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## Antony and Cleopatra; Gorgon or Mars, Whore or Goddess, according to directly claimed evidence or indirect assertion

Assistant Professor Dr. Gillian M.E. Alban<sup>\*</sup> Istanbul Aydın University, Istanbul 34295, Turkey,

## Abstract

Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* is interpreted by Ted Hughes in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* as tragedy and theophany, its two faulty characters rising above frail humanity to partake of divinity. While evaluating these oxymoronic views of the two protagonists as presented by Shakespeare, I wish to assess which of their strengths and weaknesses are reported of these characters by repute, directly claimed, or indirectly asserted. I thereby hope to understand the plethora of qualities of the two presented as both faulty humans, while also partaking of divinity. This paper treads a path through direct speech and indirections to illustrate a complex and ultimately positive direct reflection of these two tragic immortals.

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Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* is interpreted by Ted Hughes in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* through his dual reading of the play as both tragedy and theophany. The play ends in a double suicide, with Antony killing himself in the belief that his Tarquinian fury has killed Cleopatra, and Cleopatra kills herself because no life is possible for her after Antony's death. They thereby transcend their tragic fate, apotheosized onto a higher spiritual plane, their tragic errors redeemed. Hence the protagonists, who are both faulty humans, rise above their frail humanity ultimately to partake of an extraordinary divinity, through a complexity of paradoxical qualities which may overwhelm readers or audience. Cleopatra as Queen of Egypt and Hell, an African Queen of serpents, witchcraft, the dead and the underworld, a gipsy, whore and boggler, also becomes Isis and Venus the goddess of love by the final theophany. For Antony, he is a ne'er-lust-wearied

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gillianalban@aydin.edu.tr.

libertine, an unmanned strumpet's fool, a Gorgon, at the same time he is a demi-Atlas, the triple pillar of the World, Dionysus, Osiris, Adonis, Hercules and Mars. This paper evaluates how Shakespeare exposes the weaknesses while also asserting the strengths of these two characters, through malicious gossip reported from jealousy or scorn, or from torturously lived personal experience, through whatever direct statement or indirect assertion. My aim is to evaluate the diametrically opposed qualities of these highly variable characters as they are presented through direct report and confession as well as indirect report, drawing the reader into whatever strongly or weakly gained impressions regarding the oxymoronic qualities of these characters. Do we flaunt them for their faults, or bow before and acknowledge their greatness? As might be expected, the master magus, Shakespeare, aligns negative and positive in such a plethora of impressions that we scarcely receive one, but a following one counteracts it. The play's magic convinces us of the magnitude of these characters, who sweep us through multiple experiences, from low to high.

Philo, a follower of Antony, initiates the play's discussion by castigating both protagonists through direct report or slander, expressing his disgust at his general's abasement through his unsanctioned sexual relationship with a dark gipsy, actually the Queen of Egypt. The closest historical parallel is the love of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba which is referred to non-pejoratively in the Koran. In Shakespeare's time gipsies were believed to come from Egypt, thus Philo's remark contains racism as well as sexism. Philo directly states: "this dotage (or infatuation) of our general's" (1.1.1), who in the past has "glowed like plated Mars" (4) now looks on the "tawny front" (6) or swarthy complexion of Cleopatra, operating as a mere tool to heat her sexual passion, "the bellows and the fan/ To cool a gipsy's lust" (1.1.9-10). One of the three Roman triumvirs, "The triple pillar of the world", Antony has been "transformed/ Into a strumpet's fool" (1.1.11-13). Full of metaphor, this assertion claims for Antony a literally glowing comparison with the Roman god of war, Mars, for his martial achievements, with Antony also ignobly shown as satisfying this gipsy, so called because of her dark skin and also the association of gipsies with gitans, Egyptians. So much for direct slander. Strikingly, Cleopatra directly describes herself as sunburnt and lined: "with Phoebus' amorous pinches black/ And wrinkled deep in time" (1.5.29-30); nobody describes her physically as worse than she frankly relates her appearance in these her own words.

The declining Pompey refers to the "Salt" (2.1.21), or lecherous, Cleopatra and her waned, or faded lip, wishing that/ hoping to let her "witchcraft, join[ed] with beauty, lust with both" (22) to make her irresistible to the "ne'er lust-wearied Antony" (39) whom he wishes forgetful or "Leth'd" (27), to "Tie up the libertine in a field of feasts [and] /Keep his brain fuming" (23-4). This directly suggests the magic force and sexual power of Cleopatra on the overly-willing Antony, whom Pompey wishes to remain totally subjugated to her, in order to keep him occupied and out of the military action, leaving the field clear for Pompey to achieve greater success himself. Maecenas calls him "th' adulterous Antony", and Cleopatra his "trull" (3.6.95, 97); Scarus calls him "a doting mallard" (3.10.20) or infatuated duck, these slights confirming all these negative impressions. In directly reporting Cleopatra's behaviour, no one leaves anything to the imagination, instance this highly graphic sexual metaphor — Agrippa declares, "Royal wench!/ She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed./ He ploughed her, and she cropped" (2.2. 236-8). If we need evidence of Cleopatra and Antony's relationship, this latter who has "given his empire/ Up to a whore," (3.6.67-8), it is physically embodied in "Caesarion, whom they call my father's son" (3.6.6), as states Octavius Caesar, with a distancing touch of his skepticism regarding this supposed child of Caesar. On the other hand, the lovers' direct assertion of themselves and their love is displayed in the first scene. Ignoring Caesar's Messenger, Cleopatra asks Antony if it is love, how much? He declares: "There's beggary in the love that can be reckoned" claiming they will need a "new heaven, new earth" (1.1.15, 17) for their love, which they achieve; everything else is discarded as worthless: "Let Rome in Tiber melt" (1.1.34).

The play presents two public scenes which are directly reported as news, one in which Caesar formally introduces what this pair do in contempt of Rome, declaring with the words: "Here's the manner of't" (3.6.2), relating a report presumably brought to him of how Antony and Cleopatra publicly divide up the spoils of empire between them. "I' th' market-place, on a tribunal silvered,/ Cleopatra and himself in chairs of gold/ Were publicly enthroned" (3.6.3-5), making Cleopatra "Absolute Queen" (11) of various provinces. "His sons he there proclaimed the kings of kings: ... / She/ In th'habiliments of the goddess Isis" (3.6.13, 16-17). Caesar's speech contains the dismissive reference to "And all the unlawful issue that their lust/ Since then hath made between

them" (3.6.7-8). But however much he derides them both, this direct report actually works to magnify the pair, affirming their royalty and even the divinity of Cleopatra; this is confirmed in the way this scene has been performed in certain spectacular stagings of this play.

This scene operates as the political summation of Enobarbus' description of Cleopatra's first amorous meeting with Antony, when she "pursed up his heart upon the river of Cydnus" (2.2.197), which is returned to at the gloriously tragic end. This description is directly proclaimed by Enobarbus: "I will tell you" (2.2.200), and achieved entirely through an impressionistic building up of atmosphere with very limited factual input. Taking the scene and much of the language from Plutarch, Shakespeare constructs an attack on the senses assailing the reader similarly to the way it reportedly affected the contemporary spectators. Thus while directly reported by Enobarbus, the main commentator on the pair of lovers, it actually works indirectly and subtly on the sense of the reader through allusion, metaphor and metonymy. The language shows Cleopatra's barge, we smell the perfume, feel the waves beating to the sound of the flutes, in a synaesthesia of multiple senses:

The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne Burned on the water; the poop was beaten gold; Purple the sails, and so perfumed that The winds were love-sick with them. (2.2.201-4)

Merely describing the boat as a throne suggests the goddess Isis who is actually the throne of the Egyptian Pharaohs; this throne burns on the water, its perfumes causing the winds to fall love-sick; her pavilion is cloth-of-gold. The person of Cleopatra is not described at all, in fact she is never described in the play; she simply "beggared all description" (2.2.208). Left to imagine her, through the words of Enobarbus the air is filled with allusions to Venus, smiling cupids, Nereids and mermaids fanning and cooling her cheeks, together luring the viewer or reader. Our senses are gently soothed with soporific, sensuous and highly sensual suggestions: "The silken tackle/ Swell with the touches of those flower-soft hands" (2.2.219-220). The reader, like Antony, is overwhelmed with the "strange invisible perfume" (222) which hits and draws the people out, away from the market-place where Antony:

Enthroned i'th' market-place, did sit alone, Whistling to th' air, which, but for vacancy, Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too, And made a gap in nature. (225-7)

Thus Cleopatra's supernatural powers of attraction defy the laws of nature and gravity, drawing all to her with her gorgeously magnetic force, hinted through this powerful metonymous description. Antony, who can never say a woman 'No', goes to her "barbered ten times o'er" (234), paying for this feast with his heart. This most splendid reported scene, popular in artistic representations, directly states virtually nothing, and the meeting of the lovers which finally occurs constitutes a mere afterword to Cleopatra's 'mistressly' sensuous overwhelming of all around her, indicative of her powerfully overwhelming magic.

Enobarbus states that "A certain queen [was carried] to Caesar in a mattress" (2.6.70), bringing the sublime down to the ridiculous. The extraordinary power of this very human woman and experienced lover is directly related, as, sunburnt and wrinkled, she "Hop[s] forty paces through the public street" (2.2.239), speaks and pants, thereby makes "defect perfection,/ And breathless, pour[s] breath forth" (241-242). Despite the slights and insults which would and have destroyed many another woman, none of which she denies, including Antony's later doubts and accusations against her, she draws all to her, with her magnetic skills. Superlatives scarcely reach her, she is beyond them all. To her great distress, Antony has married Octavia, but will he therefore leave Cleopatra? In this first line, instead of his usual iambic pentameter, Shakespeare simply packs this brief line into the stresses of spondee, to describe this extraordinary woman who is outside of all the usual definitions of woman. Enobarbus asserts:

Never! He will not. Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale Her infinite variety. Other women cloy The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry Where most she satisfies, for vilest things Become themselves in her. (2.2.244-249)

Cleopatra directly asserts her status: "As I am Egypt's Queen" (1.1.30); Antony even more strikingly briefly calls her the personification of "Egypt" in Act 3; she is the country. She then goes on to present herself indirectly on this occasion through imagining Antony's fond comment on her: "He's speaking now, / Or murmuring 'Where's my serpent of old Nile?" (1.5.25-6). This affectionate reconstruction of their shared dialogue, an imagined recollection, works on her in his absence like an oxymoronic "delicious poison" (28), paining while yet pleasing her in his absence. She uses indirect speech on this occasion to indulge her imagination while absent and starved of Antony, as he will later indirectly slander her in his hopeless despair of her; indirect speech is used very infrequently in this drama. She freely and directly refers derisively to herself in her relationship with her previous lover, Caesar, which for many characters shows her as faulty, even as a whore, in spite of the high company she keeps: "Broad-fronted Casesar,/ When thou wast here above the ground, I was/ A morsel for a monarch" (1.5.30-32). Antony later uses this same word to sayagely critique her, spitting out how he found her "as a morsel, cold upon/ Dead Caesar's trencher" (3.13.121-2). Early in the play he determines: "These strong Egyptian fetters I must break" (1.2.122). But later, while preparing for sea battle, he acknowledges her force in calling her "my Thetis!" (3.7.60), the name of the sea goddess mother of Achilles, or even suggestive of Tethys, the wife of Oceanus which was also a name of Isis. Herself Queen of Egypt and its excellent navy, Cleopatra is suitable to represent both these goddesses of the sea, while Rome's fame depended entirely on its infantry, not its naval power, which will later contribute to disaster at Actium.

We have slender chance to evaluate Cleopatra's rival, Octavia, called by her brother Caesar a "piece of virtue" (3.2.28), which remark objectifies even as it praises. Cleopatra beats the Messenger until he declares Octavia "low-voiced" (3.3.13), so then Cleopatra can call her "Dull of tongue and dwarfish" (16), and she is placatorily informed "She creeps" (18). This petty belittlement arising from Cleopatra's jealousy shows her great insecurity after Antony's desertion of her and his marriage back in Rome. But Octavia's difference from Cleopatra is clearly seen in the way she approaches Caesar as a "castaway" (3.6.41), stealing up quietly on him rather than approaching with an army for usher; this strongly contrasts with Cleopatra's magnificent public scenes where she flagrantly proclaims herself, as shown above.

Antony's rivals, particularly the living Caesar, are far more significant against him, and when Antony's man, Enobarbus, and Octavius Caesar's man, Agrippa, compare these two leaders who currently divide the world between them, Enobarbus calls Caesar "the Jupiter of men!" (3.2.9), to which Agrippa responds that Antony is "The god of Jupiter!" (10), both dispraising their own master. Enobarbus calls Caesar "The nonpareil!" (11) and Agrippa calls Antony "O thou Arabian bird!" (12) the Phoenix, to which Enobarbus retorts, "Would you praise Caesar, say 'Caesar'. Go no further" (3.2.13); his title is his name. Agrippa relates Antony's human touch, that "When Antony found Julius Caesar dead,/ He cried almost to roaring" (3.2.54-5) and even wept for the death of Brutus. We know Antony's grief at Caesar's death from the play Julius Caesar, one of many proofs that Antony is humane where Caesar is merely an efficient fighting machine. Cleopatra is provoked by Charmian's "O that brave Caesar!" (1.5.70) to indignantly retort: "By Isis, I will give the bloody teeth/ If thou with Caesar paragon again/ My man of men!" (1.5.73-5), forbidding any comparison between Antony and the dead Julius Caesar. She states that Antony is "The demi-Atlas of this earth, the arm/ And burgonet of men!" (1.5.24-5). He stands incomparable; her freely confessed previous love with the old Caesar dates from her "salad days,/ When I was green in judgement, cold in blood" (1.5.76-7). Hearing of Antony's marriage, she ironically determines to "Let him for ever go! Let him not, Charmian" (2.5.115), suggesting "Though he be painted one way like a Gorgon,/ The other way's a Mars" (116-17); this double perspective, hologram-like, indicates that however dread, he is the conqueror of her heart. And despite his marriage, she effortlessly retains him; Caesar reports that she "Nodded him to her" (3.6.67).

The disasterous sea battle of Actium is the turning point of the play, when Antony betrays his men and his cause by following Cleopatra out of battle. He directly confesses: "The land bids me tread no more upn't;/ It is ashamed to bear me", declaring "I/ have lost my way for ever" (3.11.1-4). Enobarbus critiques his crazed behaviour as showing him no longer a "lion's whelp" but the old one dying and hence dangerous (3.13.99-100). Antony also reproaches Cleopatra: "O whither hast thou led me, Egypt?" (3.11.51), referring to her by the country she personifies even as he critiques her. She replies: "Forgive my fearful sails! I little thought/ You would have followed," (55-6). He affirms: "Egypt, thou knewst too well/ My heart was to thy rudder tied by th' strings/ And thou shouldst tow me after" (56-8). But when she simply begs: "Pardon, pardon!" (3.11.68), he responds: "Fall not a tear, I say; one of them rates/ All that is won and lost. Give me a kiss / Even this repays me" (69-71). As Scarus has already derided: "We have [literally and metaphorically] kissed away/ Kingdoms and provinces" (3.10.7-8). Hence it is natural for Antony to confess: "Authority melts from me" (3.13.95).

But observing Cleopatra offering her hand to Thidias, Caesar's messenger, Antony is so insecure of her that he becomes ballistic, retorting: "what's her name/ Since she was Cleopatra?" (3.13.103-4), regretting having left his pillow "unpressed in Rome" (111); he found her, "a boggler ever" (115), as "a morsel, cold upon/ Dead Caesar's trencher" (121-2), continuing "Though you can guess what temperance should be,/ You know not what it is" (126-7). She can scarcely insert three words to ask: "Wherefore is this?" (127), while he declaims against her and stalks off to relieve himself by having Thidias whipped. She then gently asks: "Not know me yet?" (162) and he asks: "Cold-hearted toward me?" (163). This gives her the chance to directly assert her feelings in an emotional outpouring:

Ah dear, if I be so, From my cold heart let heaven engender hail And poison it in the source, and the first stone Drop in my neck; as it determines, so Dissolve my life! The next Caesarion smite, Till by degrees the memory of my womb, Together with my brave Egyptians all By the discandying of this pelleted storm Lie graveless, till the flies and gnats of Nile Have buried them for prey! (3.13.163-72)

Thus she protests herself ready, if she were cold to him, to let her own chill kill her in hailstones, leaving her, the offspring of her womb, and all her Egyptians, dissolved, dead and unburied under Nile's insects, until he finally declares himself: "I am satisfied" (3.13.172). Renewing his courage, he determines: "I will be treble-sinewed, hearted, breathed,/ And fight maliciously" (183-4), while she, finding that "my lord/ Is Antony again," simply declares: "I will be Cleopatra" (191-2); they are what they are.

We are informed by a soldier who interprets the strange music of Act 4 Scene 3 that Hercules is deserting Antony, a curiously indirect suggestion of Antony's decline. His closest follower, Enobarbus, deserts him and Antony sends his treasure after him, Antony blaming himself that his "fortunes have/ Corrupted honest men!" (4.5.16-7), but a common soldier reproaches Enobarbus: "Your emperor/ Continues still a Jove" (4.6.29-30) as Antony returns his treasure to him. Antony is determined to redeem his honour: "By sea and land I'll fight. Or I will live,/ Or bathe my dying honour in the blood/ Shall make it live again" (4.2.5-7). He does redeem himself through victory in battle, and returns to share everything with his men whom he calls "all Hectors" (4.8.7), and on this occasion he commends Scarus to Cleopatra without expressing jealousy: "To this great fairy I'll commend thy acts" (12). He passionately encourages her to: "Chain mine armed neck! Leap thou, attire and all,/ Through proof of harness to my heart, and there/ Ride on the pants triumphing!" (4.8.14-16) to which she aclaims: "Lord of Lords!/ O infinite virtue! Com'st thou smiling from/ The world's great snare uncaught?" (16-18) as he fondly replies "My nightingale,/ We have beat them to their beds" (18-19).

However, a brief victory does not long defer ultimate defeat, his fleet deserting to Caesar, when he turns on

Cleopatra to outrageously and directly denounce her: "This foul Egyptian hath betraved me", calling her a "Tripleturned whore!" (4.12.10,13), "O this false soul of Egypt! This grave charm/ Whose eye becked forth my wars and called them home,/ Whose bosom was my crownet, my chief end,/ Like a right gipsy hath at fast and loose/ Beguiled me to the very heart of loss" (25-29); "The witch shall die" (47), he determines in fury. Deserted by Hercules, he feels the fate of Hercules and his burning shirt of Nessus upon him, placed there by his wife (43). He berates her with faithlessness this time in a convolutedly indirect accusation: "I made these wars for Egypt, and the Queen —/ Whose heart I thought I had, for she had mine" (4.14. 15-16). Reporting what he thought he had or knew of Cleopatra, which he now entirely doubts in defeat and insecurity, he is unable to evaluate the state of her heart which he assumes to be deceitful in this moment of lowest despair. "She, Eros, has/ Packed cards with Caesar and false-played my glory/ Unto an enemy's triumph" (4.14.18-21). Therefore, finding himself unmanned. castrated by Cleopatra, he declares: "She has robbed me of my sword" (23), "She hath betrayed me and shall die the death" (26). In the midst of this denouncing fury, her euruch Mardian brings him the false report of Cleopatra's death which she has sent to Antony, at which Antony immediately changes, declaring his life over, and from this determination he never deviates. "Unarm, Eros. The long day's task is done/ And we must sleep" (4.14.35-6), as he resolves to overtake her, dishonoured in her having achieved death before him. In this scene he confounds her identity throughout with the name of Eros, his servant, as he speaks to Eros with Cleopatra on his mind: "Eros! — I come, my queen. — Eros! — Stay for me" (51), he says, declaring that together they will divert the underworld troops from Dido and Aeneas, "And all the haunt be ours" (55). He prepares to run like "A bridegroom in my death and run into't/ As to a lover's bed" (4.14.101-2), and from this point he never swerves, wounding himself ineffectually but fatally.

Reaching her while dying, he calls himself: "the greatest prince o'th'world, / The noblest" (4.15.56-7). As he dies in her arms, she mourns: "Shall I abide/ In this dull World, which in thy absence is/ No better than a sty? (62-4) The crown o'th' earth doth melt. My Lord! (65) O withered is the garland of the war,/ The soldier's pole is fallen" (66-7), and with his fall "there is nothing left remarkable/ Beneath the visiting moon" (68-9). Cleopatra considers her life as having passed with this emperor or divine Jovean force of nature as in a dream to which she longs to return:

I dreamt there was an emperor Antony. O, such another sleep, that I might see But such another man! ... His face was as the heavens, and therein stuck A sun and moon which kept their course and lighted The little O, the earth. ... His legs bestride the ocean; his reared arm Crested the World.... ... His delights Were dolphin-like: they showed his back above The element they lived in. In his livery Walked crowns and crownets, realms and islands were As plates dropped from his pockets. (5.2.75-91)

Thus she declares the amazing properties of the gigantic emperor, universal force of nature and supernatural Antony in terms of earth, heaven, ocean, empires, creation and dominion; this is the new "heaven and earth" they have created.

On the one hand Cleopatra humbly declares herself: "No more but e'en a woman, and commanded/ By such poor passion as the maid that milks/ And does the meanest chares" (4.15.77-9). Concurrently she asserts her dominion: "It were for me/ To throw my sceptre at the injurious gods/ To tell them that this World did equal theirs/ Till they had stolen our jewel" (79-82). Thus she threatens and berates the gods for stealing her love, with whom life on earth was very heaven. She immediately determines on suicide: "Let's do't after the high Roman fashion/ And make death proud to take us" (4.15.91-2), as she declares herself once "again for Cydnus/ To meet Mark

Antony" (5.2.227-8). Her preferred gentle suicide method of asps, the snakes of Isis, arrive in a basket of figs, and as she affirms of the carrier the freedom he brings her, she asserting her marble determination:

He brings me liberty. My resolution's placed, and I have nothing Of woman in me. Now from head to foot I am marble-constant. Now the fleeting moon No planet is of mine. (5.2.237-40)

Having ranged through every emotion of passion, pique, jealousy, rage and regret, she expresses her changelessness, as she embraces "The stroke of death [which] is as a lover's pinch/ Which hurts and is desired" (5.2.294-5). Entering her divine immortality she declaims: "Give me my robe. Put on my crown. I have/ Immortal longings in me" (5.2.279-80). Finally discarding her frail humanity and its errors, she turns to Antony, whom she imagines rising to admire her, as she places herself above all mortality: "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" (286-88). Thus she invites the "mortal wretch" of the asp "With thy sharp teeth this knot intrinsicate/ Of life at once untie" (302-4) as she goes to his kiss. Charmian ratifies her act: "It is well done, and fitting for a princess/ Descended of so many royal kings" (325-6).

When Caesar is informed of the death of Antony, he evaluates that:

The breaking of so great a thing should make A greater crack. The round world Should have shook lions into civil streets And citizens to their dens. The death of Antony Is not a single doom; in the name lay A moiety of the world" (5.1.14-19).

Therefore he admits that: "We could not stall together/ In the whole world" (39-40). For Cleopatra, the frustrated Caesar respectfully acknowledges that: "Bravest at the last,/ She levelled at our purposes and, being royal,/ Took her own way" (5.2.334-6). She looks as if she is merely sleeping, hence liable to "catch another Antony/ In her strong toil of grace" (346-7) he confesses, finally indicating his own susceptibility to her charms. He promises: "She shall be buried by her Antony./ No grave upon the earth shall clip in it/ A pair so famous" (357-9).

Thus we see that throughout the play, diverse claims and accusations regarding Antony and Cleopatra are largely made through direct speech, as is natural for drama, while many such direct statements contain wildly allusive and metaphorical implications. Very little is actually stated indirectly, while most reports are unsubstantiated and built on rumours. The lovers' claims for themselves and each other are equally wild: they both only once make indirect statements regarding the other; Cleopatra in her longing for Antony, while he convolutedly tosses in despair of and mistrust of her. However, in the play's setting they work through fractions and uncertainty to ultimately lay claim to a magnificent apotheosis which soars above the loud and mutual recriminations and ruthless slanders, whether true or false. Thus the dreadfully spectacular reputation of these two protagonists is largely built on direct report concerning them or stated of each other, however wildly or metaphorically such statements are made. Finally they remain themselves, human as well as immortal and heavenly.

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