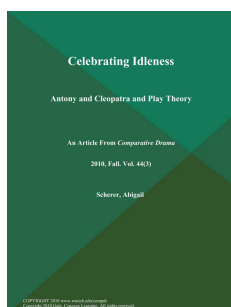


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CELEBRATING IDLENESS ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA AND PLAY THEORY EBOOKS 2019



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The "infinite variety" of Cleopatra's pretenses affirms her allegiance to a theater that embraces idleness, and finally becomes idleness. (1) When Cleopatra dallies over the lines of the self-sacrificing or magnanimous lover--"Sir, you and I must part, but that's not it; / Sir, you and I have loved, but there's not it"--Antony replies, "But that your royalty / Holds idleness your subject, I should take you / For idleness itself" (1.3.89-90, 94-96). Shakespeare's drama appears all too ready to corroborate the unease of early modern antitheatricalists who impugn theater for the spread of idleness within the culture. When in his *Anatomie of Abuses* Philip Stubbes observes, "If you will learne ... to practise Idlennesse ... you neede to goe to no other Schoole [i.e., theater], for all these good examples male you see painted before your eyes in Enterludes and Plaies," the recreational rhythms of Cleopatra's Egypt might well serve as illustration. Here the queen may "laugh[]" her Antony "out of patience, and that night ... laugh[] him into patience, and next morn, / Ere the ninth hour ... dr[ink] him to his bed" (2.5.19-21). Rather than refute the charge that theater is "a nurseris of idelnesse," (2) Cleopatra's variable palate of "Enterludes u0026amp; Plaies" seems set on further stoking such heated discourse, as Antony and Cleopatra not only prove their culpability as idlers, they do so ardently. (3) Of course, while Shakespeare's Egypt is a holiday world, ruled by a queen devoted to the glorification of play, it is all the time being roundly censured by a Rome whose emperor remains soberly attuned to politics and warfare. Though Rome, led by Caesar, closely follows our couple, it does so with a perception primed for practical goals, and which can only disparage the lovers' fanciful moves. Pompey reads Cleopatra's diversions not as ennobling, but as debilitating and ultimately deadening, as he calls for her to "tie up the libertine [Antony] in a field of feasts; / Keep his brain fuming.... [S]leep and feeding may prorouge his honour / even till a Lethe'd dullness" (2.1.23-24, 26-27). The variant tones of the play's two worlds have often been read as two types of performance: an Egyptian theater that fosters unrestrained yet graceful designs spun from illusions and lies, and a Romanized one, steadfast and moralistic, which insists on staging idleness only in order to humiliate and condemn it. Hence, when defeated in battle, Antony foresees his followers "windowed" in Rome, himself publicly "subdued / To penetrative shame" (4.14.73, 75-76).

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