

The Immortal Longings of Shakespeare and His Queen

Rosa Palmeri

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William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* has caused dispute among critics since the 17th century. At the time of its conception, its unusual structure, metaphorical language, and compression of time and place broke the rules of the rising Neoclassical movement. Its title characters, particularly Cleopatra, also caused debate. Shakespeare, in typical Renaissance fashion, created a queen shrouded in paradoxical mystery. In the past, this has rooted many misinterpretations and harsh appraisals of Cleopatra, but modern scholars are beginning to find reason in her mood swings. Shakespeare purposefully created a setting that spans both Egypt and Rome, an incongruous queen with a spectacular suicide, and language that outworks nature to achieve an immortal significance for himself and his Cleopatra.

Cleopatra is said to be the most difficult female role to play in Shakespeare (Bloom 548). She is a queen of ‘infinite variety (II. ii. 235),’ according to Enobarbus, and her many layers offer a daunting number of choices for an actress to make. Judith Cook, a Shakespeare scholar, attempts to define the paradoxical queen: ‘She is brave and cowardly, mean and generous, false yet true, above all passionate and wilful – and devouring. What she wants, she takes and what she wants to do, she does (Cook 136).’ These ambiguities often lead to one-sided interpretations: Ellen Terry, one of the greatest actresses of her time, played Cleopatra as an all out courtesan, with no incongruence (Cook 135). Others have played her as a purely noble woman, ignoring her more sexual qualities. In Stratford, Janet Suzman was able to portray the Egyptian Queen successfully. She said, ‘If you think about the descriptions of [Cleopatra] then you couldn’t possibly do it, but Shakespeare is so brilliant because he only allows himself hints of what he says about her to actually appear in the scenes on the stage (Cook 137).’ Suzman’s Cleopatra was not encumbered with generalizations typically associated with Cleopatra. She created a fresh character and let Shakespeare’s text, which reveals the queen’s many facets, be the sole informer of her temperament.

Cleopatra herself is an actress of sorts; she constantly puts on a show for Antony, fainting into Charmian’s arms, ‘sick and sullen (I. iii. 13).’ She orders him to hear messengers from Rome, ignoring his pleas to return attention to Egyptian pleasures, where her thoughts truly lie (I. i.). She carries this performance through to the very end when she becomes submissive and unusually contained in Caesar’s presence, only to kill herself at his departure (V. ii.). It is her ‘infinite variety (II. ii. 235)’ that makes her so compelling to Antony, and consequently, to the audience. Her mood swings and rash actions shock and surprise us.

In the modern world, Cleopatra would sell tabloids. Her antics make her comparable to a post-Federline Britney Spears or, with Antony at her side, Angelina Jolie ‘stealing’ Brad Pitt from a Fulvia-esque Jennifer Aniston. In fact, one of the most publicized couples ever to reign in Hollywood, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, played the pair in Joseph L.

Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra*, an adaptation made in 1963 (The Internet Movie Database *Cleopatra*). In Shakespeare's play, Antony and Cleopatra are watched as if on a higher level, by both the audience and the supporting cast. They make no soliloquies or acknowledgements of the audience, as many other leading roles in Shakespeare do. Instead, Shakespeare sprinkles the text with references to gods and goddesses, love that 'needs find out new heaven, new earth (I. i. 17-18),' and entire countries and empires, all indicating the unequalled couple. In the first scene, Antony declares:

Kingdoms are clay; our dungy earth alike
Feeds beast as man; the nobleness of life
Is to do thus [*embracing*] – when such a mutual pair
And such a twain can do it, in which I bind,
[On] pain of punishment, the world to weet
We stand up peerless.

(I. i. 35-39)

In the world Shakespeare creates, there is no other match for Antony and Cleopatra but each other.

Although one can compare them to modern-day celebrities, Shakespeare makes it explicit that they are actually godlike. Cleopatra is often compared to Isis (III. vi. 17) or to Venus in Enobarbus' lofty description of her in act II, scene II (II. ii. 200). Antony is Herculean in the beginning of the play; he is a great soldier, a 'Herculean Roman (I. iii. 85);' the real Antony even claimed descent from Hercules (Baker 1399). But unlike the Cleopatra who is constant even in her inconsistency, he becomes progressively weaker until his death. In a scene preceding Antony's pathetic suicide, soldiers hear Hercules literally leave Antony (IV. iii.), thus sealing his fate. Because of this, one could argue that Cleopatra occupies a higher ground than Antony. In Sir Philip Sidney's *Apologie for Poetrie*, a text that makes

Sidney a rival to John Dryden as ‘the father of English literary criticism’ (McIntyre 356), he argues that a poet can outdo Nature. He says:

Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers Poets have done, neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet smelling flowers, nor whatsoever els may make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brazen, the Poets only deliver a golden.

(Sydney)

Cleopatra clearly occupies this ‘golden world (Rackin 86).’ In Enobarbus’ description, he says she is ‘where we see/The fancy outwork nature (II. ii. 200-201).’ She is likened to full, immortal goddesses (Venus and Isis), the key word being *likened*. Her barge is ‘*like a burnish’d throne* (II. ii. 191),’ the ‘pretty dimpled boys (II. ii. 202)’ who wield her fans are ‘*like smiling Cupids* (II. ii. 202).’ This makes Cleopatra, not only Shakespeare who created this seemingly fantastical character, the ‘Poet (Sydney).’ She even goes further, making poetry come to life in an ongoing performance. She creates scenes and spectacles, like the one Enobarbus witnessed on the Cydnus. Cleopatra’s art is creating the ‘golden world’ that surrounds her and sets her on another level.

Conversely, Antony is compared with the demigod, Hercules (Kermode 1392). Demigods, in Classical Greek and Roman myths, are stronger, quicker, and braver than ordinary people, but are still mortal. After Hercules leaves him, Antony suffers a rather pitiful death. He seems reluctant to take his life; first he asks Eros to do the deed, and when that fails, he falls on his sword for a slow, painful, and ignoble death. In his dying speeches, he talks only of death and the mortal world as if nothing would come after. He finds no relief in his end, and wishes to, ‘importune death awhile (IV. xv. 19)’ so he can lay a last kiss on Cleopatra’s lips. Antony occupies a world of Roman realism when he is without Cleopatra, and in his final scene he is literally raised up to her in her monument, as if he were ascending to her ‘golden world (Rackin 91).’ There he dies at least a little more splendidly, in the arms of a queen, than he would have below in the arms of his guards (IV. xv.).

Cleopatra's death scene is almost an exact opposite of Antony's. It is well-planned, painless (perhaps pleasure-full), and her 'immortal longings' suggest that it is in preparation for an afterlife. The scene contains as many layers, paradoxes, and symbolic implications as the queen herself. It begins with the entrance of Proculeius who tries to sooth the wary Cleopatra. He succeeds at first; she claims to 'hourly learn/A doctrine of obedience (V. ii. 30-31),' but at the entrance of Caesar's Roman forces, Cleopatra immediately tries to kill herself. Here we see her intentions; if Caesar plans to parade her around Rome so the 'world would see/His nobleness well acted (V. ii. 44-45),' she will commit suicide, welcoming death even in a 'ditch in Egypt (V. ii. 57)' or 'stark-nak'd (V. ii. 59)' 'on Nilus' mud (V. ii. 58).' She then turns from this dramatic protestation into a reverie. She describes her dream of an other-worldly Antony to Dolabella. Here she again raises the fallen Roman to her level, creating a 'golden world' with her art. 'Nature wants stuff/To vie strange forms with fancy; yet t' imagine/An Antony were nature's piece 'gainst fancy,/Condemning shadows quite (V. ii. 97-100).' In this trance-like speech, Cleopatra acknowledges the powers of poetry, saying that Nature lacks the material to compete with imagination in the creation of remarkable forms, but she then declares Antony Nature's competitive 'piece 'gainst fancy (V. ii. 99).' Cleopatra uses her poetry to make Antony greater than anything poetry could ever create: a cunning contradiction that begins to set the scene for her theatrical suicide.

Caesar re-enters and Cleopatra instantly changes into an obedient subject, kneeling to Caesar. But, in an almost comic exchange, Caesar discovers she is withholding part of her treasury. Ever the actress, Cleopatra lies, saying, 'Some nobler token I have kept apart/For Livia and Octavia (V. ii. 168-169).' Then a curious change occurs. After Caesar and his men exit, she forgets all about the treasure and moves the focus directly back to her suicide, as if the former was a mere distraction. She then shows further insight into Caesar's intentions. Cleopatra and her women will be shown throughout Rome as 'Egyptian puppets (V. ii. 208),' and their 'Alexandrian revels (V. ii. 218)' will be played out by 'quick comedians (V. ii.

216).’ ‘Antony/ Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see/ Some squeaking Cleopatra boy
my greatness/ I’ th’ posture of a whore (V. ii. 218-221).’ In her predictions is one of the many
connections between William Shakespeare and Cleopatra that occur in this play.

In Shakespeare’s theatre, women were prohibited from appearing on stage, and all of
his complex female roles were given to young men whose voices had yet to change (thus
‘Some squeaking Cleopatra boy (V. ii. 220)’). The two artists, linked in creating the spectacle
that is *Antony and Cleopatra*, were dually concerned with the queen’s ‘greatness (V. ii. 220)’
and how it would be presented in the future. Their concern was not without grounds. Young
men would continue to play women’s parts until the Restoration, and Cleopatra was seen by
critics of the emerging Neoclassical period as a sluttish temptress who brought the downfall
of Antony. Dr. Samuel Johnson, a Shakespeare critic of the 1700s, said, ‘Sir, the long and
short of it is, the woman’s a whore (Rackin 81)!’ In fact, the realistic views of the
Neoclassical period may have been what Shakespeare and his Cleopatra were trying to
endure.

The Neoclassical movement, prevalent in the 18th century, had its roots in
Shakespeare’s Jacobean 17th century. It drew on Western Classical art and culture, usually
that of Ancient Greece and Rome. It emphasized reason, mathematics, and science. In theatre,
Neoclassicists called for a lucid style, and figures of speech were signs of incompetence
rather than magnificence. *Antony and Cleopatra* was a Renaissance piece: mysterious and
obscure, using bold metaphorical language (Melani). Neoclassical critics found new life in
Aristotle’s *Poetics* and its Classical Unities (Rackin 88). With its reckless structure and
compression of time and place, Shakespeare broke these Unities. Accordingly, Cleopatra
broke unity in the play’s Classical Rome. She took the reasonable Antony from his
triumvirate and made him a lover, full of fantastical poetry. Caesar’s Rome was what
Neoclassicists were emulating and what Shakespeare and Cleopatra wanted to survive, even
in death. To achieve this end, both artists create and inhabit the poet’s ‘golden world,’ that

breaks the realistic, Neoclassical laws of Nature and Caesar's Rome. Their connection in this unearthly realm is best seen in Cleopatra's suicide after she is given the 'pretty worm of Nilus (V. ii. 243),' whose bite is appropriately called 'immortal (V. ii. 247)' by the honest Clown. It is there that Shakespeare and his queen declare their will to survive after their mortal deaths. In their 'afterlife,' Cleopatra would escape ridicule and mockery in Rome, and Shakespeare's complex female roles would be played by real women, giving characters like Cleopatra the legitimacy and understanding they deserved. In creating this great, artistic death scene, they thwart both Dr Samuel Johnson's Neoclassical world and Caesar's Classical world. These are Shakespeare's and Cleopatra's 'immortal longings (V. ii. 281).'

Before the Clown even enters, Cleopatra begins to prepare for the asp's bite. She declares:

Now, Charmian!

Show me, my women, like a queen; go fetch

My best attires. I am again for Cydnus

To meet Mark Antony. Sirrah Iras, go.

Now, noble Charmian, we'll dispatch indeed,

And when thou hast done this chare, I'll give thee leave

To play till doomsday.

(V. ii. 226-232)

Here Shakespeare uses obvious references to theatre; words like 'show' and 'play' along with the reference to her 'best attires' summon images of a stage, actors, and costumes. Cleopatra, the lead actress in her play-within-a-play, is literally changing into a new costume to become 'like a queen.' Once changed, she says, '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. 238-241).' This contradiction draws still more attention to the deceiving theatricality of the scene, for she continues erratically as ever, combining bawdy humour, blatant sexuality, spite, and, most 'woman (V. ii. 239)' of all, motherly care.

The Clown brings the asps to Cleopatra and provides a quick interlude of farce. At his dismissal, he wishes her the 'joy o' th' worm (V. ii. 279),' a deliberately phallic allusion. This exchange adds an unexpected quirk to Cleopatra's death, making it more memorable. Finally, Cleopatra proclaims, 'Give me my robe, put on my crown, I have/Immortal longings in me (V. ii. 280-281).' She then makes explicit that these longings, achieved by this glorious suicide, will spite Caesar and bring her once more to Antony. She sees Antony 'rouse himself (V. ii. 284),' literally meaning to sexually excite himself (Kiernan 117), to prepare for her arrival into the immortal afterlife and to praise her noble act (again, a direct indication of theatricality). It seems, through their fantastical poetry and literal raising-up of Antony at his death, Shakespeare and Cleopatra have placed Antony into their immortal 'golden world.' Cleopatra subsequently adds more unusual drama to the scene, comparing the asp at her breast to a baby and crying out, 'O Antony! (V. ii. 312)' in sexual ecstasy. At last, the great queen dies, leaving Charmian and Caesar to finish the play and her play-within-a-play on a melancholy note (Rackin 93). In her splendid death, Caesar sees the bravery and royalty Cleopatra had carefully laid out in this final performance.

With its many layers and theatrical contradictions, *Antony and Cleopatra's* final scene is unforgettable and therefore made immortal in the minds of both Cleopatra's audience (Caesar, Dolabella, and Rome itself) and Shakespeare's audience. Throughout the scene, Cleopatra weaves a web of continual surprise, making it an integral part of the 'golden world' that she and Shakespeare inhabit through the play's text. It ultimately defies Caesar; he loses both Antony and Cleopatra, cannot disgrace them in Rome, and, accordingly, will not be remembered as the conqueror of an unmatchable pair. It also defies the rising Neoclassicists, whose harsh judgements and rules would dictate the majority of theatre throughout the 18th century. In writing *Antony and Cleopatra* and, more specifically the character of Cleopatra, Shakespeare created a 'golden world' so superb that the play would continue to be popular to this day. The plays of his Neoclassical critics, however, are unremarkable in comparison.

Racine's *Phedre* and Moliere's *Tartuffe* may follow Aristotle's Unities, using a single plotline, taking place over a short period of time in a single setting, but they are not nearly as rich, universal, or popular as Shakespeare's plays. Today, there are entire festivals, entire companies, and entire organizations devoted to Shakespeare and his work, and *Antony and Cleopatra* is considered a gem in the set, one of Shakespeare's 'great tragedies (Bloom 381).' Shakespeare and Cleopatra have defied their Classical and Neoclassical critics, and have become icons in a new era that can appreciate the play and moody Cleopatra, now properly played by a woman. Shakespeare and his queen can be found onstage, in movies, and knocking at doors on Halloween, forever immortal in the modern imagination.

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