CHAPTER ONE

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA
IN SHAKESPEARE’S DEVELOPMENT

SHAKESPEARE, in a daring episode near the end of Antony and Cleopatra, turns you back on yourself and for a moment leaves you all alone. By now many awesome things have happened: fortunes have flowed with the moon, treaties and marriages have been made and broken, battles dared and deserted and won. Antony is dead, and Cleopatra has bargained with Caesar in her tomb. She knows now that if she lives she will be led through Rome in triumph, and she is preparing herself to die. Within a few lines the old man will bring at her request the asps whose biting, he says, is immortal. Now in her climactic motion, up toward the verge of death but with so much life still in her, Cleopatra looks back, imagining for a moment her appearance in Rome as an ornament to Caesar’s triumph:

Nay, ’tis most certain, Iras. Saucy lictors
Will catch at us like strumpets, and scald rhymers
Ballad us out o’ tune. The quick comedians
Extemporally will stage us and present
Our Alexandrian revels. Antony
Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
I’ th’ posture of a whore. (V.ii.214–21)

These lines are written for a boy actor who for two hours’ traffic in the street of quick comedians has been squeaking out his Cleopatra in the posture of a whore. We might pass off the speech as a joke on him, to be relished by groundlings and courtiers alike, or we might quickly classify it as a conventional
play upon the theme of appearance and reality. But these are inadequate responses to the fact revealed by the speech: that the performance on the stage and the reality it claims to imitate, though distinct from each other in all their concrete actualities, together create a unified experience that occurs outside of time. Suddenly this speech jolts us into the play as active participants in its artifice: we are made to change places with the playwright, even to defend his art against his assumed disbelief. We are briefly lifted out of ourselves and left to stand in his place; and just at this moment the creative insight asked of us is to imagine the historical Cleopatra and the boy actor as literal contemporaries, with all their differences intact, and yet all the distance between them erased. Imagining them in this way gives in turn a precise justification to Cleopatra’s statement fifty lines later, as she robes herself for the asp, "I have/ Immortal longings in me.” By holding poised in our minds the Queen of Egypt and her boy impersonator, in fact we create and experience the immortality of Cleopatra.¹

I do not mean that Cleopatra’s speech may be taken for the whole play, as a microcosm or focus for its major themes. Among great works of art only the whole may represent the whole. In fact this speech barely alludes to the important actions and ideas of Antony and Cleopatra. It does not condense or moralize our experience of the play by telling us, for example, that ripeness is all, or that we are such stuff as dreams are made on. Rather, the speech arrests for a moment our ongoing experience of the play in its unabbreviated wholeness. By subverting our suspension of disbelief and reminding us that we have been attending to a dream after all, it quickens our perception of the whole extent of the play as an emotional and intellectual experience, so that we may put a boundary around it in our minds and locate alongside the dream of the play the stuff of life outside it—the life of the actual Cleopatra wrinkled deep in time, and the flattened, squeaky presence of the boy actor. We are made aware of the world and the play at once, of the real Cleopatra and the postured one, not so that we may know how one is based on the other or how both are fused in
a unique synthesis, but rather that we may see how each is a condition for the other, and both are simultaneous yet wholly distinct.

This experience comes only from an intense effort of imagination, which cannot be sustained for long. The experience of course is different from any description of it; but it is also very different from what our common notions of the subject lead us to expect. When we speak ordinarily of immortality, we are likely to think of some heroic deed or work of art passed down from hand to hand through generations, so that it is never past but always timely. But in the experience created by Cleopatra's speech, the spectator casts his mind back in time to perceive the past in its integrity without leaving the present, and by linking in awareness both past and present, to make them coexistent. This is an exercise of the historical imagination, in that it depends upon our ability to conceive the past in its separateness rather than upon the ability of the past to keep up to date. Neither Cleopatra's immortality nor that of Shakespeare is a device of their making, to be lifted and passed on to us like an eternal light. Rather, Cleopatra's immortality is a particular accomplishment of Shakespeare's historical imagination working through such episodes; and Shakespeare's immortality lies only with the power of our historical imagination to rekindle continuously.

These remarks are, of course, relevant to other plays, and to many things besides plays. Shakespeare's imagination has ensured the immortality of several historical figures besides Cleopatra, and in this he is not unique among the writers of the world. Nor is this speech the only place in Shakespeare or in world drama where the playwright conspicuously reminds us of our mutual make-believe. But the speech and the response it arouses are intrinsic to Antony and Cleopatra, and important for Shakespeare's meaning, in a unique way reflected by the arrest of attention commonly produced among sympathetic listeners by Cleopatra's words. Among other respects in which Antony and Cleopatra is distinctive among Shakespeare's plays is that here immortality is given thematic status as part of the play's sub-
ject. Hamlet at his death asks Horatio to tell the world his story, and Othello tries to ensure that his story will be transmitted accurately to posterity. But Mark Antony imagines a future with Cleopatra “Where souls do couch on flowers”; and Cleopatra, whom we were told age cannot wither, confirms Antony’s expectations when she says, “I have/ Immortal longings in me,” as if these were as concrete, as precisely located, and as easily satisfied as hunger pangs. In the context of the play this is not wishful thinking, and it is not a histrionic statement. As I will attempt to show later, her consummated experience in the play has schooled Cleopatra to her expectations by making her familiar with immortality.

In fact, the exercise of imagination invited by Cleopatra’s speech is what finally makes us aware of the play’s intellectual range and significance. It is no coincidence that in the very words by which Cleopatra and the boy actor become coexistent to our minds, so too do opposite judgments of Cleopatra:

I shall see
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
I’ th’ posture of a whore.

“Greatness” and “whore” both are accurate words for Cleopatra. But they do not cancel each other’s meaning, and they do not fuse in a third meaning. Rather, each exerts its meaning inseparably from that of the other, and together they make a single imaginative perception. Cleopatra speaks as if greatness were her most certain and familiar attribute, and her concern over the accuracy with which she will be impersonated is surprising because Shakespeare has until now gone out of his way to portray her in the posture of a whore. In the first half of the play Shakespeare altered the Cleopatra he found in Plutarch by elaborating upon her seductiveness and decadence, and by suppressing all evidence of her culture and refinement. Plutarch said through North that Cleopatra was offended by Antony’s coarse jests; that beauty was not her main attraction for men, but that “so sweete was her companie and conversacion, that a man could not possiblie but be taken”; that she had, in
the Renaissance meaning of the term, a “curteous nature”; that her tongue was “an instrument of musicke” that had mastered the languages of almost every people with whom Egypt had diplomatic relations. Though disapprovingly aware of her qualities and accomplishments as a courtesan, Plutarch, by recording at the beginning these signs of her greatness, gave Cleopatra her regrettable due. But Shakespeare will have none of them. In the first half of his play Cleopatra is alternately a wily temptress and a spitfire, vying with Antony at coarse jests, using her tongue as a scourge, and consistently exhibiting everything except a “curteous nature.”

No doubt there is a certain playful virtuosity in Shakespeare’s impulse to debase Cleopatra at first and then have her speak blithely of her greatness. Evoking her greatness by calling her a whore is as deft a stroke as invoking her presence by naming the boy actor. But this kind of virtuosity must rely on a genuine possibility of belief, and it is more than playful to suppose that “greatness” may be commensurate with “whore.” By her style and finesse, Cleopatra surely raises whoring up to greatness, in the Aristotelian sense that every kind has its own excellence. But the lasting greatness for which we honor her is that she goes on to perform just the action one would least expect from a whore. She remains faithful to her lover after he dies, and in the act of affirming her greatness decides to kill herself in order to be reunited with him. “Husband, I come!” she says to Antony as she prepares for the asp; and the nobility of her act impresses us by the sharp contrast between her constancy now and her old fickleness. In Antony’s “curteous” wife Octavia this sort of loyalty is not remarkable. But we are struck with wonder to see Cleopatra’s Egyptian variety now subject to Roman discipline. The deepest meaning of her greatness is that she has been in the posture of a whore.

The adverse judgment implied by “whore” is transmuted when we confront the greatness whose meaning “whore” has made. By holding poised in our minds two morally contradictory actions, we transform all moral action into postures, which become not false poses but the protean forms of life. Step by
step through this play Shakespeare has made us amoral, in
order to produce at last an imaginative experience of omniscience
to accompany the experience of timelessness. At this stage of his
development amorality has nothing to do with the cynical
Machiavellianism of his notorious villains, Richard III, Iago,
and Edmund. It does not unleash evil upon the world, but
releases good from evil like an athlete from the stone, and bears
enigmatic witness to the two poised against each other. There
are no villains in *Antony and Cleopatra*, not even such puny
mischief-makers as the tribunes in *Julius Caesar*. Evil in that
form had proved in *King Lear* to be self-destructive, and Shake-
speare is no longer concerned with it directly. Here the evil
to be conquered is not only within the characters themselves;
it is the other side of their goodness. It is into mere whore and
only into whore that the unique greatness of Cleopatra is in
danger of falling. In the amoral vision I speak of, the whore
in her is truly won over to its particular, inimitable greatness.
What we call evil is assimilated in the all but mystical knowledge
that the moral life is forever open to a breathtaking moment
when such opposed qualities may become true conditions for
each other, or when Mark Antony may become simultaneously
“plated Mars” and “strumpet’s fool,” “husband” and “fire and
air.” Lear acquired this knowledge when, the evil of his world
having proved self-destructive and his personal trials having
won him to his greatness, he felt prepared at last to join
Cordelia and “take upon’s the mystery of things,/ As if we were
God’s spies.” I believe that we must accept and share this
knowledge if we are to have the meaning of *Antony and Cleo-
patra*, which seems to me nothing less than Shakespeare’s
attempt to elaborate and confirm the insight to which he had
brought his protagonist and himself at the end of *King Lear*.

II

The play is built upon the opposition of public and private
values.\(^3\) However we name them—love or honour, lust or em-
pire—we know from the moment of Philo's opening speech that the issue before us is the form in which this opposition is to be resolved. It is usually said that Mark Antony is confronted by a choice between the values represented by Cleopatra and those represented by Octavius Caesar; and that however inadequate either value might be, he resolves this conflict by choosing Cleopatra and giving up the world. Instead I shall argue in this book that Mark Antony is disciplined in the distinctive vision of the play, wherein he is challenged either to choose between the opposed values represented by Cleopatra and Octavius or not to choose between them; and that instead of choosing, he resolves the conflict by striving equally toward both values and rhythmically making each one a measure and condition of the other. The result of his effort is that instead of becoming more "effeminate," as in North's Plutarch, Shakespeare's Antony grows larger in manhood until he can encompass both Rome and Egypt, affirming the values that both have taught him until both are fulfilled. Then his death comes, as Cleopatra's does later, not as dissolution but as transcendence, a sign of his having approached as close to immortality as a poet may dare to imagine by becoming everything that it was in him to be. That I think is why the lovers' deaths produce a feeling of exaltation that so many critics find unique in Shakespeare. In the concrete detail of the play's rendition, these deaths are not permitted to break the continuity of existence. Antony kills himself with his own world-sharing sword, yet does not complete the work, so that he may be left to die upon a kiss, which in turn is not quite so much to die as to "melt" and "discandy." 4 Cleopatra desires death, like a "lover's pinch," to satisfy her immortal longing. She has found a means of death that will cause neither inward pain nor outward disfigurement; and she succeeds so well that in the embrace of the asp she merely "looks like sleep." For her and Antony death is not a limitation but a transformation of existence into a state of peace where the energy and the sweetness of life are at last unfettered. Their deaths signify not that one half of life is well
lost for another but that both halves are found at last and hinged upon each other, in order that the whole world may be won.

This powerful element of transcendence in the death of the lovers, grounded as it is in their effort to reconcile public and private values by refusing to choose between them, marks an important stage in Shakespeare's development, and perhaps cannot begin to be understood outside the context of the Shakespearean canon. For one thing, the special poise in Shakespeare's treatment of death in this play suggests a familiar continuum. On the one hand, Antony and Cleopatra actually die, like the protagonists of the great tragedies, their physical deaths constituting a measure of providential judgment for their fully revealed human frailty. On the other hand, the tone of apotheosis in which their deaths are invested is in the symbolic key of Shakespeare's last plays, where death is no longer conceived naturalistically within the framework of a providential order, as in the tragedies, and is therefore no longer functional in the drama. Here as elsewhere *Antony and Cleopatra* goes far to bridge the difference between Shakespearean tragedy and romance.

Shakespeare's treatment of death in this play, moreover, is not simply a virtuoso performance isolated from the remainder of his concerns. There is a connection between the way the lovers die and the way they have lived, and their rewarding effort to reconcile public and private values locates *Antony and Cleopatra* on the central line of Shakespeare's development, where he is markedly concerned with this conflict of values in his history plays and Roman plays, in *Hamlet* and *King Lear* especially among the tragedies, and finally in *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. About this aspect of the play as well, it will be useful here to make a preliminary sketch of the argument to be developed in the following pages. Shakespeare's mind was formed in a community that felt itself to be achieving a precarious cultural and political unity after a devastating period of internal strife, and it was natural that early in his career Shakespeare, like many of his countrymen, should focus his
attention on the two related problems of order in the state, and of the king's vocation in upholding that order. He began with a firm commitment to the doctrine that temporal order and the king's role are integrally related because both are divinely sanctioned and oriented. But as he applied this doctrine to the presumed facts of history given him by his culture and to the facts of human nature discovered by his art, he came to question the divine self-regulating efficacy of a world order that had shown itself capable of such extensive breakdown as to provide him with the subject matter of his history plays. Simply the writing of such chronicle plays as Shakespeare's *Henry VI* and *Henry IV* cycles, instead of traditional morality plays or epics, served in fact to secularize the idea of world order, and to acknowledge politics as a fallen human activity rather than a divine sacrament. It is true that the chronicle plays typically attempt to picture the vicissitudes of politics as the temporal reflection of a providential scheme. But their subject is disorder in the human community, and first of all they are called upon to dramatize the human causes and consequences of disorder. The more coherent and effective they were to become as plays, the more vividly they had to reveal the personal character of the king, both in weakness and in strength, as the best available warrant for order in the kingdom. As this process of aesthetic growth took place, as the chronicle plays sharpened and refined their concern for the relationship between personal character and public order, they began implicitly to conceive the state not allegorically, as a work of God, but dramatically, as a work of art. The England of Shakespeare's history plays depends for her health and destiny upon the specifically human talents, the shaping imagination of her Richards and her Henrys. These men may claim divine stewardship for themselves, and others may claim it for them; but the program of the plays is to show how they use their human power, for better or for worse, to mold their country's character by making her history.

When the state becomes a work of art, so does the person; and one of the striking elements in Shakespeare's history plays is the self-consciousness with which he invests his heroes. A
passage from Burckhardt’s *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* will suggest the background for this phenomenon:

In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness—that which was turned within and that which was turned without—lay as though dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. . . . Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation—only through some general category. It is in Italy that this veil dissolved first; there arose an *objective* treatment and consideration of the State and of all the things of this world, and at the same time the *subjective* side asserted itself with corresponding emphasis. Man became a spiritual *individual*, and recognized himself as such.6

Burckhardt is speaking of developments in Italy during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and his remarks are relevant to Shakespeare’s treatment of British history during the same period. It is a commonplace that in Shakespeare’s history plays from *Richard II* to *Henry V* we see many facets of the transition from a medieval to a modern conception of national politics and public life, especially in the career of Prince Hal. Henry Bolingbroke and his son Hal, in contrast to Richard II and Hotspur, respectively, begin to conceive the state as an object of deliberate policy instead of ritual passion. Their desire to undertake foreign campaigns in order to distract their subjects from domestic rivalries, and thereby to unite the nation behind them, typifies their sophisticated statecraft. With what the Elizabethans would have called a similarly Machiavellian adroitness, in their personal conduct they play shrewdly imagined roles in relation to their subjects, Prince Hal to such an extent that it is impossible to separate the man from the self-dramatized public image. In his opening soliloquy, in his several claims for the educational value of his tavern life, in his trying the crown for size and his prompt defense of this premature experiment, and in his strained attempt at democratic comradeship with the common soldiers in *Henry V*, Hal is continuously stage-managing his effects and theatrically improvising his character as he goes along. Whatever might be his exact proportion of histrionic calculation at any given moment, he is almost never
free of that pagan impulse to shape himself in images that he announced in his opening soliloquy.

I shall have more to say later about the manifold detail of self-dramatization in Prince Hal and other Shakespearean heroes. Here I suggest only that for Shakespeare as he matures, the political leader's impulse toward self-dramatization becomes problematical, along with political order itself, as inseparable parts of a single awareness. The earlier concern for the permanence of order is progressively subordinated to a concern for that discrepancy between public and private values that Antony and Cleopatra is to call by the names of Rome and Egypt. In the history plays it is clear that the king's vocation, in order to deserve its divine sanction, requires the subordination of private values to that "ceremony" of the public world that King Henry V explains in a notable speech of regret after he has purged himself, as Prince Hal, both of his earlier image of himself and of Falstaff. In fact, the friction between character and "ceremony" underlies the protagonist's self-dramatization as he tries to satisfy the public demands made upon him. This personal conflict between private and public loyalties influences in turn the ongoing politics of order, to complete a vicious circle: Shakespeare comes to recognize that the protagonist's histrionics may themselves constitute an original public fact, a cause rather than a symptom of political instability. This perception, fundamental to Richard II, is explored and enlarged in Julius Caesar, Hamlet, and King Lear, among the plays to be discussed in this book. In these plays political ethics, and especially the psychological basis for ethics, become as important as the structure of public order. The private lives of Richard, Brutus, Hamlet, and Lear are threatened by self-dramatization no less regularly, and no less independently, than their political communities are subject to the vicissitudes of rebellion, usurpation, and anarchy. Character and society keep failing each other more and more, until the circle is broken in King Lear. There the self-dramatization of an aging king begins the dissolution of public order; once under way, the public disorder intensifies the private; and the fearful point is reached where each must
complete itself separately, at the edge of doom, before public and private life both can be reconstituted. In *King Lear* public and private values, and beyond those values good and evil themselves, no longer are conceived in causal relations with each other; all virtues and flaws have become original and autonomous. If we can speak at all of divine providence in *King Lear*, we cannot say that it guarantees the continuity of political order, but only that it underwrites the existence of Cordelia as well as Edmund, so that life may continue if man chooses. Order and disorder, both public and private, are shown to be ineradicable potentialities of life; and personal self-dramatization is separated from politics and made an independent problem of vocation.

So much of Shakespeare's career falls into place in *King Lear*, and *King Lear* is so great a play in its own right, that it is difficult not to conclude that Shakespeare’s development ends and culminates there. But this view impoverishes Shakespeare, whose development does not culminate anywhere but goes on through *Antony and Cleopatra* and other plays, to end where he ends, with *The Tempest*. In that development *Antony and Cleopatra* goes beyond *King Lear*—not above it but beyond it, to break new ground, and to fill out the whole contour of Shakespeare's development. The opposite of self-dramatization, Regan herself tells us in *King Lear*, is self-knowledge. By the time Lear achieves what measure of self-knowledge he is granted, he wants the safety of a “wall’d prison” to protect his personal accomplishment from any further threat of public life. One reason he is denied even this rescue is that Shakespeare has come to see that self-knowledge is not a condition but a process, like life itself, in which public and private values must remain in continuing negotiation with each other and in which not even the old and wise are permitted a separate peace, as Prospero will come to recognize. Meanwhile Shakespeare creates in Antony a character whose earned self-knowledge does not result in a desire to renounce the world for the safety of Lear's prison, but instead a desire to remain in the world, and, since it must continue to suffer his flaws, a magnanimous insistence
upon giving freely to his world of his strength, virtue, and treasure as well. By accepting fully his own imperfection along with the world’s, Antony is able to remain unprotected, and to let what goodness he has earned perform whatever acts of magnanimity are possible. For Shakespeare in *Antony and Cleopatra*, then, self-knowledge and the virtue it entails become not a place but a pathway, continually renewed in and through public action; and Shakespeare’s progression from *King Lear* to *Antony and Cleopatra* is toward this conception, with its corollary vision of the immortal joining of public and private values.