



Cleopatra: Antony's Transformational Object

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Abstract

This essay proposes that Shakespeare's Cleopatra is a male fantasy of a love object for Antony. She is an extravagantly feminine construction of a character who effects a transformation in Antony that enables him to finally perceive himself as a heroic lover as well as a heroic warrior. A fluidity of gender roles in the passionate relationship between Cleopatra and Antony elevates their mutual love, making it both transformative and transcendent. An examination of key passages in the play will demonstrate that Cleopatra's empathic mirroring of Antony's love is facilitated by her comfort with the "phallic" aggressive components in her own sexuality. The interpenetration of this mirroring helps Antony to expand the concept of his own masculinity in such a way as to resolve within himself the dichotomy of Rome/male/warrior versus Egypt/female/lover that underlies the dynamic of conflict in this play.

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I shall see

*Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
I' th' posture of a whore. (5.2.266-268)*

These lines, spoken by Cleopatra and intended originally for performance by a boy actor, have engendered much commentary. They bring to mind the men involved in the construction of this extremely feminine, overtly sexual and theatrical character: Shakespeare himself who imagined and dramatized her presence in the play, and Plutarch from whom he borrowed the character. Jacques Amyot translated Plutarch into French, and Thomas North then brought the character into English. Most spectacularly, the poetic description of Cleopatra's meeting with Antony at Cydnus and praise of her "infinite variety" in Act 2, Scene 2 by Enobarbus, Antony's loyal soldier and closest

friend, has an indelible effect on our response to her character. Shakespeare's extravagant construction of femininity, a male fantasy, means to provide a suitable love object for Shakespeare's protagonist, the heroic warrior Antony. The presence of the boy actor playing the role, to which Cleopatra so disparagingly refers, points to the existence of a masculine element in her femininity.

Fluidity of gender roles in the passionate relationship between Cleopatra and Antony transforms Antony and elevates their mutual love. Cleopatra's comfort with the "phallic" aggressive components of her own sexuality facilitates her empathic reflection of Antony's heroic love. The interpenetration of this mirroring opens a shared loving and sexual space that invites Antony to enlarge his concept of masculinity from a "captain's heart" bound by armor into a lover's heart, able to break and shed that rigid armor without shame. The arc of this expansion of masculinity results in their deaths; it is tragic as well as transcendent. Antony's transformation from a heroic Roman warrior to a heroic lover is accomplished in the imagined space of "new heaven, new earth."

In her paper "The Boy Actor and Femininity in Antony and Cleopatra," Madelon Sprengnether argues that the glimpse of the boy actor allows Shakespeare to destabilize conventional hierarchy of gender in this play, and to contest traditional binary opposition of gender. I agree with her, but my argument is a psychological one: a duality of gender in Cleopatra's sexuality decreases the heterosexual complementarity in their relationship, and creates a liberating mirroring within the sexual play space she creates for Antony.

The lovers' relationship in Antony and Cleopatra creates a tension between two contrasting and gendered cultures. Feminine Egypt, -- soft, sensual, sexual, fertile, shameless and boundless, intersects with masculine Rome, --a hard, disciplined, regimented culture of war, politics, restraint and duty. The Romans blame Antony's love affair with Cleopatra for what they regard as the contemptible decline in his heroic stature and manliness. Antony, himself, at times shares this assessment. He is ambivalent about his attachment to Cleopatra throughout most of the play. He fluctuates between happy immersion in his passion, and shame and guilt about his abdication from warrior culture, and feelings of betrayal and emasculation by Cleopatra. In the opening lines of the play, Philo, one of Antony's soldiers, articulates the Roman dismay:

*Nay, but this dotage of our general's
O'erflows the measure. Those his goodly eyes,
That o'er the files and musters of the war
Have glowed like plated Mars, now bend, now turn,
The office and devotion of their view
Upon a tawny front. His captain's heart
Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst*

*The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper,
And is become the bellows and the fan
To cool a gypsy's lust. (1.1.1-10)*

Philo bemoans that Antony's warrior heart, in times past powerful enough to break his armor, has been captured and appropriated by Cleopatra. Indeed, in his first words in the play, Antony seems mesmerized by Cleopatra's teasing banter:

CLEOPATRA: *If it be love indeed, tell me how much.*

ANTONY: *There's beggary in the love that can be reckoned.*

CLEOPATRA: *I'll set a bourn how far to be beloved.*

ANTONY: *Then must thou needs find new heaven, new earth. (1.1.15-20)*

From the very outset, Antony proclaims that the love he shares with Cleopatra is boundless and infinite, a passion that exists in the expansive territory of "new heaven, new earth." That territory, the loving, playful, and sexual space between them where Cleopatra enables him to finally dwell without ambivalence, is imaginatively envisioned by Antony in Act 4 and by Cleopatra in Act 5. Antony initially refuses to be distracted by messages from Rome, declaring

*Let Rome in Tiber melt and the wide arch
Of the ranged empire fall. Here is my space. (1.1.38-39)*

In the next scene, however, finally apprised of wars in Rome, Antony resolves:

*These strong Egyptian fetters I must break/
Or lose myself in dotage (1.2.128-129)*

In this frame of mind he returns to Rome; and to strengthen his alliance with Octavius, Antony quickly marries Octavia, Octavius' sister.

The Egyptian "fetters" that Antony fears speak to Cleopatra's legendary sexual power, as Agrippa, a Roman general, reminds us in a reference to Octavius' uncle, Julius Caesar:

She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed (2.3.268)

Cleopatra herself is proud of her eroticism; referring to Julius Caesar, she boasts to her women servants that she was "a morsel for a monarch" (1.5.36). Her sexual body has an appetitive context: her body as food, stimulates sexual desire. Enobarbus, explaining why Antony, now married, will never leave Cleopatra, describes the queen's charms:

*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. (2.3.276-279)*

In Roman eyes, Cleopatra's idealized body is a source of endless desire and infinite gratification. Her mercurial moods, emotionality, and theatricality provoke responsive adaptations in Antony; she injects surprise, instability, and novelty into their union, especially within their sexual relationship.

Masculine aspects of Cleopatra's mercurial sexuality are powerfully presented in 2. 5. Glum and bored from the long absence of messages from Antony, she muses about going fishing:

*...My bended hook shall pierce
Their slimy jaws, and as I draw them up
I'll think them every one an Antony
And say "Aha! You're caught." (2.5.14-17)*

There is a condensation in this cruel image. Cleopatra envisions herself with a phallic capability of penetration and painful entry. She is also imagining an endpoint of snaring the elusive Antony, for she fears she has lost him. Cleopatra then recalls a happy time when she arrayed her "tires and mantles" on a drunken Antony "whilst I wore his sword Philippan." (2.5.27) Here the queen delights in the memory of an erotic dominant role enacted with an explicitly phallic component while cross-dressing in sexual play. Moments later, in a paradoxically fierce configuration of sexual receptivity and fertility, Cleopatra greets the messenger who has brought news from Antony: "Ram thou thy fruitful tidings in mine ears/That long time have been barren" (2.5.29-30).

Throughout this scene, Cleopatra vividly demonstrates ease with the aggressive components of her sexuality. Her acceptance of the inextricable merger of sexuality with "phallic" aggression is an aspect of her allure. She provides an empathic erotic mirroring of Antony in her implied acceptance of the same merger in him. This crucial attunement diminishes the binary opposition of gender within their relationship and increases the sense of boundlessness between the lovers which supports psychological change in Antony. Cleopatra's representation in the first two acts as a sexually powerful, receptive, playful, and infinitely variable Diva comfortable with her own aggression sets the stage for her to assist Antony in reimagining his concept of heroic masculinity in the next two acts.

This reimagining begins with two small but important moments when Antony mirrors Cleopatra. Cleopatra, irate with jealousy, literally beats the

messenger who has brought her the news of Antony's marriage to Octavia. In 3. 13, Antony, irate with jealousy, has Octavius' messenger whipped when he encounters him kissing Cleopatra's hand. In the same scene, echoing Cleopatra's earlier claim that she was a "morsel for a monarch," Antony rages at her "I found you as a morsel cold upon/ Dead Caesar's trencher" (3.13.146-147). He asks her: "To flatter Caesar, would you mingle eyes/ with one who ties his points?" (3.13.191-2). In this scene, Antony reminds Cleopatra of her involvement with Julius Caesar, who was Antony's senior and psychological "father" of a sort; he now fears that she will betray him with the much younger and increasingly powerful Octavius. Cleopatra responds:

Not know me yet?

ANTONY

Coldhearted towards me?

CLEOPATRA

*.....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!*

ANTONY

I am satisfied. (3.13.195-205)

Cleopatra extravagantly insists that she loves Antony more than life itself, more than Caesar's son, and more than her sons with Antony. Her willingness to disavow her children and even the future of her dynasty "satisfies" Antony.

Father-son competition is universal and timeless, although it has recently been well argued that sexual desire for the mother in the Oedipus complex is not ubiquitous (Friedman and Downey). Cleopatra's reassurance that Antony is her unrivaled love, elevated above both his "father" and sons, articulates a powerful male fantasy, and conveys heroic stature on Antony as her lover. Antony's "satisfaction" marks the beginning of his imagining that, Roman insistence to the contrary, the intensity of his sexual passion need not diminish his masculine potency.

In developing my thoughts about Antony and Cleopatra, I am deeply indebted to Janet Adelman's brilliant interpretative readings of this play in *The Common Liar* and *Suffocating Mothers*. However, in *Suffocating Mothers*, Adelman writes that "the memory of Cleopatra's womb becomes the site of her- and his (Shakespeare's)- imaginative power to restore the heroic male,"

arguing that Shakespeare reconciles masculinity with maternalism. I disagree. Cleopatra's rather shocking offer to smite Caesarion and "the memory of my womb" is, significantly, her first of only two passing references to her children in the play. The second reference, after Antony's death, when Cleopatra asks Proculeius if Caesar might give conquered Egypt to Caesarion, reflects concern about dynastic succession rather than maternal instinct. Cleopatra, receptively sexual and fertile but never a loving mother to her children, abandons them to seek reunion with Antony through her suicide. Lack of apparent interest in her children enables Cleopatra to maintain a mutually-engaged sexual relationship with Antony. Furthermore, her lack of apparent maternalism diminishes the activation in Antony of either a regressive maternal transference or competition with children, both of which truly maternal women evoke in their lovers, male or female.

The mirroring between Antony and Cleopatra increases prior to Antony's last land battle. Antony awakes and calls for his soldier Eros to bring his armor, but Cleopatra insists that she will arm Antony for battle.

CLEOPATRA

Is this not buckled well?

ANTONY

*.....Thou fumblest, Eros, and my queen's a squire
More tight at this than thou. Dispatch (4.4.17-21).*

Antony returns from battle victorious and greets Cleopatra:

*.....O, thou day o' th' world,
Chain mine armed neck. Leap thou, attire and all,
Through proof of harness to my heart, and there
Ride on the pants triumphing (4.8.19).*

Here the queen who is "a squire"-- Antony's nod to the male in her-- arms Antony in a reversal of Venus disarming Mars. Antony invites her, with her female attire, to leap through his armor to his heart in an ineffable, remarkable image of sexual union and gender merger. Together they create and share a moment of reconciliation between heroic military culture and lovers' passion.

But that is only a moment. After his ships desert him in battle, Antony again rages at Cleopatra's betrayal of him with Caesar and threatens to kill her. Frightened, she hides in her monument. To assuage Antony's ire, she sends false word of her suicide. The messenger, Mardian, reports that Cleopatra died saying, "Antony, most noble Antony" (4.14.37) with her last breath. Antony says to his armor-bearer:

*Unarm, Eros.....Off, pluck off!
The sevenfold shield of Ajax cannot keep*

*The battery from my heart. O, cleave my sides!
Heart, once be stronger than thy continent;
Crack thy frail case. Apace, Eros, apace!
No more a soldier. Bruised pieces, go.
You have been nobly borne (4.14.44-53).*

Here, as opposed to Philo's opening lines, "His captain's heart/which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst/ The buckles on his breast," Antony envisions his heart bursting its armor from emotional heartbreak, not from a warrior's aggression. In this moment, Antony's ambivalence about his passion for Cleopatra resolves as he imagines that she killed herself because he deserted her. He describes his armor as having been "nobly borne," with an echo of Cleopatra's "last words"; and, with no sense of shame, removes it. He continues:

*I come, my queen
Where souls do couch on flowers, we'll hand in hand
And with our sprightly port make the ghosts gaze.
Dido and her Aeneas shall want troops,
And all the haunts be ours. (4.14.60-64)*

Antony pictures this "new heaven" in the afterlife. Whereas Virgil's Aeneas, the ancestral Roman heroic warrior who deserted his lover the African queen Dido and caused her suicide, was spurned by Dido in the afterworld, Antony anticipates a quite different reception: an eternal union with Cleopatra. He resolves ".....I will be a bridegroom in my death and run into 't as to a lover's bed" (4.14.120-121). And so he does. Although Antony bungles his suicide, he dies completely loving, in Cleopatra's arms, concerned only that his queen be safe.

Cleopatra's preparation for her own death confirms her sense of an "inner male" coexistent with her dramatically feminine traits. Captured by Octavius, she memorializes Antony in an eloquent encomium addressed to Dolabella, a sympathetic Roman, beginning, "I dreamt there was an emperor Antony" (5.2.93). She elevates Antony's status, reimagining him with the stature of a god-like hero. Once apprised that Octavius intends to march her in triumph in Rome she fumes "I shall see /Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness/ I th' posture of a whore"(5.2.266-268). Resolved that she will kill herself, Cleopatra procures the asp and declares:

*.....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 (5.2.290-293).*

Cleopatra, like Antony, chooses suicide in a fantasy of reunion and marriage with the beloved in the afterlife. Her theatrical disavowal of femininity as she chooses both liberty and love represents for her a psychological merger with Antony, and perhaps with his freedom as a male; while she simultaneously, as a female diva, expects to achieve in death the marriage she longed for in life. Armed in magnificent royal regalia appropriate to this last earthly engagement, Cleopatra gives voice to her “immortal longings,” imagines Antony cheering her on, gloats that she will be defeating Caesar, and declares, “Husband, I come!” (5.2.342)

Enobarbus refers to Cleopatra as “a wonderful piece of work” (1.2.170); to twenty-first century ears this appraisal rings true, but with a comic nuance. As for Shakespeare, he has transformed the story of Antony and Cleopatra into myth, and transported their love to the territory of “new heaven, new earth.”

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