, come to learn. Adelman's point reminds us that when reports come from varying sources, each with its own sender, carrier, and form of interpretation, it becomes impossible to re-create a faithful synthesis of the world. I see this as a testament to the effective disruptiveness of the messengers, who are the carriers of these varying reports to the corners of the world.

Often in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the truth is as such only according to a single perspective. The multiple sources counteract the others' verity and call into question any information passed in the play. For example, when Antony returns to Rome, Caesar is angry and blames Antony for sending away his messenger, who carried his requests for help in the wars. Caesar believes that the wars waged by Fulvia were on Antony's behalf, but Antony clears up the situation by sharing his version of the truth. He tells Caesar: "Truth is, that Fulvia, / To have me out of Egypt, made wars here" (2.2.98-99). But after Antony silences Enobarbus when he tries to speak up, Enobarbus says: "That truth should be silent I had almost forgot" (2.2.112). And then in his speech to unify Caesar and Antony, Agrippa says that with their alliance "truths would be tales, / Where now half-tales be truths" (2.2.139-40). All this comes in clear juxtaposition to Antony's statement in the previous act, when he tells a messenger "Who tells me true, though in his tale lie death, / I hear him as he flattered" (1.2.99-100), and Cleopatra's response to her messenger who asks "Should I lie, madam?" (she says "O, I would thou didst" [2.5.93]). Over and over, the truth suffers from diversity of perspective and opinion, changeablility in form, and movement between the characters. While messengers supply one version of it, multiple other characters offer their own differing versions and blur the lines between fact and fiction. Shakespeare's play replicates the Erasmian ideal of *copia* [iv]– the belief that "the copiousness of language makes it impossible to extract meaning based on definable distinctions…In other words, one sentence can be variously *translated*, in Ascham's sense of the word…The twin properties of *copia*, at once copying and cornucopia, fit in well with the strain of doubleness and deceit that metaphor in general is said to enact…the essential duplicity that metaphor engenders" (Menon 17). The many translations of any one piece of language dilate an incident into many interpretations of meaning. In this way, the various and diverse messengers

become a metaphor of language itself, each enacting a translation of the truth according to a particular perspective. Judgment, and its truth, depends on perspective, and since the hyperbolic world of the play disallows unity of perspectives, therefore no single judgment can assume verity. In the Egyptian world of indistinction it is impossible to define any information as independently truthful.

Antony and Cleopatra's messengers act as the attempt to connect the hyperbolic apexes of their worlds, the solution to the problem of distance and lapses of information. Their primary function is to move the story forward – for example, the messengers in 3.7 provide military updates to Antony, and their reports are vital to his battle attack. But at the same time, we know that the messages may also carry an imperfect story – it may have been falsely constructed or observed from the wrong perspective. Because the multiple messenger-perspectives supply the infinite variety existing in the world, and information of all kinds is fallible, we must conclude that knowledge is not absolute; it exists in many directions, with many perspectives and interpretations. In effect, this causes a breakdown of direct, reliable communication and definitive knowledge – a crisis emblematic of the English Renaissance's anxiety of language.

The play itself becomes a metaphor for the Renaissance debate about the nature of rhetoric. Although some critics believed that "such 'inflation' [of language] was bad because it was untrue to nature and gave false impressions of fact" others believed that higher language tries, in the manner of *Antony and Cleopatra*, "to do something else, something highly respectable and highly poetic: to give utterance to their own convictions and sensations of being larger than life, which in turn demanded a style of expression more spacious than that used by the ruck of mankind" (Colie 79). Rhetoric simultaneously represents and misrepresents, connects and disrupts, inflates and yet reduces. Rhetorical devices, as well as the play itself, express a

"ripeness" of craft that verges on "overripeness" and even corruption (Colie 79). Shakespeare has constructed *Antony and Cleopatra* to be a rhetorical demonstration of this dialectical relationship within language – the ability to communicate truth that inherently involves the necessity of obstructing it. The messengers of this play demonstrate the dual nature of language: the power to connect becomes the very source of disconnect.

Shakespeare's messengers dramatize the functionality of rhetoric for Renaissance-era literary teachings and real-world applications (fashioned behavior, for example). In this theatrical world of heightened language, a world of excess and overflow (and in this instance, I am referring to the world of the play, not the world of the Renaissance!), the messenger figures represent the way in which language transports from speaker/sender to auditor/recipient. They are the literal carriers of the important information passed between characters, the threads that connect not only the locations of Egypt and Rome, but also the apexes of verbal excess in their world. The messenger figures embody the constructed rhetoric that has been crafted for performance in these transmissions; they function as the sculptable and moveable language that passes between characters. In their flawed but necessary role, the messengers enact the anxiety of the instability of language, the Renaissance fear that a word could be divorced from its meaning and mask an original thought. They stand in for language, but both they and their own language are unstable, adding to the indistinction of the world and separation of the message with its meaning. In the end, Shakespeare's Messenger creates problems, raises questions, and even solves some misunderstandings; it is a character as varied and diverse as the very rhetoric of the play, the characteristics of the protagonists, and the multiple interpretations of them all. They all become as paradoxical, subsuming, and indefinite as Cleopatra herself:

> Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
> Her infinite variety: other women cloy

> The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry
> Where most she satisfies; for vilest things
> Become themselves in her, that the holy priests
> Bless her when she is riggish. (2.2.241-246)

Notes:

[i] Simultaneous with the schoolmaster's delivery is that of Thidias, a messenger of Caesar. Directly after the schoolmaster has given his message to Caesar, Caesar summons Thidias to bring a message to Cleopatra. Caesar tells Thidias to try his "elegance" and "cunning" on Cleopatra, in order to convince her to turn against Antony and leave with the Romans. When Antony is offstage with the recently-returned schoolmaster, Thidias arrives and speaks to Cleopatra of Caesar's entreaties. But then Antony walks into the room at the moment when it appears as though Cleopatra is giving in to Thidias. Antony becomes enraged, and orders Thidias to be whipped, telling Thidias to tell Caesar how he has been received. This is all happening, of course, while the schoolmaster's messages are being passed. I'm not sure what to do with this strange, dualistic messenger exchange. One enters, then leaves, and then another enters, leaves, and follows the previous one. Then the first one enters a new scene, leaves, and the second one enters again. This odd, crossing of messages is puzzling; they inform the other's message, but do not have direct contact. Both of them bring a message to the same people (Caesar – Antony – Cleopatra) but have different information and different effects.

[ii] Roger Ascham's rhetorical manual was titled *The Scholemaster*. One of Shakespeare's most intriguing messenger-figures is Antony and Cleopatra's Schoolmaster. A coincidence? The use of a schoolmaster as an ambassador/messenger is peculiar, even for this play. An interesting analysis would be a comparison of the ambassador-schoolmaster to the ideals described in Ascham's text. Is Shakespeare commenting upon Ascham's technique? Dramatizing it? Or is it a mere coincidence?

[iii] I cannot decide which came first: the hyperbole, or the messenger. Is the hyperbolic realm the first problem, or the faulty messengers who try to connect it? It seems that in the play, these two devices function as an indefinite, self-perpetuating cycle. The hyperbolic heights give cause for the connective messengers, but the messenger communications contribute to the excess and overflow. The messengers bring connection to the world, but also bring disconnection to the world. Now what?

[iv] Erasmus and the Humanists provided the founding ideals for the English Renaissance's academia. Erasmus taught from the Greek and Latin orators' ideas of *copia*, that one thought can be expressed in a multitude of ways, and the more numerous they are the better. In one of his writings, Erasmus listed all of the different ways to say "thank you" – a list that continued for pages and emulated the notion of excessive variety. This endless interpretation becomes relevant to *Antony and Cleopatra*, where one message can mean various things, and each different meaning has a its own consequence.

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