WHAT’S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Reading the Liberal Humanist Romance in
Antony and Cleopatra

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There’s beggary in the love that can be reckoned.
—ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

What’s love got to do, got to do with it?
—TINA TURNER, WHAT’S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT

Before addressing what love has to do and to do with it in Shakespeare’s play, I want to consider what makes a question such as Tina Turner’s intelligible in the first place. As a speech act, this song is a critical “intervention”: a disruptive response to a narrative that precedes and exceeds it. Exactly what the question challenges is unimportant—for its rhetorical effectiveness depends not on the particular discourse it targets, but rather on our recognition of the strategic use of the word “love” with regard to it. In other words, what matters is not the matter but the form imposed on it “in the name of love.”

That we understand instantly what the question does betrays our awareness of the use of the concept of love as an authoritative and sacralizing epistemology. Political rulers act “out of love” for their subjects; patriots “out of love” for their countries; fathers “out of love” for their families; mothers “out of love” for their children; spouses and lovers “out of love” for each other. Perhaps it goes without saying that political leaders have loved subjects, patriots countries, parents children, husbands wives, etc. But what doesn’t go without saying are all the other narratives that seek, and find, refuge under such cover. The love story has been one of the most pervasive and effective—yet least decon-
structured—of all ideological apparatuses: one of the most effective smoke-screens available in the politics of cultural production. One need think only of the historical popularity of crime stories purveyed as love stories: from the Trojan War—that paradigmatic “linkage” of love and genocide—to Bonnie and Clyde; from the subcultural Sid and Nancy to the hyperreal Ron and Nancy—we see the extent to which the concept of love is used as a “humanizing” factor, a way of appropriating figures whom we have no other defensible reason to want to identify with.\(^2\) The popularity (and respectability—Julia Roberts was nominated for an Oscar) of the film Pretty Woman—a “Cinderella” story about a prostitute and a ruthless businessman who uses her to try to maneuver a hostile corporate takeover—is only the most recent example.\(^3\) In these narratives, love is regarded as “content” rather than as something that influences our reception of other elements. I propose that we look at love as a genre or, in Bourdieu’s terms, a re-structuring structure within other structuring structures: one whose coercive influence is camouflaged by its very obviousness. What we take as the love story aspect of other stories is exactly what enables us to take these other stories, period.

I

The coercive function of love stories has been analyzed by Tania Modleski, Janice Radway, Rosalind Coward, and others, who discuss the myths, functions, uses, and profits of “love” as it’s been marketed in “women’s novels,” or popular romance fiction.\(^4\) These important studies map the connections between the fantasies such texts encode and aspects of women’s real social experience. In high-canonical critical circles, however, such texts have been (and continue to be) held in contempt for, among other things, their lack of “realism” and their blatantly fantastic representations of certain kinds of erotic and affective relations. It is easy to believe that the phenomenon of subjection, resistance, and displacement into “love” operates largely, if not entirely, in romance literature written for and/or by women. Much less obvious (but for that reason all the more infiltrative) are the ways in which a similar symptomology organizes criticism of male-authored texts of the “high” English canon and, in particular, has helped to consolidate Shakespeare’s plays in the history of liberal humanist criticism.

There is little evidence that Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra was popular
in his own day and much evidence that it was not. There were few critical statements about the play for several centuries after its first production in 1606–1607; and as Michael Steppat points out,

though Chaucer about 1385 in his *Legend of Good Women* had spoken of Cleopatra’s “passiou[n]” and her “trouth in love,” . . . most Elizabethan discussions focused on what were seen as her moral and political crimes. The Elizabethan writer Richard Reynolds asserted that a “harlotte” like Cleopatra, who had committed “horrible murthers,” [was] [in]capable of dying for love. (1-2)

In general, there doesn’t seem to have been much critical interest in Shakespeare’s version at all until, as Steppat says, “the early nineteenth century, when the Romantics showed an interest in *Antony* as a play to be read in the study” (1-2).

It is not an accident that the play caught the interest of “the Romantics.” For writers such as Coleridge, Hazlitt, and Shelley, who, no matter what their professed social and political concerns, contributed more to the notion of “great individuals” than to anything else, have proleptically read that celebration into Shakespeare’s play, finding their own cause in the play’s effects. The very aspects of the play that Shakespeare’s audience would have found most indecorous (Antony and Cleopatra’s apparent indulgence of “self” over public duty, desire over public honor and reputation) are deemed liberatory. And it is not an accident that the intellectual legacy of Romanticism, liberal humanism, has also celebrated this play for its valorizing of Great-Individuals-in-Love.5

The increasing historical popularity of the play has been inseparable from a critical revisionism that has transformed it from what it was in Shakespeare’s time—a notorious story about politics on every level—to what it is now: a “legendary” love story. And this transformation owes more to the ability of critics to misrecognize what love’s got to do with it than with what love actually does in the play. This has been most true of the liberal humanist scholarship on the play, a way of reading that I would argue is always implicitly coded male (regardless of the anatomical sex of its practitioner) because it is a view—possible only from a position of total cultural entitlement—in which gender and class differences are “transcended” in great literature’s embrace of a “universal” human nature.

There are, of course, many interpretive differences among liberal humanist critics; and it would be wrong to speak of them as a homogeneous group. However, there does seem to be a shared impulse regarding the concept of love. While much liberal humanist criticism of Shakespeare’s play has been subtle
and responsive to the social and the political discourses in the text, it tends to
assume, in one way or another, explicitly or implicitly, that in the last instance,
love (shared by autonomous human agents) is made of different stuff. Even
certain critics who would not consider themselves liberal humanists commit
the liberal humanist fallacy when it comes to love. What Flaubert said about
himself vis-à-vis Emma Bovary is largely true of the way many critics have
read Shakespeare’s text: critics who have been either unwilling or unable to
look at the cultural “work” being done by what they perceive, or construct, as
the “love story.”6 In its compulsive drive to maintain love in a category all its
own, a deus ex machina of affective experience, liberal humanist criticism of
Shakespeare’s play enacts the same interpretive symptomology Janice Radway
has called “reading the romance.” But it is a kind of masculine romance man-
qué, in which certain sociosexual anxieties, regarded as trivial in the “femi-
nine” genre of “ladies’ romance,” are girded with (and ultimately hypostatized
by) the status, dignity, and decorum of canonical drama.

This isn’t to say that Shakespeare has written a Harlequin Romance or even
anticipated it.7 It is, rather, to talk about the way the play has been appropriated
and understood; and in particular, the way it has been critically rewritten as a
tale of epic, paradigmatic, and transcendent love. My concern is not to “rescue”
the play, or to dismiss such criticism, but rather to look at what is productive
about it—what it does—in a larger arena of cultural politics. In what follows,
I want to put Tina Turner’s question to the service of two other questions: how
is reading Shakespeare’s play like reading a Harlequin Romance? And what
does this resemblance have to tell us about a certain symptomology of reading
that is pervasive in Western culture?

II

I am aware that questioning the love of Antony and Cleopatra is in certain
circles tantamount to slaughtering one of Shakespeare criticism’s most sacred
cows; but I for one have never found the play’s rhetoric of love convincing.
However, unlike those who reject their love as being morally offensive or
untenable, critics who believe that such an attachment between the two figures
couldn’t be “real love” (usually supported with claims that he is misogynistic
and she is manipulative), I don’t have an alternative vision of what else love
might mean in this play. The liberal humanist frequently sees it as Shake-
Shakespeare's meditation on the pleasures of "mature love"; a ripened version of the passion we see in Romeo and Juliet; the "triumph" of Antony and Cleopatra's love over their mutual suspicions and political obstacles, etc. Regarded as transcendent in the end, the love of Antony and Cleopatra is reckoned "above" the politics in which the play's other power relations are mired.

Behind this, I believe, is an effort to retrieve or maintain a definition of love that will stand safely apart from politics—in fact, one in which love is defined precisely as Other than the political. But rather than regard the love of Antony and Cleopatra in such "bracketed" terms, I want to consider it precisely in terms of all the play's other power relations, and specifically its investigation of all representational strategies. Lest I seem too dismissive of the liberal humanist critic's (LHC) ability to read, I will acknowledge that his celebration of extraordinary-individuals-in-love is not solely a projection; for the play itself deploys such rhetoric. But it does so only to demonstrate that "transcendent love" is a discursive strategy—long recognized as such in courtly love poetry—with very public social and political aims. For as cultural historians, social theorists, feminist psychoanalytic critics, and materialist literary critics have shown us, the forms of affective relations are inseparable from the specific material, political, and social conditions which they constitute and which constitute them. And in early modern England, Love with a capital L (like Art with a capital A) would not have been thinkable apart from these conditions.

It is (both for the protagonists and for most critics) the "love story" element that renders this historical narrative "mythic." As Hayden White has pointed out about interpretations of history, their comprehensibility tends to depend on their "figuration as a story of a particular kind." Drawing analogies between fictional and historical narratives, White claims that there are at least two levels of interpretation of every historical work: one in which the historian constitutes a story out of a chronicle of events and another in which, by a more fundamental narrative technique, he progressively identifies the kind of story he is telling—comedy, tragedy, romance, epic, or satire, as the case might be. It would be on the second level of interpretation that the myth consciousness would operate most clearly.

Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra tropes on each genre White lists above. But unlike Shakespeare's history plays or the other tragedies, its "comprehensibility," finally, seems always to boil down to this more "fundamental narrative"—the love story—a narrative that frequently disguises itself (qua narrative) or is taken as natural as opposed to the contrivances of other generic
forms. In a recent essay significantly entitled “The Personal Shakespeare: Three Clues,” William Kerrigan claims that it is the “worth” of Antony and Cleopatra’s love, and their fidelity to it, that “inspires” their legend. Arguing that “as [Shakespeare] allied his dramatic art with the mythological greatness of his lovers, [he] struck against the designs of history” (189), Kerrigan’s reading exemplifies precisely the kind of excision I have mentioned above, one in which “love” is universalized, naturalized, and, more important, essentialized in its separation from the discourses that construct other kinds of cultural experience.

But the “love story” in this play produces what Hayden White calls our “mythic consciousness” because it is a narrative that pretends to stand apart from and above other narratives; and it is the lovers themselves who alternately purchase, or jettison, the pretense. The legend effect that Kerrigan attributes to the love story “against the designs of history” I want to attribute to the love story within the designs of history. To situate a love story within a play that examines the implications of different forms of representation is to posit love “itself” as a crucial stratagem of ideological production. The central issue, then, must be regarded not as what the love story is apart from the play’s other “designs” but rather as what it does in relation to them.

In this play, the politics of desire that motivate imperialist ambition are perfectly congruent with those that operate “privately” in the realm of love; and whatever Antony and Cleopatra feel for each other is composed of the same materials that constitute the rest of their world. “Naturally” Antony loves Cleopatra—she is exotic, mysterious, capricious, charismatic, charming, earthy—the characterological equivalent of the imagined terrain of Egypt, with which she is always synecdoched. “Naturally” Cleopatra loves Antony—he is magnanimous (in the Aristotelian sense), expansive, aggressive, powerful, manly, famous “in the word’s report,” like the imperial Roman terrain he both extends and is an extension of. “Naturally” they are drawn to each other; they are both so much larger than life. But to think of their love in these terms is to consent to Antony and Cleopatra’s self-representations without paying adequate attention to Shakespeare’s representations. It is to fall into what Bourdieu calls “the interactionist fallacy,” or to assign to them “personally” the qualities that are in fact the metonymic extensions of their paradigmatic source: the “internalized” functions of their respective habitus (Distinction 169–74 passim). In a play that is simultaneously about legendary Roman expansionism and legendary lovers, it is not surprising that the play records (and produces) a confusion (and fusion) of persons with places. For the shared ideologies that construct Egyp-
tian-ness and Roman-ness reproduce in subjects (as aspects of "self") the structures that structure, and therefore make sense of, their worlds. In this view, there can be no separation between the designs of history and the designs of persons.

Whatever love text these figures weave is repeatedly ruptured by political exigency. This is especially true of Antony, who can justify himself in his own eyes only by mystifying "this wrangling queen, whom every thing becomes" (1.1.49). But even the erotic rhetoric Antony uses is abandoned in those moments when he fears political betrayal, as he demonstrates in 3.13, when he calls Cleopatra a "morsel, cold upon / Dead Caesar's trencher" (116), a "boggler," a "fragment." That Antony can lapse so quickly into the debasing terms his fellow Romans use against Cleopatra (note Enobarbus's reference to her in 2.7.123 as an "Egyptian dish") reveals the extent to which his own construction of her as love object cannot be kept uncontaminated by that of his countrymen—such terms are ever-present in his mind, ready to be mobilized under the appropriate political conditions.

Antony's rhetoric of transcendence is apotropaic—a way of warding off an intolerable awareness of Rome's view of him as "a strumpet's fool" (1.1.13) who has "offended reputation" (3.11.48). In a play in which the political is set up as the "Real," Love becomes Antony's representation of his own "imaginary relationship to his real conditions of existence," a way of shoring up an identity grown blemished "in the world's report" (2.3.5). Unable to objectify the objectifications of himself produced in Rome, Antony feels "unqualified with very shame" (3.11.44). Unable to escape his own constitution as a Roman (in the history of Augustus Caesar as Shakespeare's own sources wrote it), his heightened rhetoric of love for Cleopatra is, in Bourdieu's terms, his "attempt to reappropriate an alienated being-for-others" (Distinction, 207), to counter the "penetrative shame" that I would claim underlies every aspect of his character in this play. Using "love" to produce "distinction," Antony and Cleopatra themselves posit a transcendent rhetorical realm in which they can underwrite endangered reputations with the symbolic capital that transcendent love always lays claim to.

This is not to say that this is not love. But it can and must be regarded as inextricable from sociopolitical purpose. I have argued elsewhere that Troilus and Cressida (another legendary "love story") posits desire as a form of social production, inseparable in form and operation from the rest of the play's machinery of legend. A pervasive program of public desire (Helen and the War) underwrites what I have called myths of private desire. Something similar happens in Antony and Cleopatra, insofar as the rhetoric of love is different
from how it is practiced. Put more simply, Antony and Cleopatra talk about their love in ways that contradict what they actually do with it. In 1.1.14-18, we hear what amounts to a theory about love:

Cleo. If it be love indeed, tell me how much.
Ant. There's beggary in the love that can be reckon'd.
Cleo. I'll set a bourn how far to be belov'd.
Ant. Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth.

This language gestures toward a love that cannot be "reckon'd," that exceeds the supposed baseness of thinking in quantitative terms. But for these two figures, thinking in any terms other than those of an acquisitive expansionism seems to be impossible, as even their "alternative" terms of measurement rely on colonialist images of new territories: finding out a new heaven, a new earth. The "expansiveness" that critics attribute to Antony's love for Cleopatra (in a term that, like "misrecognition," refracts the truth of what it misspeaks) can be understood as a part of the play's lexicon of imperialism. This expansiveness is in fact expansionist. Here is not a love that cannot be reckon'd, but rather a love that requires even more territory, more, even, than that Octavius covets. Antony's claim of unwillingness to perform "exact bookkeeping" is itself a kind of social performance, one that generates symbolic capital by observing in the realm of love what Castiglione describes as a "certain sprezzatura," a way of treating artfully acquired and socially useful skills (in this instance, a style of loving) as if they were intrinsic or "natural" (43).

This love story, then, far from providing a refuge from Rome's imperial project, a "distinction" from the world of Octavius Caesar, conceives imaginative space for itself in language that partakes of similar narratives, in similar terms. What has frequently been taken as the "alternative" world of Egypt and Cleopatra turns out to be not so different after all. While on one level the play beckons us with the allure of "difference" and its hold over Antony, on another level it demonstrates again and again that while Egypt and Rome may be the sites of different representational strategies, the stakes of their conflict are finally the same. And these are the ability to lay claim to authoritative space in which the acquired can be appropriated (in senses both personal and political) as property.

The connections, then, between the "epic" narrative of empire and the "timeless, mythic" narrative of love are imbricated, as Octavius's political defeat of Antony is figured in language similar to Cleopatra's sexual "conquest" of Antony, both are represented as strategic and in military terms. In 4.14, just before Mardian tells him, falsely, of Cleopatra's death, Antony informs Eros,
I made these wars for Egypt, and the queen,
Whose heart I thought I had, for she had mine:
Which whilst it was mine, had annex’d unto’t
A million moe, now lost... (15-18)

Antony, here convinced that Cleopatra has betrayed him to “pack cards” with Caesar, explicitly reveals the connections between his love and his soldiership, passion and militarism, the conquest of one heart and the annexation of “a million moe.” Antony and Cleopatra’s mutual having of hearts gives them the ground and impetus for their own imperial project: theirs is literally a consuming passion insofar as the power it produces is the power to consume new territory. When Antony believes that Cleopatra no longer loves him, what he says is, “She has robb’d me of my sword.” Falsely informed of her death by Mardian a few lines later, Antony makes it very clear that without Cleopatra, all that is left to do is “unarm, the long day’s task is done” (35). If Antony is “No more a soldier” (42), it is because he is now no more a lover. Unlike Troilus, who renounces his role as lover in order to play the soldier, Antony cannot be the one without being the other.

To say this is not to abrogate the sense of love and loss Antony experiences at this moment. But it is to talk about that love as a constituent element of the power relations that inform every aspect of this play. Although the play encourages us to misrecognize Antony’s love for Cleopatra as an alternative to the identity and project he bears for Rome, we see that in his role as Cleopatra’s Antony, he is put to similar use. Except that now, in and from Egypt, he is misplaced in a representational habitus alien to his “original” constitution as “Antony,” a constitution which requires the submission of self to the demands of legendary posterity. We can see this imperative at work in Antony’s death scene, where he reverts to type, his dying words most concerned with how he will be narratively re-membered. Ever obsessed with “report,” Antony narrates his own memorial, calling himself “the greatest prince o’the world,” “a Roman valiantly vanquished” (4.15). After bungling his fall on his sword, this rhetoric exemplifies the split between what these figures do and what they say about what they’re doing, a disjunction reinforced by Cleopatra, who is less concerned with the time Antony has left than with remaining in a secure position on her monument. Denying Antony’s request that she descend to kiss him in his last moments, Cleopatra answers,

I dare not, dear.

[Dear my lord, pardon: I dare not]
Lest I be taken: not the imperious show
Of the full-fortun’d Caesar ever shall
Be brooch’d with me, if knife, drugs, serpents have
Edge, sting, or operation. I am safe:
Your wife Octavia, with her modest eyes,
And still conclusion, shall acquire no honour
Demurring upon me: but come, come, Antony—
Help me, my women,—we must draw thee up:
Assist, good friends.

(22–30)

Ever obsessed with how she is staged, Cleopatra is more anxious about not being a “brooch” in Caesar’s imperious show than in granting her dying lover’s last request. Her foremost thoughts at this moment are on how to keep Caesar and Octavia from “acquiring honour” from her capture; and her references to suicide are prompted here, at least syntactically, not by Antony’s impending death but by the prospect of being made Caesar’s spectacle. For both Antony and Cleopatra, love—even at this most critical of moments—cannot transcend the particular textual material it operates in.

For many critics, the play affectively “ends” here in 4.15, with the death of Antony and Cleopatra’s poetic eulogy to him. Her mythic language about her lover enables the liberal humanist critic to contrive the emotional “sense of an ending” that the play at once invites and refuses. Cleopatra says she will commit suicide, will die “after the high Roman fashion,” will seek “the briefest end” (87–90). The problem, however, is that she doesn’t, and still has the entire fifth act of the play to get through. We watch her efforts to secure resources, to position herself with regard to Octavius, to maneuver her way out of her predicament, all to no avail. Does she at last commit suicide because she cannot imagine life without Antony, or because she cannot imagine the humiliation of watching “some squeaking Cleopatra boy [her] greatness / I the posture of a whore” (5.2.218–19)? Somehow one suspects that not even her hairdresser knows for sure.

Of course, none of this is meant to indict Cleopatra for not loving “truly” or well enough. Quite the reverse. The play posits two versions of love: love as poetic construct or usable material for fiction, and love as realpolitik; love that is “to die for,” and love that is to die for if nothing else can be worked out. Which leads us to speculate on why there has been such an abiding effort by liberal humanist critics to recuperate the story for transcendent love. In this play it is Antony who kills himself for love when he believes, wrongly, that Cleo-
patra is dead. And we should remember that it is Cleopatra herself who has had him falsely informed. As an effort to test his love? To make him regret his accusations against her? I suggest that Cleopatra does this because it never occurs to her that Antony might respond to this news by actually killing himself.

So there is a problem here. And I believe it’s around how to recuperate Antony’s epic masculinity—his “worth” and dignity as a legendary warrior-lover—when in this play he occupies a subject position almost always culturally reserved for women, and in relation to a Cleopatra who occupies a position almost always reserved for men. Here a few words about the rigid formula of the Harlequin Romance would be helpful. In *Loving with a Vengeance*, Tania Modleski explains that

it is useful to see in each *Harlequin* two basic enigmas: the first, which is more or less explicitly stated (and often constantly repeated), has to do with the puzzling behavior of the hero: why does he constantly mock the heroine? Why is he so often angry at her? The second enigma, usually but not always implicit, concerns how the hero will come to see that the heroine is different from all other women, that she is not, in other words, a “scheming little adventuress.”

(39, my italics)

In the Harlequin Romance, the male lover is mocking and cynical directly in proportion to the feelings of love and attraction he represses for the heroine, who, unlike the reader, is unaware of the hero’s “true” feelings.

In Shakespeare’s play it is Cleopatra who presents an unreadable, impene-trable surface, the sphinx-like opacity that produces Antony’s fascination and resentment. It is Cleopatra who mocks Antony repeatedly for his allegiances and attachments to Fulvia, Caesar, and Rome. And it is Antony who is left to waffle and wonder, Antony who feels the simultaneous humiliation and infatuation that in the *Harlequin* Romance is the designated preserve of the heroine. It is Antony who feels exposed and feminized, “his corrigible neck, his face subdued / To penetrative shame” (4.14.75). In this play it is Antony who is in thrall to love, Antony who leaves battle to follow Cleopatra back to Egypt, Antony who basically quits his job (working for Rome) and abandons everything for his obsession with this love object whom he cannot properly read.

All this breach of gender decorum does not a comfortable liberal humanist make. The tension, then, which the LHC must resolve is that between Antony’s love for Cleopatra, who is “different from all other women” because of her extraordinary power and his inability (shared by the critic) to eliminate lin-
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gering fears that she is, finally, a "scheming little adventuress." Of course, if by "scheming little adventuress" one means a woman for whom eroticism involves a conscious desire for power and property, then we must regard Cleopatra as just such an adventuress; but one whose "adventurism," then, is like Antony's, like Caesar's, in short, like that of most of the male lovers in Shakespeare's plays. Cleopatra is, erotically as well as theatrically, one of the boys. For Antony, this is precisely what makes her exciting. For the LHC, however, this thralldom can be tolerated only if the "proper" gender arrangement is finally restored. What makes Antony and Cleopatra recuperable as a legendary "love story" (in a way that Troilus and Cressida is not) is the fact that Cleopatra does finally "do the right female thing" and commit suicide. And with this final act, she seems to inscribe herself into the time-worn tradition of women who kill themselves "for love," providing the critic with the glue needed to cement his reading of this play.

Like the ways in which Harlequin romances are read, the LHC's reading is neither simplistic nor inconsequential. The Harlequin offers the female reader a way to imaginatively revise her real history, to make it come out "right," to provide a new epistemology for a form of cultural experience that has been humiliating and intolerable. In these texts, the cruelty, standoffishness, cynicism, and contempt of the male lover are proven in the end to be "about" his love for the heroine. His behavior, therefore, has not been a sign of his disregard and disrespect for her or about her social insignificance. On the contrary. The fantasy ensures her centrality. In these narratives, the heroine's humiliation becomes the very sign of her power; and the real female social experience of oppression and marginality is given a new history. This is the "payoff" that the Harlequin story line promises: that in the end "love" will proleptically revise and make emotional sense of all preceding experience, no matter how violent or disjunctive. What drives the reader to new Harlequins, in the repetition compulsion Modleski describes, is the fact that she keeps returning to a real world which belies the textual fantasy.

In the LHC's reconstruction of love in Antony and Cleopatra, we see a similar symptomology. Only in this version, whatever was undignified (unerect) about Antony is firmed back up as the story takes its place in the reified canonical ranks of legend. Unwilling fully to confront (or, one imagines, to identify with) this unstable representation of a seriously compromised masculine subject-in-love, the liberal humanist seeks transcendence. Faced with Cleopatra's ability, to paraphrase Cordelia, to love and be politic, the liberal humanist separates the two categories for fear that the alternative must be an Antony
who has been enthralled by a “scheming little adventuress.” In a move that proves that the repetition compulsion is alive and well in canon formation, Cleopatra’s suicide is read in the tradition of the “legend of good women,” and Antony becomes a recuperable epic lover.

While I readily admit that the liberal humanist position I’ve been outlining here is something of a composite for the sake of argument, it is not inaccurate. Some critics occupy it fully and vociferously, others only obliquely and perhaps even unwittingly. Liberal humanism has, after all, taken a certain amount of critical fire over the last decade; and it is clear that such criticism has had to cede (or at least share) its position of academic centrality to more politicized and theorized kinds of approaches. But the humanist way of reading has been the academy’s most successful export into the culture at large, as Alan Bloom, William Bennett, and Lynne Cheney (to name only the most visible proponents) have demonstrated, a way to appeal to the “structures of feeling” that prompt reluctant taxpayers to continue to subsidize higher education in the liberal arts. In the current climate of “backlash” against multiculturalism, race politics, canon expansion, feminisms, gay and lesbian studies, and other foregroundings of “the political” in academic discourse, liberal humanism is once again set to position itself as the (now martyred) defender of the Faith (whether in Great Books, Genius Authors, Western Reason, or the Sovereign Individual). Outside academic circles, humanism reigns, among educated middle-class liberals and political conservatives alike, as the voice of centrist interpretive reason, setting the ideological agenda for “enlightened” individuals. In American culture, liberal humanism—in virtually every sphere of ideological production—is far more pervasive than poststructuralism.

What is at stake in all this is how both the consumers and the producers of cultural texts re-member histories, their own and those of others. We have seen with appalling clarity just how subject we still are to the uses of transcendent narratives (“just wars,” prosecuted in the name of Freedom, Liberty, Democracy, Faith, the New World Order) when those in power live in terror of “the wimp factor.” As Foucault has taught us, we must be very careful about how we talk about cause and effect with regard to power relations; and I certainly do not mean to link liberal humanism, or the defenders of the high canon, directly with the obscene events that have gutted the Persian Gulf. Surely there are many liberal humanists (and high-canonists) who were horrified by the alacrity and relish with which we pursued Operation Desert Storm. What profoundly disturbs me, however, is that try as I might, I cannot completely discover what gets prosecuted in literary and cultural production in the name of
Love from what gets prosecuted in the New World Theatre in the name of Freedom and Democracy. The degree of misrecognition needed to subsidize our investment in any notion of transcendent anything is matched only by the degree of violence that erupts when our real conditions of existence intrude on the fantasy.

In the rarefied ranks of Shakespeare scholarship, that most "legitimate" canonical field, we can see that the specious separation of love and politics that I've been discussing is not unlike that of high and low culture. Anyone who has seen the Taylor/Burton film version of the Antony and Cleopatra story will recall how easily it lent itself to a mass cultural treatment. And in the recent film L.A. Story, not only does Steve Martin's character (a weatherman with a Ph.D. in "Arts and Humanities") quote Shakespeare, but there is a parody of the graveyard scene in Hamlet (with Rick Moranis of Honey I Shrank the Kids fame) playing the gravedigger. Martin knows that he is in love with his romantic object (the British Victoria Tennant) when she recognizes the allusion and recites the proper lines from the play. Unlike the Valley Girl shop clerk he is having casual sex with, this is someone he can take to meet Mother: this girl knows her Shakespeare. All this at the same time that Glenn Close and Mel Gibson are playing the "real thing" in Zeffirelli's version of Hamlet (suitably revised, through the elimination of Fortinbras and references to potential war, to hail U.S. moviegoers as Oedipalized Individuals rather than as social and political subjects).

To what do we owe this upsurge in Shakespeare's mass-cultural visibility? I wish to suggest that it is due to Shakespeare's position as iconic guarantor of liberal humanism, at a time when as a society we desperately need to find ways to justify our moral authority as we throw our weight around. Like so many other products in American consumer culture, Shakespeare is used to reinforce our sense of "distinction": like the best cars, the best furnishings, or the best wine—Shakespeare: the best that's been thought, said, and felt.

Shakespeare and Antony have both been res-erected by the liberal humanist fallacy; and in this consolidation that occurs behind "a kinder, gentler" patriarchalism, I believe we can read the same symptomology that produces all desire for legends. For a legend is the interpretive overkill designed to ensure the final stability of the Text—the concrete that bricks signifier to signified and arrests any slippage between effects and what are taken to be their acceptable causes. Legends are things that "stand the test of time." This cliché is true, but not in the way intended by those who still utter it. For transcendence is not about getting it up, but rather about keeping it up—freezing history in an
essentializing of being that denies epistemological (and therefore historical) uncertainty and its threat of authoritative impotence. In the reification of meaning, that textual hardening that is always the aim of legend, Transcendent Love can be regarded as a monumental erection of the critical Phallus against any text that subversively insists on asking, What’s love got to do, got to do with it?

NOTES

This essay first appeared in *Textual Practice* 6, No. 1 (Spring 1992), and I thank Terence Hawkes and Routledge for permission to reproduce it, in somewhat revised form, here. A short section of it also appears in chapter 3 (“Spies and Whispers: Exceeding Reputation in *Antony and Cleopatra*”) of Notorious Identity: Materializing the Subject in Shakespeare (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press).

1. All references are to the Arden edition, M. R. Ridley, ed.

2. I refer here to the 1967 Warner Brothers film *Bonnie and Clyde* and to the 1986 Zenith Production of *Sid and Nancy*, the story of “Sid Vicious” and his American girlfriend Nancy Spungen, whom he murdered in a drug-induced rage. As for Ron and Nancy, their narrative is still undergoing revisions, the latest offering being Kitty Kelley’s “unauthorized” biography of Nancy Reagan (Simon and Schuster, 1991).

3. Roberts did not win for Best Actress. But Whoopi Goldberg won Best Supporting Actress for her role in *Ghost*—another hugely successful American film in which love is literally transcendent.

4. The title of this essay is meant to recall Radway’s *Reading the Romance*. See also Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*; Coward, *Female Desires*; and Snitow, “Mass Market Romance.”

5. One must take into account Dryden’s 1678 version, *All for Love*, in which political issues recede under the foregrounding of a more domesticated vision of the problems of love, jealousy, and fidelity. But despite its title, Dryden’s treatment of love doesn’t have the strongly individualist romance ethos that I would claim isn’t fully developed or ideologically operative until the late eighteenth century.

6. Anyone who is at all familiar with Shakespeare criticism will recall how pervasive this way of reading the play has been and continues to be. My concern here is not to prove that this critical tendency exists by singling out particular critics and their readings of Shakespeare, but rather to examine the cultural “work” performed by the critically misrecognized text: to analyze how a certain attitude toward and construction of love (and Shakespeare) within liberal humanist criticism is congruent with (and even indirectly authorizes) the use of other, more overtly dangerous narratives of transcendence in mass culture and politics.
7. Modleski discusses the worldwide success of Harlequin Enterprises, LTD, and their chain of low-budget formulaic romance novels. According to the publishers,

Harlequins are well-plotted, strong romances with a happy ending. They are told from the heroine’s point of view and in the third person. There may be elements of mystery or adventure but these must be subordinate to the romance. The books are contemporary and settings can be anywhere in the world as long as they are authentic. (35-36)

Harlequin Romance is the generic name of the publisher’s series; but because of its sales success it has also come to be a descriptive term for any kind of novel that corresponds to this particular formula. As Snitow points out in “Mass Market Romance,”

Harlequin is 50 percent owned by the conglomerate controlling the Toronto Star. If you add to the Harlequin sales figures (variously reported from between 60 million to 109 million for 1978) the figures for similar novels by Barbara Cartland and those contemporary romances published by Popular Library, Fawcett, Ballantine, Avon, Pinnacle, Dell, Jove, Bantam, Pocket Books, and Warner, it is clear that hundreds of thousands of women are reading books of the Harlequin type. (262, note 1)

8. These are just a few of the many works that inform this claim: Elias, The Civilizing Process; Underdown, Revel, Riot and Rebellion; Adelman, The Common Liar; Stone, The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800; Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality; Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice; Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life; Rose, Sexuality in the Field of Vision; Sprengnether, “The Boy Actor and Femininity in Antony and Cleopatra”; Belsey, Subject of Tragedy; Dollimore, Radical Tragedy; Stallybrass and White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression.

9. This phrase comes from Althusser’s famous definition of ideology in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in Lenin and Philosophy.


11. Aristotle defines this unwillingness as characteristic of the “magnificent man,” in Nichomachean Ethics 90.

12. Although for some liberal humanist critics, not without a fight. I am thinking here of Levin, quixotic defender of Shakespeare and the values of humanist scholarship. See “Bashing the Bourgeois Subject” 76–86 (and Belsey’s reply, 87–90) and “The Poetics and Politics of Bardicide” 491–504. Since this essay first appeared in Textual Practice 6, No. 1 (Spring 1992), Levin has published a rebuttal to my argument, and I, a reply. See Levin, “On Defending Shakespeare,” and Charnes, “Near Misses of the Non-transcendent Kind.”

13. Even taking into account Saddam Hussein’s brutal treatment of the Kurds in 1988, one can only wonder how much of the ferocity of his latest crushing of rebellion is due to the humiliation Saddam and his army experienced at the hands of the U.S. and allied forces. After devastating Saddam’s forces, we could not resist reveling in our
military, technological, and moral superiority. Wielding his usual Janus-faced rhetoric in response to the Kurdish refugee disaster, President Bush at once asserted that the New World Order is “a responsibility imposed by our successes,” and “reaffirmed” the U.S. “policy” (such as it is after Chile, Nicaragua, Iran, El Salvador) of “non-interference” in the civil affairs of a nation-state. In a rhetorical move that has much in common with the strategies of liberal humanism, Bush first defined the tenets of the New World Order in universalist terms: “Peaceful settlements of disputes, solidarity against aggression, reduced and controlled arsenals, and just treatment of all peoples,” before asserting that “the new world order [is] based on American ideals” (New York Times, April 14, 1991; my italics).

14. In both of these films the icon (and iconicity) of British high culture is adjusted to American popular culture and the cult of the individual. L.A. Story takes the Hamlet motif (well-read young man, too attached to mother and alienated by the rottenness of the state of Los Angeles) and transforms it into the ultimate Steve Martin comic fantasy: the Lonely Guy/Jerk finds love and hipness in L.A. And Zeffirelli’s Hamlet, in terms of casting as well as cinematography, becomes an intimate story of unbalanced individuals: a Fatal Attraction leads to a Mad Max, who in turn becomes a Lethal Weapon. In both cases, we can see in the realm of popular “entertainment” the same relationship adumbrated between Bush’s New World Order and particularly American ideals.

15. For an important discussion of the relationship between Shakespeare and American culture, see also Bristol.

WORKS CITED


