Book Reviews


In his preface, Jan H. Blits identifies this study as a work of “philosophy” rather than “theory.” Blits argues that a reading of the whole of Antony and Cleopatra, paying meticulous attention to detail, reveals the “substance that Shakespeare deliberately put into it,” i.e., it demonstrates how the passing from a heroic age of Roman virtue, linked to the ideals of the Republic, to an age of universalism brought about through establishment of the Empire, ushers in the new religion of Christianity. “By conquering the world, Rome’s principle of war produces a religion of peace…. [N]ow that all of Rome’s enemies have become Romans, there are no enemies left to hate and so mankind must be loved.” The author goes on to support this argument by presenting a painstaking summary of the play, at times line by line. The close reading is enhanced by numerous notes and references, both extratextual and intratextual: philosophical, theological, historical, and literary, pagan and Christian, from the classical age to the contemporary world. Anyone who loves the play will find this study comprehensive, interesting, enjoyable, and useful.

The book’s argumentative style presents problems, however. For example, warning bells should ring when in the preface, the author claims that he can divine Shakespeare’s purpose in writing the play. Similarly, in claiming that the book is not theoretical, but philosophical, Blits raises other significant questions. For instance, is this study therefore not interpretive? Is there no agenda other than presentation of the “truth”? What and whose truth? And should the expectations generally placed upon a work of literary criticism (e.g., that there be a sustained argument, on some level speculative, adding to and joining in a conversation about the text, rather than claiming that it is the one true reading) therefore be suspended? What precisely does Blits mean by “theory”? Some explanation of terms might benefit the reader. His argument—set out in the introduction—is clear enough: “Antony and Cleopatra, as much a history play as a love story,
depicts the transition from the pagan to the Christian world—from the aftermath of the collapse of the Roman Republic and the decline of the pagan gods to the emergence of the Roman Empire and the conditions giving rise to Christianity.” The summary that follows appears, moreover, to bear out this argument in a reasonable manner: “Treating Antony and Cleopatra as a coherent whole, it [the book] reaches its conclusions by closely examining Shakespeare’s plot, characters, language, structure, digressions, allusions, and other devices. . . . The play’s whole cannot be understood apart from its parts, and the parts cannot be understood apart from the whole.” However, the argument that follows includes much that is highly interpretive and brings to bear numerous outside sources which are given equal weight with the text. Lacking the form of an organized argument—advanced point by point, supported by textual evidence—Blits’s methodology obscures his interpretive bias, buried among explanations, paraphrases, and notes. For example, over the course of the study Blits builds his case that Antony represents a debased Rome. Enobarbus says of Antony’s following Cleopatra from the sea battle: “The itch of his affection should not then / Have nicked his captainship . . . . /When half to half the world opposed” (3.13.7–9). Blits comments, “Antony allowed himself to be emasculated (‘nicked’) by his sexual desire. The stakes could not have been higher, and yet he shamed himself as the slave of his lust.” Here, it is difficult to decipher which interpretation belongs to whom: which is the opinion of the character, which the position of the writer himself? Enobarbus, a questionable source of “truth” in the play, seems credited with the correct evaluation of the situation, which Blits then elaborates on, as if Antony’s degradation is established here beyond question.

Similarly, Blits’s comments on Antony’s swift turn from condemning to forgiving Cleopatra for her flight from the battle also paint him negatively: “Antony may magnify the worth of a single tear or kiss of Cleopatra’s in order to minimize what he has lost. . . . Although we might think that his melting to Cleopatra’s tears and kiss only heightens his folly, he might think—or wish to think—that it redeems his conduct.” Blits mentions Antony’s “magnanimity” in his study, briefly, without examples or extended discussion—“In contrast to his magnanimity elsewhere,”—and goes on to demonstrate his “tyrannical” treatment of Thidias and Hipparchas. But what Blits leaves out here in order to make his case is that very trait: Antony’s capacity for forgiveness, his largeness of soul. Other examples abound. The last “gaudy night” of feasting and celebration where Antony’s