

Cleopatra as Catharsis:
Tragic motifs in Plutarch's Death of Cleopatra

Tenets of Tragedy

1. *Hamartia*
 - a. The change of fortune "should come about as the result not of vice, but of some great error or frailty, in a character..." (Arist. *Poet.* 13)
2. The *peripeteia* (Reversal of Fortune) and *anagnorisis* (Recognition)
 - a. "Reversal of the Situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity." (Arist. *Poet.* 11)
 - b. "Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune." (Arist. *Poet.* 11)
3. The building of pity, which leads to catharsis
 - a. "A perfect tragedy should...imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation." (Arist. *Poet.* 13)
 - b. "... through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions." (Arist. *Poet.* 6)
 - c. "Zeus, who has established this as a fixed law: 'Learning comes by suffering.'" (Aesch. *Ag.* 177)
4. Desperation speech
 - a. Characters "lapse into a state of miserable helplessness (usually evident from an expressed wish for a speedy death); or, if he or she is of a more heroic bent, a decision follows that something truly dramatic is in order, suicide or murder being the commonest choices."¹
 - Examples of additional desperation speeches: *Medea* (Eur. *Med.* 502-519), *Ajax* (Soph. *Aj.* 430-480), and *Helen* (Eur. *Hel.* 293-303)

Tragic Motifs in the *Life of Antony*

5. *Hamartia*
 - a. Antony- "Up to this moment only a few people knew that Antony had fled, and those who heard the news at first found it impossible to believe that he should have run away and left them...His soldiers longed to see him and were confident that he would appear" but "when their general Canidius also left the camp" the soldiers, feeling betrayed by their commanders, defected to Octavian. (Antony, Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 68)
 - b. Cleopatra- "Then the queen, in terror at [Antony's] fury and despair, fled to her monument... and sent messengers to tell Antony that she was dead." (Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 76)
6. The *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*
 - a. Antony- "the god Dionysus, with whom Antony claimed kinship and whom he had sought above all to imitate, was now abandoning him." (Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 75)
 - b. Antony "stood and waited for the issue of the battle at sea. But his crews, as soon as they drew near the enemy, raised their oars in salute, and, when their greeting was returned, they went over to Octavius as one man." (Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 76)

¹ R. L. Fowler, "Rhetoric of Desperation," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 91 (1987): 6.

- c. Cleopatra- “Gallus walked up to the door and engaged Cleopatra in conversation, while Proculeius fixed a scaling ladder against the monument and entered by the window.” (Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 79)
 - d. Cleopatra “tried to justify her part in the war, making out that her actions had been forced upon her by necessity and through her fear of Antony. But Octavius contradicted her on every point and demolished her excuses...” (Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 83)
7. The building of pity, which leads to catharsis
- a. Antony “lay prostrate, the bleeding stopped and he came to himself and implored the bystanders to put him out of his pain. But they ran out of the room and left him writhing in agony and crying for help.” (Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 76)
 - b. He was a “pitiabile sight... covered in blood, struggling in his death agonies and stretching out his hands towards Cleopatra” (Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 77).
 - c. Returned dignity: Antony entreats Cleopatra “not to grieve over this wretched change in his fortunes, but to count him happy for the glories he had won and to remember that he had attained the greatest fame and power of any man in the world, so that now it was no dishonour to die a Roman, conquered by a Roman.” (Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 77)
 - d. Cleopatra “because of the grief and pain she had suffered- for her breasts were inflamed and lacerated from the blows she had given them- she gladly seized upon her illness as a pretext to refuse food and so release herself without further interference from the burden of living.” (Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 82)
 - e. Cleopatra was “lying on a pallet bed dressed only in a tunic...Her hair was unkempt and her expression wild, while her eyes were sunken and her voice trembled uncontrollably: her breasts bore the marks of the cruel blows she had inflicted on herself, and in a word her body seemed to have suffered no less anguish than her spirit.” (Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 83)
 - f. Returned dignity: “Octavius Caesar was vexed at Cleopatra’s death, and yet he could not but admire the nobility of her spirit, and he gave orders that she should be buried with royal splendor and magnificence, and her body laid beside Antony’s...” (Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 86)
8. Desperation speech
- a. “Hide me and let me be buried here with you, for I know now that the thousand griefs I have suffered are as nothing beside the few days that I have lived without you.” (Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 84)
9. Plutarch’s interpretation of Antony and Cleopatra vs. later Roman interpretations:
- a. Antony the proud Roman general: Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 77
 - b. VS. Antony the drunk, emasculated man: Hor. *Epod.* 9.11-12; Strab. *Geog.* 17.1.11
 - c. Cleopatra the Intelligent queen: Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 27
 - d. VS. Cleopatra the Whore queen: Prop. *Eleg.* 3.11; Luc. *Phars.* 10.369-370

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