

Enobarbus on Horses: *Antony and Cleopatra*, III. vii. 7-9

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BOTH Irving Ribner and M. R. Ridley express puzzlement over *Antony and Cleopatra* III. vii. 7-9, but the meaning of the passage seems clear enough. When Cleopatra asks why she should not be present at the forthcoming battle, Enobarbus replies cynically: "If we should serve with horse and mares together, / The horse were merely lost; the mares would bear / A soldier and his horse." Ribner notes: "A ribald jest is doubtless intended, although its precise terms are not clear. 'Bear' is often used in the sense of 'support the male.'"¹ And Ridley

¹ *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. G. L. Kittridge and Irving Ribner (Lexington, Mass.: Xerox College Publishing, 1971), p. 1351.

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comments: "I have to admit that I do not see the precise point of Enobarbus' (presumably) ribaldry. There is perhaps a play on 'serve' in its breeders' as well as in its military sense, but this is not very helpful. The critical word is 'bear,' which has apparently never had the specific meaning ('be mounted by') which is here needed and which 'take' (see *OED*) has had since 1577 (though that meaning is no doubt suggested by Cleopatra at I. v. 21). . . . And Shakespeare's bawdry, though sometimes complicated, is almost always precise."²

I think the intention is as precise as we could wish it. "Bear" is indeed a key word, and it means exactly what both editors sense it must mean. "Serve," however, has no sexual meaning here. What Enobarbus says is simply that if horses and mares are both employed in battle, the horses will mount the mares and thus be "lost" with regard to their intended function.

The flavor of the bawdry is enriched, however, by Enobarbus' choice of adverb. "Merely" is invariably glossed as "utterly," which is clearly its primary meaning. Yet in Shakespeare's speech the word almost certainly would have been pronounced *marely*, and thus the picture of war horses distracted by mares may be punningly suggested.³

Ridley is quite correct in linking the passage to I. v. 21, where, in Bevington's phrase, Cleopatra daydreams "raunchily" of "being Antony's horse."⁴ Enobarbus' later scorn of her as "yon ribaudred nag of Egypt" (III. x. 10) seems ironically in keeping. Finally, though, I wonder whether a remote connection with Plutarch may not exist—that is, whether Shakespeare's imagery may not have been suggested by his source: "the horse of the mind, as Plato termeth it, that is so hard of rein (I mean the unreined lust of concupiscence) did put out of Antonius'

² *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. M. R. Ridley, The Arden Edition (London: Methuen, 1956), p. 121.

³ For Shakespeare's vowel cf. the rhymes *hairs/tears* (n.) in *Venus and Adonis* and *feare/bear* in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. See also Helge Kökeritz, *Shakespeare's Pronunciation* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1953), pp. 194-209.

⁴ *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. Hardin Craig and David Bevington (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1973), p. 1071.

head all honest and commendable thoughts."⁵ Perhaps here we have an instance of Eliot's idea of "the poet's mind" as "a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together."⁶ When the moment is right, elements of history and philosophy give life to scintillating drama.

⁵ Plutarch, "The Life of Marcus Antonius," trans. Sir Thomas North, in *Shakespeare and His Sources*, ed. Joseph Satin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), p. 586.

⁶ T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920; rpt. London: Methuen, 1950), p. 55.