

# Literary Love

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**the role of passion in  
English poems and  
plays of the seventeenth  
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**A. J. Smith**

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**Edward Arnold**

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## Sense and Spirit

man, unlike all other living creatures upon earth, is twofold. He is mortal by reason of his body; he is immortal by reason of the Man of eternal substance. He is immortal, and has all things in his power; yet he suffers the lot of a mortal, being subject to Destiny. He is exalted above the structure of the heavens; yet he is born a slave of Destiny. He is bisexual, as his Father is bisexual, and sleepless, as his Father is sleepless; yet he is mastered by carnal desire and by oblivion.

Hermetica, *Pimander*,  
Lib.1, 14-15.

But there, where I have garner'd up my heart,  
Where either I must live, or bear no life,

*Othello* IV, ii, 58-9

Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;

Sonnet 129

To be absolute in a sexual attachment, and make a touchstone of the bond with another person, is to put one's moral being in hazard to circumstance and the insecurities of human nature itself. When love is proved by the sense it makes of life then the lover stands in jeopardy. Renderings of love from St Bernard to Milton assume that amorous ardour may be a means to final truth, yet they leave human lovers with a question. In a universe impelled by pure spiritual love, what place has bodily fruition? The heroic lovers of the thirteenth century, Cavalcanti and Dante, found spiritual value in their devotion to a woman by pursuing an idea of her beauty which might ultimately draw them to union with the divine source of love itself. They escaped the limitations of the flesh by transcending sense altogether.

In seventeenth-century plays and poems we find lovers who commit themselves to the bond of the body while they crave an attachment beyond the appeasement of sense; and they make themselves vulnerable to brute exigency. The heroic lovers now are those who will try to the limit the issue between their love and a timeserving world, or who resolutely direct their fervour in a higher service than sexual ease. We see them struggling to justify in the senses their assurance of a love that stands above change, and thereby to prove the integrity of a nature which intermingles flesh and spirit.

The studies in this book seek to bring out several straits of lovers in seventeenth-century English writing, such as reveal the times in the way that love drives its devotees to a metaphysical extremity. Shakespeare's very language commits him to the body as much as to the mind, putting our brave expectations of love in pawn to the frailties of sense. In *Troilus and Cressida*, *Othello*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare gives dramatic immediacy to the conflict between love's absolutism and the claims of a world of change, a predicament which he shows to be no less a trial of the spirit when the lovers are pagans than when they inhabit a universe of grace. Donne's love lyrics express a lover who zestfully accommodates himself to the precariousness of sexual desire, but also claims that he and his mistress have found a condition of mutual love which altogether preserves them from alteration. Webster's *The White Devil* still more radically subjects love to an arbitrary world which exploits tenderness, undercuts loyalties, and mocks passion with sudden death. In following decades the true heroism seemed to lie in a better exercise of manhood and love than the bondage of sex allowed. Milton's Samson vindicates all those would-be regenerates who take the offer of solace in the world for a dire threat to their true vocation of love.

Sexual love looms so large in European writing from the twelfth century to the seventeenth century partly because it poses an acute form of a difficulty which inheres in ascetic Christianity. How may the life of the senses be reconciled with the aspirations of the spirit? The dilemma grew more vexing as human impulsions came to seem generally subject to natural laws. Writers for whom love furthers an organic process apprehend no less keenly than those who take it for a fortuitous concurrence of atoms the susceptibility to time and change of our most drastic human commitments. The spiritual crisis of the seventeenth century appears in the rendering of love, and defines itself there as a yearning for stability, such as committed some uncompromising souls to turn from secular ardours to an impassioned engagement with God. It was resolved for love poetry when love itself dwindled to a moral undertaking, or a quirk of sentiment. The true distinction of English writing about love between Shakespeare and Milton is that it takes love for a hunger of sense and spirit, which engages the intelligence no less than the feelings. In the tension between such divergent propensities of our nature is engendered a living metaphysic of love.

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## The Grammar of Love

since my soul, whose child love is,  
Takes limbs of flesh, and else could nothing do,  
More subtle than the parent is  
Love must not be, but take a body too,

Donne, 'Air and Angels'

It isn't only in the theatre that we mark the world of difference between a language which renders consciousness in direct impulse and gesture, and a language which just ruminates upon experience:

'Qu'attens-tu plus, hélas!  
Antoine, hé! qui te fait différer ton trespas,  
Puis que t'a la Fortune, à ton bien ennemie,  
La seule cause osté de désirer la vie?'  
Quand sa bouche en soupirs eut achevé ces mots,  
Sa cuirasse il deslace, et se l'oste du dos:  
Puis le corps désarmé va dire en ceste sorte:  
'Cléopâtre, mon cœur, la douleur que je porte  
N'est pas d'estre privé de vos yeux, mon soleil,  
Car bien tost nous serons ensemble en un cercueil:  
Mais bien je suis dolent, qu'estant de tel estime  
Tel empereur, je sois moins que vous magnanime.'  
Il eut dict, et soudain Éros appelle à soy,  
Éros son serviteur, le somme de sa foy  
De l'occire au besoing: Éros a prins l'espée  
Et s'en est à l'instant la poitrine frappée;  
Il vomit sang et âme, et cheut à ses pieds mort.  
'Adoncques, dist Antoine, Éros, j'approuve fort  
Cet acte généreux: ne m'ayant peu desfaire,  
Tu as fait en ton corps ce qu'au mien je dois faire.'  
A grand' peine avoit-il ce propos achevé,  
Et le poignard sanglant de terre relevé,  
Qu'il s'en perce le ventre, et lors une fontaine  
De rouge sang jaillit, dont la chambre fut pleine.

Robert Garnier, *Marc-Antoine* (c. 1575) IV, 1586-1609



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Unarm, Eros, the long day's task is done,  
And we must sleep. . . . Off, pluck off,  
The seven-fold shield of Ajax cannot keep  
The battery from my heart. O, cleave, my sides!  
Heart, once be stronger than thy continent,  
Crack thy frail case! Apace, Eros, apace!  
No more a soldier: bruised pieces, go,  
You have been nobly borne. From me awhile.  
I will o'ertake thee, Cleopatra, and  
Weep for my pardon.

*Antony and Cleopatra* IV, xiv, 35-45

The change from narrated action to direct action brings more than a gain in vividness. It is plain that the shift of dramatic mode quite alters the value of the events:

J'ay veu (ô rare et miserable chose)  
Ma Cleopatre en son royal habit  
Et sa couronne, au long d'un riche lict  
Peint et doré, blesme et morte couchee,  
Sans qu'elle fust d'aucun glaive touchee,  
Avecq' Eras, sa femme, à ses pieds morte,  
Et Charmium vive, qu'en telle sorte  
J'ay lors blamee; A, a! Charmium, est-ce  
Noblement faict? Ouy, ouy, c'est de noblesse  
De tant de Rois Egyptiens venue  
Un tesmoignage. Et lors peu soustenue  
En chancelant, et s'accrochant en vain,  
Tombe à l'envers, restant un tronc humain,  
Voila des trois la fin epouventable,  
Voila des trois le destin lamentable:  
L'amour ne peut separer les deux corps,  
Qu'il avoit joints par longs et longs accords;  
Le Ciel ne veut permettre toute chose,  
Que bien souvent le courageux propose.

Etienne Jodelle, *Cleopatre Captive* (1552), V, 58-76

Give me my robe, put on my crown, I have  
Immortal longings in me. Now no more  
The juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip.  
Yare, yare, good Iras; quick: methinks I hear  
Antony call. I see him rouse himself  
To praise my noble act. I hear him mock  
The luck of Caesar, which the gods give men  
To excuse their after wrath. Husband, I come:

Now to that name, my courage prove my title!  
I am fire, and air: my other elements  
I give to baser life. So, have you done?  
Come then, and take the last warmth of my lips.

*Antony and Cleopatra* V, ii, 279-90

Shakespeare's language vividly realizes men and women who are acting out their minds before our eyes, as if they don't know from moment to moment where their thinking will take them. Antony and Cleopatra speak in the present tense, and their words make a series of imperatives which impel present action. Yet action intertwines with reflection. The images of physical events, and the bodily movements themselves, give us the sensible notation of an inner drama in which powerful ideas come to life and conflict with each other as the character thinks them through. The striking thing about Shakespeare's language is its fusion of gesture and idea, which gives a fullblooded stage action the consequence of a drama of the mind.

The half-dozen or so extant sixteenth-century plays about Antony and Cleopatra express a conception of dramatic speech, and of tragedy itself, which is quite unlike Shakespeare's.<sup>1</sup> They show another order of concern with the human material, which comes out notably in the way that these neo-Senecan dramatists concentrate the whole tragedy on a climactic moment of their protagonist's career, and exclude everything that might confuse the moral emblem. The contrast between this mode and Shakespeare's shows us why neoclassical critics made it such a backhanded recommendation of Shakespeare that he comprehends a world.

Shakespeare's immediacy, and spread, follow out a quite particular understanding of what it is to be human and to concern ourselves with exemplary lives. His interest in the affair of Antony and Cleopatra gives him far more in common with Plutarch than with other dramatists of the period, even Hans Sachs, who also essayed a panoramic version of the material: *Die Königin Cleopatra mit Antonio dem Römer*, 1560.<sup>2</sup> It is a feature of Antony and Cleopatra that it gets in so much of Plutarch's commentary, and yet raises that mass of circumstance to a higher level of meaning in a coherent dramatic conceit. Shakespeare is exceptional among Renaissance dramatists not least in the scope and sheer sympathetic intelligence of his reading of his sources.

We feel at once the difference in dramatic syntax which sharply separates neoclassical drama from the writing for the English popular theatre:

<sup>1</sup>There is an excellent account of these versions, and of Shakespeare's play, in Marilyn L. Williamson, *Infinite Variety: Antony and Cleopatra in Renaissance Drama and Earlier Tradition*, Mystic, Connecticut, 1974.

<sup>2</sup>It is given in Hans Sachs, *Werke*, ed. A. von Keller and E. Goetze, Tübingen, 1892, xx, 187-233.

*Cleopatra.* My face too lovely caus'd my wretched case.  
 My face hath so entrap'd, to cast us downe,  
 That for his conquest *Cæsar* may it thanke,  
 Causing that *Antonie* one army lost,  
 The other wholly did to *Cæsar* yeld.  
 For not induring (so his amoureuse sprite  
 Was with my beautie fir'd) my shamefull flight,  
 Soone as he saw from ranke wherein he stooode  
 In hottest fight, my Gallies making saile:  
 Forgetfull of his charg (as if his soule  
 Unto his Ladies soule had beene enchain'd)  
 He left his men, who so couragiously  
 Did leave their lives to gaine him victorie,  
 And carelesse both of fame and armies losse  
 My oared Gallies follow'd with his ships,  
 Companion of my flight, by this parte  
 Blasting his former flourishing renowne.

Mary Sidney, *The Tragedy of Antonie* (1590), II, 430-46

These Senecan writers don't as much as seek opportunities of realizing intelligence in action, or of dramatic retrospect in which the exigencies of the moment might be imaginatively re-encountered. Incidents are presented so that they have no theatrical immediacy: and we find no dramatic equivalent of 'The nobleness of life is to do thus' or 'But I will be a bridegroom in my death', or 'I am dying Egypt, dying'. In Garnier's play *Dircet* simply reports to Caesar that Cleopatra and her women hauled Antony up to the monument, bringing out the pathos rather than the urgency of the incident: 'O! qu'il estoit perdu!' Garnier avoids even a narrated enactment of Antony's dying. In fact his Antony is already dead when he gets to the women who sustain him.

What does interest the Senecan dramatists is a completed action which affords striking examples, and calls for a categorical moral response. They put us in the position of godlike beholders, who stand beyond time and circumstance to judge an event which is distant enough for us to see it in its entirety, so that we may draw from it some truth of our condition; indeed they work on the assumption that all action in the end conforms to received general laws which simply subsume the quirks of individual nature, quality, will, and the local effects of manners and place. Their characters can do no more than follow out their hidden destinies to the end already resolved and settled, the fate we know them to have suffered. They are free only in the way they reconcile themselves to necessity, and endure it as nobly or pathetically as the decorum of their condition and their nature prescribes. The playwright's task is to exhibit them in ways which forcefully exemplify the general dispositions of human nature and affairs.

These playwrights make an art of resolving thought and action alike

into settled moral attitudes which may be sententiously formulated. Their characters strike carefully composed postures, such as articulate the images of the various dispositions we find in the handbooks of rhetoric, or personify truths which hold for our condition altogether and may be impersonally confirmed. A treatment of Antony and Cleopatra needs its Chorus of Roman soldiers, or Egyptian citizens,<sup>3</sup> to point the moral and pose the public issue:

Shall ever civile bate  
    gnaw and devour our state?  
shall never we this blade,  
    our bloud hath bloody made,  
lay downe? these armes downe lay  
    as robes we weare alway?  
but as from age to age  
    so passe from rage to rage?

Mary Sidney, *The Tragedy of Antonie IV*, 1713–20

Readers untuned to the modes of declamatory rhetoric may suppose that the writing itself is the real focus of interest. We are often invited to pay as much attention to the decorous artistry of a performance as to the inward life of the speaker:

*César:* O dieux, quelle infortune! O pauvre Antoine, hélas!  
As-tu si longuement porté ce coutelas  
Contre les ennemis, pour le faire en fin estre  
L'exécration meurtrier de toy, son propre maistre?  
O mort que je déplore, hélas! Nous avons mis  
Tant de guerres à fin, estans frères, amis,  
Compaignons et parens, égaux en mesme empire,  
Et faut que maintenant je t'aye fait occire!

*Agrippe:* Pourquoi vous troublez-vous d'inutiles douleurs?  
Pourquoy dessus Antoine espandez-vous ces pleurs?  
Pourquoy ternissez-vous de dueil vostre victoire?  
Il semble qu'enviez vous mesmes vostre gloire.  
Entrons dedans la ville, et supplions aux dieux.

Garnier, *Marc-Antoine IV*, 1678–90

Rhetoric may not wholly merit its bad name, but this writing will strike us as a much more manipulative use of the language than a Webster's or a Middleton's, not to say a Shakespeare's or a Jonson's. The dramatist isn't so much thinking in words and images as managing formal devices, demonstrating his virtuosity in appropriate modes of elegance, or point,

<sup>3</sup>As in Samuel Daniel's *The Tragedie of Cleopatra*, 1594.

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or dignity. He uses what scope for thought his language allows him to perfect his expression of settled attitudes. Such a mode has its artistic advantages, but it doesn't seek to admit that intense apprehension of present being which is the condition of metaphysical awareness.

Shakespeare's words imply or even impel gesture and movement. Their energy of syntax and rhythm articulates itself physically, no less in exposition than in action:

Troy, yet upon his basis, had been down,  
And the great Hector's sword had lack'd a master,  
But for these instances:

*Troilus and Cressida* I, iii, 75-7

An actor who engages with the syntax will feel the simultaneous pull at his voice and muscles. Ben Kingsley well remarks that the energy of Shakespeare's words 'sometimes infects the body as well' in a way which the actor can't resist, as if the very rhythm of the language may 'make you use your body' and 'articulate a line with a movement'.<sup>4</sup> Yet the outward movement isn't the whole point. The language may have a physical life which is so vivid in itself that the actor who thinks his way through it can realize it in his voice, without need of large bodily gestures:

And suddenly; where injury of chance  
Puts back leave-taking, justles roughly by  
All time of pause, rudely beguiles our lips  
Of all rejoindure, forcibly prevents  
Our lock'd embrasures, strangles our dear vows  
Even in the birth of our own labouring breath:  
We two, that with so many thousand sighs  
Did buy each other, must poorly sell ourselves  
With the rude brevity and discharge of one.

*Troilus and Cressida* IV, iv, 35-50

The words themselves actively render a metaphysical predicament, drawing us into a violent drama of love in which the frail human sentiment haplessly opposes itself to an indifferent universe of unpredictable chance and change.

Shakespeare presents his action as if the entire enterprise may turn upon each moment, whose consequence neither we nor the characters can anticipate as we live it through. Events are dramatized so that they seem to be enacting themselves before our eyes, and taking us into the minds of the participants. We are party to the precarious condition of the characters themselves, sharing their wary sense of possibilities and

<sup>4</sup>In an interview with Hugh Herbert, *The Guardian*, 2 April 1979.

searching of the consequences, their calculation of the responses of others and of their own chances. Shakespeare may rely as much for his effect as the Greek tragedians on the fact that we already know the outcome, as when Cressida vows truth to Troilus, or Antony prepares for Actium. Yet our awareness of the upshot doesn't override the hope of the moment, even when the reasons for what will occur are already ironically discernible within the present state. Our interest is more analytic than judicial, more humane than doctrinal, and in any case must be highly complex. We follow out the unfolding of a state of mind, or condition of circumstances, observe the dynamic interplay of decisions, wills, deeds, at the same time as we appraise a sheer quality of living.

Shakespeare gives dramatic substance to our sense of being caught up in time. He asks us to share the consciousness of people who are confronted moment by moment with changing circumstances which pose them choices. Far from being kept at a lofty remove from the cockpit of choice, so that we have no more to do than assent to the moralizing of a completed action, we are put in the position of participants who have some power to shape their world. The plays sift us, as we sift their characters.

The shift in dramatic tense is decisive. In dramatizing present actuality, miming the process of occurrence, Shakespeare asks us to do more than just weigh up an action in the past whose outcome has long been resolved. He moves us into the centre of decision, putting the possible courses of action before us as well as before the characters, and inviting us not only to enter into their predicament but to search our own lives if we can. Process itself becomes the stuff of drama. Resolution only matters as a final disclosure of the workings of the inner processes of mind and feeling, the interplay between impulses and characters, the sheer human quality of the life. The dramatist is no moralizer but a compassionate observer of the differences of men, curious anatomist of the ways in which people's several qualities show themselves and produce their consequences; and his very interest in the possibilities of human nature prompts him to try what people may make of themselves at the limits of their humanity.

Shakespeare renders love itself as a dynamic process, and an interplay of contending impulses. His lovers must painfully revise their expectation of a stable condition, or an ideal order to be attained:

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul,  
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars:  
It is the cause, yet I'll not shed her blood,  
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,  
And smooth, as monumental alabaster;  
Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.  
Put out the light, and then put out the light:  
If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,

I can again thy former light restore,  
 Should I repent me; but once put out thine,  
 Thou cunning pattern of excelling nature,  
 I know not where is that Promethean heat  
 That can thy light relume: when I have pluck'd the rose,  
 I cannot give it vital growth again,  
 It must needs wither; I'll smell it on the tree,  
 A balmy breath, that doth almost persuade  
 Justice herself to break her sword: once more:  
 Be thus, when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,  
 And love thee after: once more, and this the last,  
 So sweet was ne'er so fatal: I must weep,  
 But they are cruel tears; this sorrow's heavenly,  
 It strikes when it does love:

*Othello* V, ii, 1-22

Othello's speech as he moves in to kill Desdemona powerfully shows how Shakespeare's dramatic language implies action, choice, pitch of feeling. The movement of the syntax calls for a sustained intensity of resolve. Every word and phrase is a working force, prompting the actor to some powerful movement within himself, or towards other things. Othello's inward struggle is made apprehensible to us in a series of apostrophizing gestures which set up a kind of active dialogue between the several elements of his own nature, and between his mind and the universe around him:

it is the cause, my soul,

Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars:

yet I'll not shed her blood,  
 Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,

Put out the light, and then put out the light:

I'll smell it on the tree,

Yet she must die,

once more . . . once more, and this the last,

I must weep,

He appeals fiercely to his soul against himself, to the stars, to the universal condition of things, to his own desires. He thinks of his dagger or sword, and then arrests that lacerating impulse at once when it takes him on towards the sleeping Desdemona so that he glimpses the smooth

whiteness of her skin, image of unsullied purity as well as of desirable beauty. He moves agitatedly around the chamber, trying to distract himself from the terrible necessity of decision by small practical actions, which only throw him back upon the one inescapable dilemma posed by the bed and its occupant — 'Put out the light, and then put out the light'. Then having got him to the bedside the words enact the fearful inward struggle between his aching sense and his self-appointed cause, communicating the agony of his attempt to see sleep as death as he bends above the warm, breathing, possessible body of his wife. We are party to a drama which involves not only the several elements of our nature but the larger nature they reach out to, putting Othello at the centre of a metaphysical debate. The irony is that he thinks he kills her to vindicate that impulse of the human spirit which can rise above sense and aspire to the pure spirituality of universal love itself. There's a more intimate and terrible irony in the way he sees in the sleeping woman stretched out in front of him her own alabaster funeral effigy, superimposing death upon life, the cold finality of the tomb upon the frail human flesh and blood. He holds before us as an imperative issue that fine yet absolute difference between being and not being which so preoccupied the Jacobean tragedians:

Why does yon fellow falsify highways,  
And put his life between the judge's lips,  
To refine such a thing . . . ?

*The Revenger's Tragedy*, III, v, 75-7

To take love for the process of a mutual relationship in time and in the world, and involve us so immediately in the competing claims of our own nature, is to value a devotion to another human being very differently from poets who represent love as a settled fealty of the lover which we can only look at from a distance and appraise. *Troilus and Cressida*, *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, involve us in love in action, taking us into the conduct of a compact which still has to find its accommodation with inhospitable circumstance, and with human nature itself. What these plays have to tell us of erotic love is implicit in the way each action is plotted. Shakespeare's rendering of love simply is the way the play works, not least the way the language works. Love takes on metaphysical moment because the plays are as much concerned with final values as with moral discriminations, and the way human nature sustains its most drastic impulsions. They discover in erotic love a test of our capacity to make what we value endure in a universe of hazard and decay.



## Time's Fools

that other curse of being short,

Donne, 'Farewell to Love'

reckoning Time, whose million'd accidents  
Creep in 'twixt vows and change decrees of kings,

Shakespeare, Sonnet 115

*Troilus and Cressida* bursts in upon the house with a challenging peremptoriness:

In Troy there lies the scene.

Not only the aspect but the manner of this armed prologue is aggressively unsettling. His insistent historic present claims our prompt imaginative engagement. The language, at once highflown and muscular, bumps the mind on through outré terms and heraldic inversions only to pull us up short with a disdainfully curt dismissal:

From isles of Greece  
The princes orgulous, their high blood chafed,  
Have to the port of Athens sent their ships,  
Fraught with the ministers and instruments  
Of cruel war; sixty and nine, that wore  
Their crownets regal, from th'Athenian bay  
Put forth toward Phrygia, and their vow is made  
To ransack Troy, within whose strong immures  
The ravished Helen, Menelaus' queen,  
With wanton Paris sleeps — and that's the quarrel.

If these are the means by which Shakespeare set out to quell a refractory Inns of Court audience at Christmas 1608<sup>1</sup> then he lets his distaste show

<sup>1</sup>As Neville Coghill argues in *Shakespeare's Professional Skills*, Cambridge, 1964, pp. 78–97, and in a letter to *TLS*, 30 March 1967 p. 274. The Prologue isn't given in the Quarto text of 1609; it first appears in the First Folio text of the play in 1623.