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# THE UNITY OF HÉRÉDIA'S ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA SEQUENCE

H. F. LIPPINCOTT

Although José-Maria de Hérédia's sonnet "Antoine et Cléopâtre" is frequently printed separately in anthologies, it is actually the last in a group of three, interrelated sonnets. The first is called "Le Cydnus," after the river on which Tarsus is located, the second, "Soir de Bataille," and the third, in early versions called "Le Nil," bears the same title as the whole sequence.<sup>1</sup> The final sonnet is frequently printed alone because of its famous last line:<sup>2</sup>

Toute une mer immense où fuyaient des galères[,]

the idea for which Hérédia probably may have found in Victor Hugo.<sup>3</sup> But printing this sonnet separately is obviously false to the unity of three parts. Hérédia himself originally published the sonnets together, in the *Monde Poétique* of 1884, and internal links between them show that they were conceived as one work, much like a triptych in painting. Indeed, one aspect of their unity is that they are all conceived in especially visual and plastic terms.<sup>4</sup>

Hérédia, who was a master of the classical sonnet form, observes the poetic rules carefully.<sup>5</sup> Each sonnet has two rhymes in the octaves (abba/abba) with *rime embrassée*, a third rhyme in the couplets (cc), and two more in the final quatrains which complete the sextets (dede or deed)—just five rhymes in each one, with an alternation of masculine and feminine endings. The final quatrain in the first sonnet is

in *rime croisée*, while the other two are in *rime embrassée*; in the middle sonnet, the order of masculine and feminine rhymes is reversed.

What is extraordinary is that Hérédia might have used a total of fifteen separate rhymes in the three poems, but he actually uses only eleven (or twelve). Rhyme *e* in sonnets I and III is identical in sound, if not in orthography (-ort/-or), and this rhyme is virtually identical to rhyme *b* in sonnet II (-ortes). Sonnet III shares two other rhymes with the previous sonnet (-uns/-ant). This pattern of interlocking sounds may be shown as follows:

	I	II	III
(a)	-oie	-uns	-asse
(b)	-oir	-ortes	-ant
(c)	-armé	-èches	-uns
(d)	-oses	-ant	-aire
(e)	-ort	-are	-or

Adding to the echoing rhymes in sonnet III is the repetition of a pair of rhyming words from sonnet II, although reversed in order (*parfums/bruns*; *bruns/parfums*). The same words (but *brune* rather than *bruns*) also occur in the first sonnet, but not as rhymes. That two other rhymes are identical (*roses/roses*) may perhaps be explained because the words are not on adjacent lines and they are used as different parts of speech.

Metrically the poems are regular alexandrines, with a possible caesura following the sixth syllable in every line and with occasional secondary pauses after the third syllable (e.g., I, 9; I, 13; II, 13; III, 3), one pause after the fourth syllable (II, 5), and one after the ninth syllable (II, 1). Syneresis and liaison conform to the possibilities of normal pronunciation:

*One syllable*

épervier (I, 5)

dais (I, 6)

guerrier (I, 9)

ciel (II, 14)

cuirasse (III, 5)

*Two syllables*

centurion (II, 2)

Sais (III, 4)

Of terminal mute *e*'s, only one has been apocopated (*encor*, II, 3), a standard poetic convention. The use of run-on lines is very restrained (as at I, 10; II, 1; and III, 12).

My concern with this structural unity, however, does not really get at the real heart of the poems, that is, the three different dramatic situations, so strongly contrasted. Hérédia is concerned, of course, with the pair of famous lovers found in Plutarch and in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. The play, which incidentally was successful both in London and Paris towards the end of the nineteenth century, became one of Sarah Bernhardt's vehicles.

The first sonnet is parallel to the famous speech in Act II, Scene 2, of Shakespeare's play, which describes Cleopatra in her barge coming to meet Antony. Shakespeare versifies his source in North's translation of Plutarch virtually word for word, but Hérédia does not try to compete either with Plutarch or Shakespeare. Rather he sees the scene as a painter of his century would, in a series of *tableaux figés*. Cleopatra is first shown leaning out of her barge, realistically straining for a glimpse of the object of her quest, and her sensuality is pointed up by a series of gorgeous and triumphant images. With the sextet, the poet switches to the actual encounter: another fixed image, as in a painting or heroic sculpture. Cleopatra, again surrounded by sensual imagery, opens her arms and intoxicates the soldier/lover with her aura and perfume. Becoming more abstract at the end, the poet warns that Antony does not see his fate in the allegorical figures of Desire and Death that accompany her. Here we have the two themes of the sonnet group and a neat parallel with the end of the last sonnet, when Antony finally *does* see. This mingling of allegorical figures with heightened realism is typical of French plastic arts of the period.

If the first sonnet belongs to Cleopatra and if Antony is a somewhat shadowy accessory (*guerrier désarmé*), the second sonnet is entirely Antony's, even if his appearance on the scene is reserved for the final line. The emphasis is on the time after a battle (in 36 B.C. with the Parthians), where Antony was victor, if a somewhat tarnished one (*sanglant*). The sonnet presents a moment of quiet, and again we have a frozen image, that of an heroic Antony mastering his horse against the background of a flaming sky, exactly as Delacroix or David might have painted a contemporary warrior. Ince calls it a "typical fusion of horror and ecstasy" (p. 137). We are *au loin* and the verbs describing the troops are initially in the pluperfect, giving the poet and us distance from the rude shock of the opening. It is Antony in one of his great moments—Cleopatra is not present or even mentioned.

The final sonnet is another moment of stasis, reuniting the lovers, now both equally important. If the second sonnet is a moment of calm after the battle, the third could almost be the calm after the act of love. In contrast to the preceding noise and activity, all Egypt is asleep under a stifling sky. Even the river Nile flows slowly. The tableau this time is simple: the embrace of the couple high on a terrace. Movement is very restrained: the feel of the voluptuous body of a woman, the turn of a head, the look of two eyes—until the end when the galleys take flight in the exhilarating final line which opens up in time and space, the fulfillment of the *présage* of the end of the first sonnet. The highly visual effect of the scene is augmented here by the literary allusion to Cleopatra's ships which will desert Antony at the battle of Actium.<sup>6</sup>

But simply to paraphrase these sonnets is not to have the whole experience. Another way is to look at the syntax and to see how its enormous variety keeps the strict form of the sonnet lively while intensifying the emotion.

It is instructive, for instance, to examine the pattern of subject and verb in the principal clauses: almost none of the parallel portions of the sonnets have a similar syntactical structure. Consider the following chart:

	I	II	III
1	---	Le choc avait été...	Tous deux ils regardaient
		Les tribuns	
2	La trirème...blanchit	Et les centurions...	---
3	Et son sillage y laisse	Humaient	[Et...]
4	---	---	---
5	---	---	Et le Romain sentait
6	---	Les soldats regardaient	---
7	Cléopâtre...	---	---
8	Semble	Et la sueur coulait	---
9	Voici Tarse	C'est alors qu'apparut...	---
10	Et la...Lagide ouvre	---	---
11	---	---	Elle tendit
12	Et ses yeux n'ont pas vu	---	Et...l'ardent Im- perator
13	---	---	Vit
14	---	...l'Imperator sanglant.	---

This outline shows that every line except the fourth has a subject or a principal verb, but only lines 1 and 2 share exactly the same structure, and only in two poems at once, not all three. The beginning is, after all, the time when the poet needs subject and verb to get the sonnet started. The other device that Hérédia uses to expand the point is the conjunction *et* at the beginning of the line (never a word like *mais*, which is the opposite possibility). Interestingly, the *et* is restricted to lines which start subject/verb combinations in main clauses, except in the third line of sonnet III, where it links instead two complements. Yet an initial *et* is used no more than two or three times in each sonnet and in different syntactical positions, so the device does not become obvious. In only one instance is there a parallel occurrence of *et* in the initial position, namely in lines 3 and 12 of sonnets I and III, but only in line 12 is the grammatical structure parallel—here a welcome symmetry.

Hérédia's writing is the complete opposite of the formula writing of many sonnet sequences—even those of Shakespeare—where the basic syntax is often similar from one sonnet to another. Note, also, that with the exception of the quatrains of the octaves, which all end with full sentences, the pattern of the syntax does not necessarily correspond to the pattern of the rhymes (especially in the octave of sonnet II).<sup>7</sup> The different ways Hérédia finds to interrupt subject/verb/complement or to extend the thought with modifiers keep the verse lively. That the sonnets hold together and seem so inevitable is testimony to Hérédia's mastery of form and subject. We have only to listen to the verse read aloud to see how well the normal patterns of speech are preserved. Although these patterns are complex, let us examine the subordinate elements more closely, taking each of the poems separately.

Sous l'azur triomphal, au soleil qui flamboie,  
La trirème d'argent blanchit le fleuve noir  
Et son sillage y laisse un parfum d'encensoir  
Avec des sons de flûte et des frissons de soie.

The first quatrain of sonnet I starts with two separate prepositional phrases, the second varied with a short subordinate clause. The compound main clause follows, with subjects, verbs, and complements together in the next two lines, and another prepositional phrase for line 4, this time with a compound object. The main effect is sensual,

with first an appeal to color: *azur, argent, noir*; then sparkle: the transferred epithet of *trionphal* and the verbs *flamboie* and *blanchit*; next smell: *parfum d'encensoir*; then hearing: *sons de flûte et des frissons*; and finally touch: *soie*. The very sound *son* is echoed in lines 3 and 4, of (*son/encensoir/sons*).

A la proue éclatante où l'épervier s'éploie,  
Hors de son dais royal se penchant pour mieux voir,  
Cléopâtre debout en la splendeur du soir  
Semble un grand oiseau d'or qui guette au loin sa proie.

The scene having been set, the next quatrain gives us the fixed image. In line 1, another prepositional phrase is extended, this time by means of a subordinate clause, while the prepositional phrase in line 2 is extended with a present participial phrase. In lines 3 and 4, the subject and verb/complement occupy strong initial positions, *Cléopâtre* at the beginning of line 3 contrasting with *proie* at the end of line 4. The unifying device this time is the superb sound play of *e's* and *p's* in the first line, which prepares the way for *penchant* and *proie* of later lines. We hardly observe another transferred epithet in *proue éclatante*, but this adjective is part of the pattern *trionphal/éclatante/splendeur* which makes an editorial comment on the scene. Cleopatra, the *grand oiseau d'or*, is related to the royal *épervier* of line 1. The only color here is the sparkle of gold, which will be repeated at the end of the last sonnet in the reference to Cleopatra's eyes *étoilés de points d'or*.

Voici Tarse, où l'attend le guerrier désarmé;  
Et la brune Lagide ouvre dans l'air charmé  
Ses bras d'ambre où la pourpre a mis des reflets roses.  
  
Et ses yeux n'ont pas vu, présage de son sort,  
Auprès d'elle, effeuillant sur l'eau sombre des roses,  
Les deux enfants divins, le Désir et la Mort.

With the sextet comes an abrupt change of syntax with the immediate and impersonal *Voici Tarse*, which is the first of three parallel clauses of one, two, and three lines. In each case subject and verb are placed together, but in the second and third instances (both beginning with *Et*), the complement is progressively delayed, a subtle parallelism. The syntactical pattern both plays against and complements the double and triple aspects of a sextet divided into two sets of three lines, but with a rhyme scheme that divides two and four. Antecedence is ambiguous: "*ses bras*" is clearly Cleopatra, but "*ses*

yeux" is almost certainly Antony, although no precise reference is given. Again there is sensual appeal (*brune, ambre, pourpre, roses, l'air charmé*), but the main effect is contrived. The contrivance results from Hérédia's abstraction of the dramatic situation by means of the imaginary hymenal children, sprinkling rose petals, who somewhat melodramatically turn out to be allegorical figures of Desire and Death.

Le choc avait été très rude. Les tribuns  
Et les centurions, ralliant les cohortes,  
Humaient encor dans l'air où vibraient leurs voix fortes  
La chaleur du carnage et ses âcres parfums.

The second sonnet starts with the same device as the sextet of sonnet I, an abrupt sentence, but this time it is a simple statement of fact complete in less than a line, and the only full stop in the poems not at the end of a line. It is interesting that the caesura in this line is not at the full stop, but where it should be, following *été*, as the mute *e* in *rude* needs to be counted. This is a different pattern: the compound subjects come at the end of line 1 and beginning of line 2, the verb at the beginning of line 3, and the complement at the beginning of line 4. In contrast to the sounds of *flûtes* and *frissons*, we have *voix fortes*, and instead of *parfum d'encensoir*, we have *âcres parfums*. A pattern of words with the letter *c* gives *choc/centurions/cohortes/chaleur du carnage/comptant/compagnons*, instead of the more noble images of sonnet I.

D'un oeil morne, comptant leurs compagnons défunts,  
Les soldats regardaient, comme des feuilles mortes,  
Au loin, tourbillonner les archers de Phraortes;  
Et la sueur coulait de leurs visages bruns.

The second quatrain starts with introductory modifiers to the subject and verb in line 2, with the complement coming towards the end of line 3—this time a verbal (the infinitive phrase *tourbillonner . . .*) instead of a substantive. The octave ends, as it started, with a simple, complete clause which combines the references to both water and the color brown of the preceding sonnet, but on a non-heroic level. Instead of seeing more clearly (*mieux voir*), as Cleopatra does earlier, the soldiers look with an *oeil morne*. But unlike Antony, who does not see death and rose petals earlier, the soldiers see death like *feuilles mortes*.



C'est alors qu'apparut, tout hérissé de flèches,  
 Rouge du flux vermeil de ses blessures fraîches,  
 Sous la pourpre flottante et l'airain rutilant,  
 Au fracas des buccins qui sonnaient leur fanfare,  
 Superbe, maîtrisant son cheval qui s'effare,  
 Sur le ciel enflammé, l'Imperator sanglant.

*C'est alors qu'apparut*—but who or what appeared will not be clear until the end of the sonnet. With syntax that acts like an epic simile, without its actual form, the poet suspends the sense with an extraordinary series of adjectival, prepositional, and participial phrases through the rest of the octave. He ignores the almost obligatory pause at the end of line 10 and keeps building the suspense until we finally get to the bloody emperor. Again the effect is melodramatic, but by sustaining the energy of thought for six lines, the poet creates another new syntactical pattern for these poems. Again there is color (*rouge, vermeil, pourpre, airain rutilant, ciel enflammé, sanglant*) and sound (*fracas des buccins, fanfare*). A strong alliterative pattern of *s* and *f* sounds is found in almost every word (*hérissé, flèches, flux, ses blessures, fraîches, flottante, fracas, buccins, sonnaient, fanfare, superbe, maîtrisant son cheval, sur le ciel enflammé, sanglant*).

Tous deux ils regardaient, de la haute terrasse,  
 L'Égypte s'endormir sous un ciel étouffant  
 Et le Fleuve, à travers le Delta noir qu'il fend,  
 Vers Bubaste ou Saïs rouler son onde grasse.

Suddenly in the last sonnet, all is quiet. Again we have subject and verb together at the beginning of the first line, but we have to wait until the beginning of lines 2 and 3 for the complements (*L'Égypte/Et le Fleuve*), embedded in infinitive phrases. The statement is very straightforward with no color except for the black delta. Instead of color, we get the quality of the sky (*étouffant*) and the river (*onde grasse*). The only other sensual effect comes from the evocative sound of the two place-names. The contrast with the first quatrain of sonnet I, with all its sensual detail, could not be greater. Similarly, in contrast to all the action of the middle sonnet, action is suspended.

Et le Romain sentait sous la lourde cuirasse,  
 Soldat captif berçant le sommeil d'un enfant,  
 Ployer et défaillir sur son coeur triomphant  
 Le corps voluptueux que son étreinte embrasse.

In the second quatrain, there is another syntactical pattern: subject and verb in line 1, with the complement (*corps*) delayed until the beginning of line 4. Line 2 is in apposition to the subject, but line 3 actually modifies the complement, so *corps* has modifiers both before and after. Again there is an almost complete absence of movement, although sensual appeal is apparent in the very subject of these lines, an embrace. There may even be a tactile correspondence between the *onde grasse* of the river and the *corps voluptueux*, evocative but discreet.

Tournant sa tête pâle entre ses cheveux bruns  
 Vers celui qu'enivraient d'invincibles parfums,  
 Elle tendit sa bouche et ses prunelles claires;  
 Et sur elle courbé, l'ardent Imperator  
 Vit dans ses larges yeux étoilés de points d'or  
 Toute une mer immense où fuyaient des galères.

The sextet begins with a series of interlocking subordinate phrases and clauses for two whole lines and with somewhat ambiguous antecedence: "sa tête" and "ses cheveux" refer to Cleopatra, not Antony, agreeing with the subject *elle*, which, with its verb, does not come until line 3. In this sonnet, Antony is *le Romain, Soldat captif*, and *l'ardent Imperator*, but Cleopatra is simply *elle*, a kind of abstracted womanhood. It is the reverse of sonnet I, where Cleopatra is mentioned three times and Antony only once. Suddenly the sensual appeals become very strong again: the reference to hair and the *invincible parfums*.

If the first half of the sextet seems to be from Cleopatra's point of view, the second is from Antony's.<sup>8</sup> The syntax is straightforward, with subject and verb together early on and the climactic complement occupying the entire final line. With almost no movement in the entire sonnet, the *fuyaient* of the final line takes on added importance, and the sudden opening up of the final line takes on added importance, and the sudden opening up of the private world on the terrace to *toute une mer immense* is, of course, the source of the sonnet's enormous power and appeal.

If further illustration be needed of the unity of the three sonnets, the accompanying chart shows these and many more verbal parallels between them. The effect of the sonnets is strongly visual and anecdotal, qualities found in the mainstream of nineteenth-century painting and sculpture. The surface polish of Hérédia's work might also

## Parallels Between the Sonnets

## I

"Le Cydnus"  
 le fleuve noir  
 l'eau sombre  
 l'eau sombre  
 blanchit

son sillage

La trirème d'argent  
 un grand oiseau d'or

guetter au loin

{ ses yeux n'ont pas vu  
 pour mieux voir

## II

*Liquids*

le flux vermeil  
 la sueur coulait  
 coulait

le Fleuve [Nil]  
 le Delta noir

Toute une mer immense  
 { rouler  
 fend  
 son onde grasse

*Metals*

l'airain rutilant

sa lourde cuirasse  
 points d'or

*Sight*

regardaient . . . / Au loin

Tous deux ils regardaient  
 vit dans ses larges yeux

un oeil morne

ses prunelles claires

## III

*Sound*

des sons de flûte

{ [le] fracas des buccins  
leur fanfare

des frissons de soie

vibraient leurs voix fortes

*Place-Names*

Memphis

Egypte  
[sea battle at Actium]  
Vers Bubaste ou Saïs

[unnamed point of origin]

[scene of the battle]

*Parallel Epithets*

Cléopâtre

Tous deux ils  
le Romain

la brune Lagide

Soldat captif  
Soldat

le guerrier désarmé  
guerrier

l'Imperator sanglant

l'Imperator sanglant

{ tribuns  
centurions  
cohortes  
soldats  
archers

désarmé

captif

l'air charmé

enivraient [de] . . . parfums

sa proie

captif

Ses bras d'ombre

sa tête pâle

hérissé de flèches

se penchant  
ouvre . . . / Ses bras

sur l'eau sombre

le spendeur du soir

Cléopâtre

Auprès d'elle

la brune Lagide

l'azur triomphal

effeuillant . . . des roses  
dans l'air charmé

la pourpre

{ sous l'azur triomphal  
au soleil qui flamboie

*Parallel Actions*

Sur le ciel enflammé  
maîtrisant son cheval

*Repetition*

"Soir de bataille"  
l'Imperator sanglant

[les] visages bruns

des feuilles mortes  
humaient dans l'air  
regardaient

la pourpre flottante  
sur le ciel enflammé

Ployer et défaillir  
tendit sa bouche

sur son coeur triomphant  
berçant le sommeil d'un enfant

l'ardent Imperator  
". . . et Cléopâtre"

{ Elle  
sur elle courbé

ses cheveux bruns  
son coeur triomphant

regardaient

sous un ciel étouffant

un parfum d'encensoir  
sous l'azur triomphal

où l'épervier s'éploie  
où la pourpre a mis  
où l'attend le guerrier  
au loin

ses âcres parfums  
sous la pourpre flottante

où vibraient

au loin

Vers Bubaste ou Sais

d'invincibles parfums  
sous un ciel étouffant  
sous la lourde cuirasse  
où fuyaient

parfum  
brune

parfums  
bruns

bruns  
parfums

présage

[présage]

### *Rhymes*

### *Theme*

be described as "painterly." This somewhat impressionistic art history term indicates that the figures are fully rendered and that a certain traditional care has been taken. What redeems the poems from being "simply of their time" is the craftsmanship and the striking image of the last line, which is legitimate and timeless poetic legerdemain. The story of the two fated lovers endures, and we continue to be touched not only by the passion but also by the pathos of their relationship, which resonates across the centuries.

### Notes

1. Alexander Fischler comments that the revised title accords with Hérédia's "desire to close on combined rather than individual destinies." See his essay, "The Decadent Side of Aestheticism: Hérédia's Antony and Cleopatra," *Nineteenth Century French Studies*, 4 (1976), 274-85, esp. p. 280.

2. I am indebted to the notes in, and cite the poems from, Elliott M. Grant, *French Poetry of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Macmillan, 1932), pp. 432-434. See also the editions of *Les Trophées*, ed. W. N. Ince (London: Athlone Press, 1979), pp. 135-138, and ed. Anny Detalle (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), pp. 293-298.

3. Grant says that the source of this line is Hugo's poem, "La Rose de l'Infante," from which I cite the following: "au fond de cet oeil . . . mirage mouvant, / Tout un vol de vaisseaux en fuite dans le vent." The allusion is to the Spanish Armada. But compare Fischler, p. 282 and note 8. Ince sees a further parallel with Baudelaire's sonnet "Les Chats" (p. 138).

4. On the sonnets as triptych, Fischler makes a nice distinction: "Unlike its pictorial model, which is governed by the central representation, the verbal triptych presents a sequence; it is made up, in this instance, of independent scenes, set in chronological order" (p. 278). Detalle mentions Claude Lorrain's *Embarquement de Cléopâtre à Tarse*, in the Louvre, as a possible visual influence (p. 294).

5. For a convenient summary of the pertinent critical language in French, see Frédéric Deloffre, *Le vers français* (Paris: S.E.D.E.S., 1973), esp. pp. 97-100. See also Deloffre's *Stylistique et poésie française* (Paris: S.E.D.E.S., 1974).

6. For readers of British poetry, the literary effect is similar to Keat's "stout Cortez with wild surmise" seeing the Pacific Ocean (the poet's experience on reading Homer) or the ending of Yeat's "Leda and the Swan" (1924):

Did she put on his knowledge with his power?

—a sonnet which has other analogies with the Hérédia group.


7. For a general discussion of this problem which may be at the very essence of traditional poetic expression, see J. Cohen, *Structure du langage poétique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1966), esp. ch. 2.

8. Fischler's analysis is astute: "The dynamics [of this sonnet] are perhaps best conveyed by the main active verbs; we have a progression from imperfect to definite, from suggestive spectacle through expressed desire to yielding and, finally, ineluctable vision: *ils regardaient*; [*il*] *sentait*; [*elle*] *sentait*; [*elle*] *tendit*; [*il*] *vit*" (p. 282).

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