

It is understandable that Helms does not treat Antony's death. A more important problem in her essay is her neglecting Shakespeare's parallel deflation of the tragic grandeur of Cleopatra's death scene. Helms does not notice the ways in which Shakespeare has Cleopatra view the greatness of death in negative terms: according to Cleopatra, Antony will applaud her death not because she will join him but because she will frustrate Caesar (5.2.283–85). This view is in keeping with her real reason for seeking death—not to fulfill her love for Antony but to avoid having to witness “Some squeaking Cleopatra boy [her] greatness / I' the posture of a whore” (5.2.219–20). Before these revelations, Shakespeare allows Cleopatra to express a surprising philosophy:

[T]is paltry to be Caesar:
Not being Fortune, he's but Fortune's knave,
A minister of her will: and it is great
To do that thing that ends all other deeds,
Which shackles accidents, and bolts up change;
Which sleeps, and never palates more the dung,
The beggar's nurse, and Caesar's. (5.2.2–8)

Cleopatra is saying here that, since all human beings are subject to Fortune, Caesar is no better off than she and Antony are—consequently that life for all people consists of eating dung and that the only way to achieve greatness is to master Fortune by committing suicide. Her continuing belief that life is valueless threatens to cause the audience to deny *her* value.

Moreover, in the same scene, Shakespeare has Cleopatra behave in an anything but noble manner toward Seleucus when he tells Caesar that she has withheld half her riches. She threatens to scratch Seleucus's eyes and, typically, asks for pity (5.2.175–78). Unlike Plutarch, Shakespeare leaves Cleopatra's anger without justification, by having Seleucus reveal the truth reluctantly and only on her demand. In short, the behavior of Shakespeare's Cleopatra is inconsistent with her desire to conform to “the high Roman fashion,” and Helms weakens the effectiveness of the essay by not confronting this reality. Shakespeare does not have Cleopatra act so as to “make death proud” to take her. Her last words, “What should I stay—” (5.2.312), suggest that her ultimate reason for death is merely her inability to answer the question, Why should I live?

This analysis does not deny the value of Helms's insights about Shakespeare's depiction of the deaths of women. I do contend, however, that, in order not to distort Shakespeare's characteristically complementary vision, it is important not to isolate his depiction of the death of Cleopatra from his depiction of the deaths of Iras, Enobarbus, and Antony, not to separate his

view of his heroine from his view of his hero, not to overlook the complexities of his attitude toward “the high Roman fashion” of dying and of living.

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Reply:

Richard L. Nochimson is quite right: the three paragraphs in which I discuss Cleopatra's death scene do not exhaust the complexities of “Shakespeare's characteristically complementary vision.” Surely it needs no ghost come from the grave to tell us that. Having made the unwarranted assumption that my essay is a literary critic's interpretation of *Antony and Cleopatra*, he goes on to correct it with his own, which he finds more nearly adequate to what he calls “the total experience of an extremely complex play.”

Nochimson and I are not engaged in the same enterprise. His is the interpretation of literature, and mine is the exploration of the actor's job of work. We are both interested in Shakespeare's characters, but for Nochimson they are the novelistic inhabitants of a text whence the critic brings them to be judged: Antony lacks “force of will”; Cleopatra behaves “in an anything but noble manner toward Seleucus.” For me they exist theatrically, emerging from the choices that actors make in working on their roles. These choices respond to the script and the historical circumstances in which it is read, rehearsed, and performed. My essay speculates on the options that the conditions of the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage gave the actors who first played Lavinia and Cleopatra.

I would be surprised indeed if, while pursuing my explicitly delimited purposes, I had fortuitously accounted for the “total” range of historical and contemporary experience available to readers, actors, and audiences of any of the plays I discussed, much less the unquestionably complex *Antony and Cleopatra*. If Nochimson has done so to the satisfaction of others besides himself, he is due their gratitude.

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Paul Laurence Dunbar's Literary Dialects

To the Editor:

The larger part of Marcellus Blount's very informative article, “The Preacherly Text: African Ameri-

can Poetry and Vernacular Performance" (107 [1992]: 582–93), deals with the poem "An Ante-bellum Sermon," by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906), as an "instructive example" of an African American "preacherly text" (584). Dunbar was famous as an "oral performer"—that is, as an exceptionally effective reader of his own poems. His "Sermon," for which no specific model can be found, differs from his other poems with plantation settings, which modern critics have attacked as insincere, kitschy, and "reconciliationist," even if technically flawless. Like the writings of Thomas Nelson Page, such poems as "Christmas on the Plantation: A Corn-Song" and "The Party" feature a benevolent, beloved, sentimental "mastah" and contented field hands ("dahkys"). Dunbar's background is complex: the son of former slaves from a Kentucky plantation, he was born in Dayton, Ohio, where he graduated from Central High School, without a single black classmate. He was very proud of his race (e.g., "Ode to Ethiopia," "The Colored Soldiers") but, as perhaps an agnostic, no admirer of black (and white) preachers. "Preacherly" to Dunbar would have meant dull and long-winded, if not downright uneducated, hypocritical, and self-serving. The preacher's blessing in the delightful "Party" is a macaronic: "Lawd, look down in tendah mussy / on sich generous hawts ez dese; / make us truly thankful, amen. / Pass dat possum, ef you please!" The use of dialect in nineteenth-century American literature, in New England by James Russell Lowell (*Biglow Papers*, 1848) and in "the South" by Joel Chandler Harris (Uncle Remus stories), has been taken by linguists as important evidence for continued "diglossia," in which Standard English and old regional dialects were both spoken. For the Middle West, the "Hoosier dialect" of James Whitcomb Riley (1849–

1916) has not been considered as conclusive, because of its predominantly colloquial, substandard character. It is likely that Dunbar in urban Dayton still spoke a regional dialect with his classmates outside the classroom and heard a type of plantation dialect from his mother, who, incidentally, as a slave, may have had an exceptionally kind master. The dialectal features in the "Sermon" and Dunbar's other plantation poems include lack of postvocalic [r] (*mastah, Lawd, yo', comf't*), *d-* for voiced *th-* (*de, dis, deir*), *-f* for *-th* (*bref, wif*), all found in the Uncle Remus dialect. Dunbar intended them to indicate black speech; by comparing the Uncle Remus forms to modern records of the *Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada*, Sumner Ives found that these features really indicate black and white low-class rural folk speech (*The Phonology of the Uncle Remus Stories*, 1954). In poetry Dunbar succeeded in using the dialect not only for humor, satire, and realistic presentation but also for aesthetic, even lyrical, expression (e.g., "Song of Summer"); in this he surpassed Lowell's "pastoral" attempts with Yankee dialect. But Dunbar uses also another type of literary dialect without any allegedly black features—for example, in "The Spellin'-Bee." Peter Revell has been able to prove the influence of James Whitcomb Riley's dialect poetry on Dunbar's form and content (*Paul Laurence Dunbar*, Boston, 1979, 80ff.). We must conclude that the "Sermon" shows important aspects of Dunbar's poetic style but by no means all of them. In my opinion the successful analysis of a single poem can only remain *werkimmanent* if *Werk* is taken to mean the poet's entire oeuvre.

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