

CLEOPATRA: SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGIC WOMAN

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In her groundbreaking study of the correlation between gender and genre in Shakespeare, *Comic Women, Tragic Men*, Linda Bamber shows a consistent difference between Shakespeare's attitude to women in the comedies and in the tragedies. "In the comedies," she writes, "Shakespeare seems if not a feminist then at least a man who takes the woman's part," while "in the tragedies the privileges of the self are attributed to the masculine hero" (Bamber 2-6). Indeed, Shakespeare's comedies are often dominated by charismatic, intelligent and courageous women: in *Love's Labour's Lost* the Princess of France, Rosaline and Catherine wittily expose the absurdity of the pledge to studious abstinence made by the King of Navarre and his men; in *The Merchant of Venice* Portia and Nerissa assume male identities to resourcefully outwit a vengeful Shylock and test the faithfulness of their respective lovers; in *Much Ado About Nothing* Beatrice smartly manages to subdue in love a vehemently unyielding Benedick; in *As You Like It* Rosalind puts on a doublet and hose to explore love from a man's perspective and so does Viola in *The Twelfth Night*; in *All's Well that Ends Well* Helena cunningly obtains the marriage vows of a reluctant Bertram and later his love and respect. Conversely, the tragedies typically centre on the predicaments of anguished men: Titus Andronicus is caught in the middle of a whirlwind of horrendous events that transform him into a ruthless monster; Hamlet is dramatically driven to the difficult choice of becoming a revenger – a thing he so memorably attempts to resist; Othello is skilfully manipulated to reveal the darkest side of human nature and so is Macbeth; Lear is faced with his failure as a father by giving up his power as a king; Troilus is tormented almost

into madness by his betrothed's perfidiousness. Interestingly, most tragedies feature woman characters who act as catalysts to the calamitous plot. The dramatic portrayal of these women ranges from morally and possibly visually hideous figures like Tamora, Lady Macbeth, Goneril and Regan to confirmed, potential, or alleged adulteresses like Cressida, Gertrude and Desdemona, yet they all share a common feature – most of them are a little more than dramatic functions, which merely support the representation of the central masculine hero.

A significant diversion from this pattern is observed in the characterisation of Shakespeare's Cleopatra. It seems that in her portrayal the dramatist decided to depart from his own rules as well as from the representation of the Egyptian Queen he found in his main source – Plutarch's *Parallel Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, which expectably centres closely round the personality of Antony and treats Cleopatra merely as the cause of his undoing: "if any spark of goodness or hope of rising were left in him, Cleopatra quenched it straight, and made it worse than before" (Plutarch 5.273). Shakespeare, however, evidently chose to breathe more life-like complexity into his own version of Cleopatra and modelled her, in A. C. Bradley's estimation, as one of his four "most wonderful" characters (Bradley 208).

In the beginning of the play Antony is expected to be yet another of Shakespeare's complex tragic men drawn between conflicting loyalties, while Cleopatra is expected to perform the function of a disintegrating force, very much like the urge for vengeance of old Hamlet's ghost, the prophesies of the Weird Sisters, or Iago's slanderous insinuations. As the play unfolds, however, Cleopatra draws more and more attention to herself – she frowns and rails, while Antony protests and glooms. As E. A. J. Honigman points out: "Antony impresses us in scene after scene as a loser; Herculean, but still a loser; and in his defeats in conversation, added by Shakespeare, distinguish him equally from Plutarch's Antonius and from the other tragic heroes" (Honigman 153). The breakdown of Antony's heroic figure hits

bottom with his failure to perform the decorous suicide “after the high Roman fashion” (*Antony & Cleopatra* IV.xv.91) that, in his opinion, befits his great defeat both in the battlefield and in his amorous liaison with the Queen of Egypt. Cleopatra, on the other hand, not only survives him by a whole act but is given the chance to consider, plan and execute her suicide in a dignified and thrillingly beautiful way – her death is “[a]s sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle” (V.ii.310).

In Act II, Scene ii, Enobarbus provides the most illustrious description of the Queen of Egypt in his memorable Cydnus speech and concludes that her irresistible allure needs to be understood in terms of her “infinite variety” (II.ii.200-250). Although Cleopatra’s variety is rendered in various ways throughout the play, there is one particular instance where the full complexity of her character comes together into the congenital polysemy of one particular word – a word that acts as the focal point of her various moral, gender and generic representations. The purpose of this paper is to examine closely this curious crux and its importance for Cleopatra’s characterisation. The word in question is “die” and the moment in the play is Cleopatra’s glorious suicide scene, the beautiful tragicalness of which is somewhat surprisingly interrupted by the comic appearance of a rustic clown, who has come to bring the venomous serpents requested by the Queen:

CLEOPATRA. Hast thou the *pretty worm* of Nilus thereⁱ

That *kills* and *pains not*?

CLOWN. Truly, I have him. But I would not be the party that should desire you to touch him, for his biting is *immortal*; those that do *die* of it do seldom or never recover.

CLEOPATRA. Remember'st thou any that have *died* on't?

CLOWN. Very many, men and women too. I heard of one of them no longer than yesterday: a very honest woman, but something given

to *lie*, as a woman should not do but in the way of honesty; how she *died* of the biting of it, what pain she felt- truly she makes a very good report o' th' worm. But he that will believe all that they say shall never be saved by half that they do. But this is most *faliible*, the worm's an odd worm.

CLEOPATRA. Get thee hence; farewell.

CLOWN. I wish you all *joy* of the *worm*.

CLEOPATRA. Farewell.

CLOWN. You must think this, look you, that the *worm* will do his kind.

CLEOPATRA. Ay, ay; farewell.

CLOWN. Look you, the *worm* is not to be trusted but in the keeping of wise people; for indeed there is no *goodness* in the *worm*.

CLEOPATRA. Take thou no care; it shall be heeded.

CLOWN. Very good. Give it *nothing*, I pray you, for it is not worth the *feeding*.

CLEOPATRA. Will it *eat* me?

CLOWN. You must not think I am so simple but I know the devil himself will not *eat* a woman. I know that a woman is a dish for the gods, if the devil *dress* her not. But truly, these same whoreson devils do the gods great harm in their women, for in every ten that they make the devils *mar* five.

CLEOPATRA. Well, get thee gone; farewell.

CLOWN. Yes, forsooth. I wish you *joy* o' th' *worm*. (V.ii.243-278)

The twist in the meaning of this brief exchange between Cleopatra and the Clown is realised by the double sense of the word *die* in early modern English (lines 248-249): a) to

cease to live, and b) to experience sexual orgasm (Cf. *Much Ado* V.ii.95-96 BENEDICK. I will live in thy heart, *die* in thy lap, and be buried thy eyes;). Cleopatra evidently intends to use the word with its first signification, while the Clown saucily bends it towards the second one, shoving thus the whole dialogue into an alternative cognitive scheme: the *pretty worm* (line 243) becomes associated with its phallic shape; *kills and pains not* (line 244) points at the second meaning of *die*; the malapropism *immortal* (line 247) drives the reader's perception from "mortal" to "immortal" but not without the implication of the graphically related "immoral;" *lie* (line 252) points at the possible interpretation: "lie with other men" (Cf. *Sonnet 138*); another malapropism *fallible* (line 257) blends together "infallible" and "fallible," i.e. "liable to fall" (Cf. *Measure* III.i.66-67 "DUKE. Do not satisfy your / Resolution with hopes that are *fallible*; to-morrow you must die"); the repeated *joy* (lines 258 and 278) leans toward "jouissance;" *no goodness* (line 264) relates to "the lack of moral and ethical values;" *nothing* (line 271) activates a familiar Shakespearean pun on "no thing" or "an o-thing" meaning in early modern slang "vagina" (Cf. Williams 219) through which the punning uses of *feed* (line 271) and *eat* (lines 272 and 274) are understood; the senses of *dress* (line 275) and *mar* (line 277) also relate through more than one possible meaning: A) to dress or prepare a dish and then to destroy it by adding intolerable ingredients, and B) to train or break in a horse by riding (Cf. *Richard II* V.v.80 "GROOM. That horse that I so carefully have *dressed*") and to spoil (Cf. *Timon* IV.ii.41 "FLAVIUS. For bounty, that makes gods, does still *mar* men") – a domain from which the meaning bounces back into the sexual context in which women may be ridden by the devil and their virtue may thus be spoiled.

This comic cognitive scheme clearly partakes of a broader vision of Cleopatra well grounded in the language of the whole play. It derives from a traditional interpretation of the story in which Cleopatra is the whore of Egypt, who entangles the powerful Antony and drives him to his ruin. The parallel with the Whore of Babylon, a familiar image at the time,

imposes itself as Pompey conjures Cleopatra to detain Antony and prevent him from fighting in the wars: “POMPEY. But all the charms of love, / Salt Cleopatra, soften thy waned lip! / Let witchcraft join with / beauty, lust with both; / Tie up the libertine in a field of feasts, / Keep his brain fuming” (II.i.20-24). More often, however, this representation of Cleopatra is invoked by means of wordplay: “ENOBARBUS. Cleopatra, catching but / the least noise of this, *dies* instantly; I have seen her *die* / twenty times upon far poorer moment. I do think there is mettle / in death, which commits some loving act upon her, she hath such a / celerity in *dying*” (I.ii.140-144) – Enobarbus’s pun here blends Cleopatra’s characteristically dramatic demeanour and her insatiable sexual appetites: “CLEOPATRA. I take no *pleasure* / In aught an eunuch has” (I.v.9), “CLEOPATRA. O happy horse, to *bear the weight* of Antony” (I.v.21).

Significantly, the scope of this representation of the Queen of Egypt goes beyond the mere portraiture of a common harlot, it stretches out to include a gallery of what was thought at the time to be typically female imperfections. Besides lechery, Cleopatra also displays coyness and vanity: “CLEOPATRA. If it be love indeed, tell me how much” (I.i.14), jealousy: “CLEOPATRA. Excellent falsehood! / Why did he marry Fulvia and not love her” (I.i.41-42), desire to manipulate Antony: “CLEOPATRA. If you find him sad, / Say I am dancing; if in mirth, report / That I am sudden sick” (I.iii.4-6), spiteful derisiveness: “CLEOPATRA. Cut my lace, Charmian come! / But let it be; I am quickly ill and well – / So Antony loves” (I.iii.72-74), erratic emotional outbursts: “CLEOPATRA. Courteous lord one word ... Oh, my oblivion is a very Antony, / And I am all forgotten” (I.iii.88-93), irrational and misplaced anger: “CLEOPATRA. [to the messenger bringing her the news of Antony’s marriage to Octavia] The most infectious pestilence upon thee! [*Strikes him down*] ... Hence, / Horrible villain, or I’ll spurn thy eyes / Like balls before me! I’ll unhair thy head! [*She hauls him up and down*] / Thou shalt be whipped with wire and stewed in brine, / Smarting in lingering

pickled!” (II.v.61-66), quarrelsomeness and vindictiveness: “CLEOPATRA. Sink Rome and their tongues rot / That speak against us! A charge we bear i’th’ war, / And, as the president of my kingdom, will / Appear there for a man” (III.vii.15-19), instability and disloyalty: “SCARUS. Yon ribaudred nag of Egypt – / Whom leprosy o’ertake! – i’th midst o’th’ fight / When vantage like a pair of twins appeared / Both as the same – or, rather, ours the elder – / The breeze upon her, like a cow in June, / Hoists sails and flies” (III.x.10-15), once again deceitfulness and desire to manipulate Antony: “CLEOPATRA. Madrian, go tell him I have slain myself. / Say that the last I spoke was ‘Antony’, / And word it, prithee, piteously” (IV.xiii.7-9), and finally the possibility for opportunism and treachery: “CLEOPATRA. [sending word to Ceaser after Antony’s death] Pray you tell him / I am his fortune’s vassal and I send him / The greatness he has got. I hourly learn / A doctrine of obedience, and would gladly / Look him i’th’ face” (V.ii.28-32).

In what is essentially a carefully planned and imposingly majestic suicide scene, however, the immediate sense of *die* asserts itself and directs the reader’s/viewer’s perception towards a tragical cognitive scheme:

CLEOPATRA. I have
 Immortal longings in me. Now no more
 The juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip.
 Yare, yare, good Iras; quick. Methinks I hear
 Antony call. I see him rouse himself
 To praise my noble act. I hear him mock
 The luck of Caesar, which the gods give men
 To excuse their after wrath. Husband, I come.
 Now to that name my courage prove my title!
 I am fire and air; my other elements

I give to baser life. (V.ii.279-289)

Evidently, with the exit of the Clown the tone of the scene abruptly shifts from comedy to high tragedy. The address to Antony (lines 280-285) invokes an earlier hyperbolic eulogy:

CLEOPATRA. I dreamt there was an Emperor Antony

O, such another sleep, that I might see

But such another man ... His legs bestrid the ocean; his reared arm

Crested the world. His voice was propertied

As all the tuned spheres, and that to friends;

But when he meant to quail and shake the orb,

He was as rattling thunder. For his bounty,

There was no winter in't; an autumn 'twas

That grew the more by reaping. His delights

Were dolphin-like: they showed his back above

The element they lived in. In his livery

Walked crowns and crownets; realms and islands were

As plates dropped from his pocket" (V.ii.76-92).

Throughout the preceding four acts it was Antony who had to constantly look for graver and greater terms to communicate his love to a typically coy and provocatively doubtful Cleopatra, but after his death Cleopatra is given the chance and the magniloquence to express her affections and grief and to amplify them to colossal proportions. Furthermore, she claims the rights of a wife by virtue of her courage, constancy and perseverance in her "noble deed," i.e. her suicide (lines 286-287) – which, in turn, is also consistent with an earlier declaration:

CLEOPATRA. My resolution is 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” (V.ii.237-240).

It is important to note here that early modern medicine and scholarship traditionally explained distinctly female bodily processes, such as menstruation and parturition, with the changing phases of the moon (Cf. Crawford 55-63). This relationship was also used to explain contemporary observations of female psychology and behaviour – thus establishing between women and the moon a close link characterised by instability and mutability. Thus, the fundamental metamorphosis of the Queen of Egypt apparently affects even the elemental composition of her corporal being – driven by the firmness of her purpose she forsakes the baser elements of earth and water and distils herself into the purer fire and air before she liberates her soul from the confines of her fleshly body (lines 288-289). The possibility that women can, when necessity arises, leave their feminine social roles and act in the world as men is, of course, utilised by Shakespeare over and over again. What is important to stress here is that this is not always done to trigger off a series of comic situations but sometimes functions as a useful characterisation tool by which the complexity of human character is portrayed: Cf. “YORK [to Queen Margaret]. O tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide! ... Women are soft, mild, pitiful, and flexible: / Thou stern, obdurate, flinty, rough, remorseless” (3 *Henry VI* I.iv.134-139); “LADY MACBETH. Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty!” (*Macbeth* I.v.38-45).

Thus, the pun on *die* in Cleopatra’s suicide scene works beyond the self-consciously eye-façade of the Queen and juxtaposes two peculiarly antagonistic contemporary cultural stereotypes:

A) The first one seems to follow closely what Cissie C. Fairchilds calls the medieval-to-early-modern *patriarchal paradigm* – its basic system of beliefs being that women were born inferior to men, both morally and intellectually weaker, possessing a variety of flaws such as “licentiousness, instability, disloyalty and gluttony, pride, vanity, avarice, greed, seditiousness, quarrelsomeness, vindictiveness, and evidently the most irritating of all, talkativeness” (Kelso, Qtd. Fairchilds, 7). Therefore, they were destined to live under male guidance and control. This popular conception was supported with evidence ranging from selected readings from the Bible (*Genesis*, *Ephesians* 5:22-3, *1 Corinthians* 14:34-5, *1 Timothy* 2:12-14) and the writings of the Church fathers, like St Augustine, St John Chrysostom and Clement of Alexandria – to early modern medical and scientific authorities, such as Galen and Aristotle, whose teachings were still grounded in the elemental composition of the material world and concluded that the proportion and balance of the four basic elements (humours) in human beings determined their sex and personality, i.e. men had a preponderance of the higher warm and dry humours, which made them active and intelligent, while in women the lesser cold and moist humours prevailed, which attributed to them a variable and melancholic demeanour (Cf. Fairchilds 1-15).

B) In contrast, the second cultural stereotype is in line with a competing early modern view – a view motivated by the blending of Platonic humanism with Protestant spiritualism, which professes the essential equality between women and men. Baldesar Castiglione’s *The Courtier* – a bestselling guidebook that enjoyed exceptional popularity throughout early modern Europe – uses contemporary scholastic arguments to defend the substantial sameness of the female and male human being against the proponents of the *patriarchal paradigm*:

Of the unperfectnes of women me thinke you have alleaged a verye cold reason, wherunto ... I answere accordinge to the opinion of him that is of skill, and accordinge to the truth, that Substance in what ever thinge it be, can not receive it more or less: for

as no stone can be more perfectly a stone, then an other: as touching the beinge of a stone: nor one blocke more perfectly a blocke, then an other: no more can one man be more perfectly a man then an other, and consequently the male kinde shall not be more perfect, then the female, as touching his formall substance: for both the one and the other is contained under the Species of *Homo*, and that wherein they differ is an accidentall matter and no essentiall. In case you will tell me that the man is more perfecte then the woman, though not as touching the essentiall, yet in the Accidentes, I answer that these accidentes must consist eyther in the bodye or in the minde: yf in the bodye, because the man is more sturdier, nimbler, lighter, and more abler to endure travaile, I say that this is an argument of smalle perfection: for emonge men themselves such as aboude in these qualities above other, are not for them the more esteemed: and in warr, where the greatest part of painfull labours are and of strength, the stoutest are not for all that the moste set bye. Yf in the mind, I say, what ever thinges men can understande, the self same can women understande also: and where it perceth the capacitie of the one, it may in likewise perce the others” (Castiglione 154).

Expectably, this learned defence was produced and, respectively, reserved for women of the upper classes, yet the advanced arguments reflect the liberating influence of Platonic thought and show the cognitive structure behind the characteristically Renaissance phenomenon of self-fashioning: if essentially men and women, noble and vulgar, rich and poor, are the same, and the differences between them reside only in the accidents of tangible nature, then all one has to do in order to place oneself in a desired category is to adopt and personate successfully the accidents of the respective identity and the actual metamorphosis will follow.

Naturally, these two outermost views hold between them a whole world of debate which became particularly topical on the British Isles during the reign of three significantly female rulers: Mary Tudor, Mary Queen of Scots, and Elizabeth I. The polemic engendered a number of attacks and defences of different aspects of female identity such as John Knox's *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* and John Aylmer's *An Harborowe for Faithfull and Trewe Subjects* or William Heale's *An Apology for Women*. The raised gender-related issues in what was still a predominantly male centred world had different impact on the lives of these queens: Mary Tudor was desperately trying to produce a male heir to the English throne, Mary Queen of Scots lost her head but succeeded in securing the royal title for her son, Elizabeth reigned through forty-five intensely eventful years of English history yet never married and never became a mother. Shakespeare's choice to use this debate in order to achieve greater complexity in Cleopatra's characterisation suggests that in the wake of Elizabeth's rule his contemporary audience was already culturally prepared to acclaim on the London stage a distinctly multifarious woman character. At the same time, Cleopatra's heroic stance in the play is greatly enhanced by the subtle blend of the comic and the tragic in her making. The humorous light cast upon her imperfections renders them acceptable and provokes the reader's/viewer's empathy, even infatuation, with her, while her tragic end shakes and bereaves the more. This bitter-sweet effect is unprecedented in Shakespeare's treatment of his female characters. Here the audience is confronted with an exceptional woman – a queen, a harlot, a lover, a mother, a warrior, a politician, a traitor, a hero. It has laughed at the cynical jokes and held its breath at the grand speeches to be transported to a high-dimensional cognitive space beyond cultural stereotypes and generic conventions – a space, after all, so characteristic of Shakespeare.

ⁱ My italics here and hereafter: the emphasis is used to mark polysemous or potentially polysemous words for the purposes of analyzing wordplay and suggesting possible interpretations.

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