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Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

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**6:1 2020**

*Awry Crowns: Queenship and Its Discontents*

Edited by Rosy Colombo

SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

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Published in June 2020

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ISSN 2421-4353

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SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies

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MICHAEL NEILL\*

## **“Monstruous Empire”: Queenly Power in *Anthony and Cleopatra***

Abstract

Taking its cue from John Knox’s famous diatribe against female rule, *The Monstruous Regiment of Women* (1558), this essay seeks to investigate Shakespeare’s vision of queenly power in *Anthony and Cleopatra*. Contrasting his Egyptian majesty with figures of female authority in a number of earlier plays, it reads Anthony’s teasing description of that “strange serpent” the crocodile as a key to the play’s treatment of Cleopatra, that “serpent of old Nile”. By virtue of their seeming beyond definition or satisfactory description, both creatures are rendered “strange” or “monstrous” – placed, as it were, outside the bourn of what seems “natural”. But where the monstrous normally incites disgust or horror, in Cleopatra’s case it invites admiration and amazement – a wonder that extends to the magic of theatre itself with its strange power to make real what it admits nevertheless “beggars all description”.

KEYWORDS: Amazon; monster; strange; power; triumph

In one of the more celebrated scenes from *Anthony and Cleopatra*, as the triumvirs, Caesar, Anthony, and Lepidus, feast with their rival, Pompey, Anthony entertains the company with exotic tales of Egypt. As he discourses upon the extraordinary fertility of the Nile’s “slime and ooze” (2.7.22),<sup>1</sup> Lepidus takes the opportunity to interrogate him about its other marvels: “You’ve strange serpents there”, he prompts, expressing peculiar fascination with the crocodile, which, like “your serpent of Egypt”, is said to be miraculously “bred . . . out of your mud by the operation of your sun” (24-6). Wine is flowing, and the conversation veers off towards the wonder of the pyramids, but Lepidus can’t help returning to this reptilian curiosity: “What manner o’thing is your crocodile?” he eagerly demands; but Anthony responds to his excitement with nothing more than a set of sardonic pleonasm:

<sup>1</sup> Citations from this play are to the Oxford edition, ed. Michael Neill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

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It is shaped, sir, like itself, and it is as broad as it hath breadth. It is just so high as it is, and moves with its own organs. It lives by that which nourisheth it, and the elements once out of it, it transmigrates . . . [It is] of its own colour too . . . And the tears of it are wet.

(41-8)

“’Tis a strange serpent”, mutters the drunken Lepidus, subsiding into silent awe. Of course his bumbling repetition of “strange serpent” is meant satirically; moreover, “strange” is a word that has now become so worn with time that it is easy to miss its larger resonances. But in a play that is much concerned with forms of strangeness and estrangement, the rhetoric of wonder deserves closer attention: in early modern usage, the senses of “strange” included not just “foreign, alien” and “unknown, unfamiliar”, but “abnormal, queer, surprising, unaccountable” (*OED* adj. 1a, 6, 7, 10), and hence something close to “unnatural”. The adjective occurs no fewer than fourteen times in *Anthony and Cleopatra* – more often than in any other play from the canon except, significantly, *Macbeth*, where it is especially associated with the obscure, supernatural world of the “weird sisters”. Here, as Anthony’s mock zoology already suggests, it denotes a creature so far beyond the norms of Roman experience that it is literally indescribable – as though no language exists adequate to its foreign peculiarity.

Yet the play’s exotic bestiary includes other equally strange serpents, and perhaps the strangest of them is Cleopatra herself, the temptress whom Anthony has already called “my serpent of old Nile” (1.5.25), swearing his loyalty “by the fire / That quickens Nilus slime” (1.3.68-9). With uncanny aptness, her carefully orchestrated suicide involves the bite of another serpent, “the pretty worm / Of Nilus” that disappears as she dies, leaving its own stealthy trail of Nilotic “slime” in the Clown’s basket of figs (5.2.242-3, 350); and Cleopatra’s death is made to echo the way in which her self-identification as the “serpent of old Nile” leads into her first intimation of dying: “Now I feed myself / With most delicious poison” (1.5.25-7). Like Egypt’s other serpents, Cleopatra is presented as a kind of mysterious river creature: in Enobarbus’s famous evocation of her first encounter with Anthony, her magnificent gilded barge floats down the Cydnus, “burn[ing] on the water”, while “a strange invisible perfume hits the sense” (2.2.198-9, 219), in a spectacle that co-opts the very forces of nature – wind, fire, and water – to its erotic magic; and like the crocodile’s, the Queen’s own figure so far “out-work[s] nature” (208) as to “begga[r] all description” (8). Enobarbus’s verb sends us back to Anthony’s hyperbolic protestation in the opening scene, “There’s beggary in the love that can be reckoned” (1.1.15), with its pretence that his is a love so far beyond calculation that it lies outside the “bourn” of nature itself: “Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth” (17).



Strangeness had another face, however; since any being that appeared to lie beyond the boundaries of the natural order might appear less a wonder than a monster – as crocodiles themselves were in the popular imagination, and in those collections known as ‘cabinets of curiosities’.



Cabinet of curiosities, engraving from Ferrante Imperato, *Dell'Historia Naturale* (Naples, 1599). Printed in Venice 1962.

Enobarbus, indeed – immediately before launching into his lavish rhetorical evocation of the Cydnus pageant – refers to Cleopatra as just such a creature: following his account of “wild boars roasted whole at a breakfast”, he teases his audience with the prospect of “much more “monstruous” matter of feast, which worthily deserved noting” – a leering hint not lost on Maecenas, who responds: “She’s a most triumphant lady, if report be square to her” (2.2.185-92; emphasis added). Enobarbus’s adjective is largely playful, but, after their final defeat at Alexandria, Anthony himself will imagine his Egyptian Queen like some strange captive beast, displayed “most monster-like” in Caesar’s triumphal procession. Such language is necessarily coloured by a whole history of misogynistic denunciation involving the supposedly “unnatural” character of women in authority – a history into which the woman-serpent Cleopatra all too easily fits; and, of course, it also resonates with the Genesis story in which the association of woman and serpent was made responsible for the Fall of Mankind.

To many in the early modern world the very notion of queenly power constituted an uncomfortable paradox, since it appeared to run counter to the biblical insistence upon the proper subordination of womankind: “thy desire *shal be subiect* to thine husband”, the Almighty admonishes Eve after she has succumbed to the serpent’s guile, “and he shal rule ouer thee” (Genesis, 3.16).<sup>2</sup> No woman, then, should exercise power on her own account; so the word ‘queen’ most often denoted not a ruler but the wife of a king. Insofar as this was a powerful position, custom and law, as well as scripture, decreed that its power, like that of any household mistress, was derivative rather than properly authoritative. The rules of royal succession, however, meant that, in the absence of a male heir, a woman might nevertheless become queen in her own right; and England, for the second half of the sixteenth century, found itself governed by two female monarchs, the Catholic Mary I (who ruled independently of her husband, Philip II of Spain) and her Protestant sister, the determinedly unmarried Elizabeth I. The problematic nature of their authority was inevitably exploited in the conflicts of religious allegiance that pitched Mary against her Protestant subjects, and her Catholic subjects against Elizabeth – conflicts intensified by the latter’s quarrel with her Catholic rival, Mary, Queen of Scots. Hostility to the supposedly unnatural character of such rule had been famously proclaimed in the Scottish reformer John Knox’s treatise, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstruous Regiment of Women* (1558), a violent attack on the Catholic queens of England and Scotland, as well as upon Mary Stuart’s mother, Mary of Guise, who was acting as Regent of Scotland during her daughter’s minority. In his diatribe, Knox again and again declares the rule of women an affront to both God and nature, citing scripture, along with the opinions of theologians, and even pagan philosophers, in support of his misogynistic conviction that female rule was by definition a monstrous thing:

To promote a woman to beare rule, superioritie, dominion or empire above any realme, nation or citie is repugnant to nature, contumelie to God, a thing most contrarious to his reveled will and approved ordinance, and finallie it is the subversion of good order, of all equitie and justice.

(9)

Women being the mortal source of Original Sin, God himself had decreed that they “shal be subject unto man, as the fleshe is unto the spirite” (20). As such they must be contained; and for Knox, women belonged so much

<sup>2</sup> Cited from *The Bible, that is, the Holy Scriptures contained in the Old and New Testament translated according to the Ebrew and Greeke, and conferred with the best translations in diuers languages . . .* (London, 1606).

to the private sphere that even the power of speech should be denied them – at least in any public setting. Citing St Ambrose, he declared that

It is not permitted to women to speake, but to be in silence, as the lawe saith. What saith the lawe? Unto thy husband, shall thy conversion be, and he shall beare dominion over the. This is a speciall lawe (saith Ambrose) whose sentence, lest it shulde be violated, infirmed, or made weake, women are commanded to be in silence.

(22)

Extreme as Knox's opinions may sound, their proper silencing was of course the principal reason why women were forbidden to perform on the public stage. Cleopatra may be allowed the most eloquent voice in Shakespeare's tragedy, but only (as she herself complains in one of the play's wrier metadramatic moments) so long as there is "some squeaking Cleopatra [to] boy [her] greatness" on the public stage (5.2.220).

There was, it is true, a comic side to such prohibition: Knox's insistence upon the gagging of women has its satiric equivalent in the title-page engraving for Thomas Heywood's *A Curtaine Lecture* (London, 1637), where a domineering spouse subjects her powerless husband to two unrelenting hours of rebuke.

The harridan wife of this deplorable scene had earlier theatrical counterparts – notably in Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, where Petruchio finally quells Kate's "scolding tongue" (1.2.244) and "spirit to resist" (3.2.211), forcing her to proclaim to all woman-kind that "Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, / Thy head, thy sovereign . . . Such duty as the subject owes the prince, / Even such a woman oweth to her husband" (5.1.158-68). Kate here is made to parrot the domestic pieties that are systematised in popular treatises like Robert Cleaver's *Godly Forme of Household Government* (1598), where households are imagined precisely as patriarchal kingdoms in little. Yet there is, of course, a hint of subversive contradiction (often exploited in recent



Frontispiece from Thomas Heywood's *A Curtaine Lecture* (London, 1637).  
Reproduced by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.



productions of the play) in the fact that it is Kate who is allowed to bring the action to a close with what is the longest speech in the play – twice as long as the soliloquy in which Petruchio has declared the beginning of his domestic “reign” in the previous act (4.1.162-81).

For Knox, to witness a woman exercising “rule . . . in the midst of men” was not simply an undoing of good governance but, by virtue of its affront to God’s decrees, an inversion of the natural order itself: the spectacle of a queen with “the royall crowne upon her head, the sword and sceptre borne before her, in signe that the administration of justice was in her power” was enough to suggest that “the hole worlde [had been] transformed in to Amazones”, thereby ensuring that all males were “changed from the wisdom, understanding, and courage of men, to the foolishne fondnes and cowardise of women” (10-11). The suggestion of supernatural evil in the description of humankind as “transformed” into Amazons is more than simply metaphorical: since women’s defiance of scriptural decree repeats the disobedience of Eve, it must necessarily be, for Knox, the work of the devil (see 18) and therefore involve a sinister kind of metamorphosis – one that resonates with his repeated insistence upon the “monstruous” character of female rule (see e.g. 13, 27, 48, 54); for in the early



Map illustrating Raleigh’s *Discoverie of . . . Guiana*, from Theodor de Bry, *America pars VIII* (Frankfurt, 1599). Reproduced by permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC.

modern imaginary, Amazons featured alongside those terrifyingly unnatural creatures thought to populate the remote margins of the world – as they do, for example, in Theodor de Bry's map illustrating Raleigh's *Discovery of Guiana*, where the figure of an Amazon is posed alongside one of those monstrous "men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders" that Othello remembers from his own "travailous history" (*Oth.*, 1.3.139-40, 45).<sup>3</sup>

It was, however, possible to think about the amazonian power of queens in a very different way. Samuel Purchas, for example, celebrated his late sovereign, Elizabeth, as "This Christian Amazon . . . our Debora", whose wars against "those Romish", like the battles of the Hebrew prophetess against the Canaanites, have stirred "the admiration of men, the joy of Angels, and acknowledgement in all of the sword of the Lord and of Gedeon, the power of the highest perfected in her weakness": Elizabeth is an admirable "virago" whose patronage of Drake's great voyage "first loosed the virgin zone of the earth" (1613, 34). Yet the very word "virago", denoting a man-like woman, could not altogether shake off its suggestion of unnaturalness; and the Queen herself could hardly remain impervious to the substantial portion of opinion that sympathised with Knox's opinions. The Virgin Queen's defence lay in the chameleon nature of her carefully constructed royal persona, which allowed her to appear superbly feminine or defiantly masculine, as occasion served. The glamorous cynosure of her male courtiers' adoration could transform herself at will into the virile sovereign of her Armada speech – the warlike figure in a breastplate who famously declared: "I know I have the body of a weak, feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king". Spenser's celebratory epic *The Faerie Queene* is careful to pay tribute to Elizabeth's multiple personae: she is not merely its eponymous absent presence and the "Queene of loue" (*Faerie Queene*, 4, Proem, 4, 9), but the "piteous maiden" Una (1.6.6, 1),<sup>4</sup> the incarnation of religious truth, who is set against the Scottish Mary's Duessa, the embodiment of Catholic duplicity; she is not only the beautiful huntress, Belphoebe, but the female knight, Britomart, the personification of militant chastity. The masculine heroism of Britomart's role, however, is qualified by the revelation that all her chivalric questing is ultimately driven by a properly feminine desire to love and therefore to "submit [her] wayes" to the "will" of the "prowest knight", Sir Artegal (3.3.24, 7-8). It may have been in part Elizabeth's own failure to fulfil this ideal destiny that made it impossible for Spenser to complete his great poem. Indeed the difficulty for any writer

<sup>3</sup> Cited from the Oxford edition, ed. Michael Neill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Citations from *The Faerie Queene* are to *The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser*, ed. by James Cruickshanks Smith and Ernest de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1959).

seeking to flatter the Queen was to evade the traps that might be hidden in too close an identification with any single persona, which is no doubt why Shakespeare himself took care to celebrate the escape of a “fair vestal thronè by the west” from the amorous entanglements of his own fairy world in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,<sup>5</sup> where Cupid vainly shoots his love dart at this “imperial vot’ress”, as she passes from view unharmed, “In maiden meditation, fancy free” (2.1.158-64).

When Ben Jonson wrote his *Masque of Queens* (1609) for King James’s wife, Anne of Denmark, the business of queenly power must have seemed less contentious. Designed, as Jonson’s prefatory note explains, to be “A celebration of honourable, and true Fame, bred out of Vertue”, the masque introduces a “Spectacle of strangeness” involving “twelue Women, in the habit of Hags, or Witches”, who represent unnatural forms of female power, “the opposits to good Fame” (sig. A4); their leader is a demonic “Dame” whose hair is “folded with Vipers” (sig. B2). Followers of the “powerfull” goddess Hecate, who use their “powers” to make themselves “the scourge of Men” (sig. C3), they are set against twelve virtuous queens from the House of Fame, who are discovered “sitting vpon a Throne triumphal, erected in the forme of a Pyramide”, and whose fame and goodness are proclaimed, reassuringly enough, by the figure of “heroique, and masculine Vertue” (sig. D2). All of them warrior figures, they include “Penthesilea, the braue Amazon” (sig. D3), and the legendarily warlike British queen Voadicea (or Bunduca); but several, including Artemisia and Hypsicratea, are also distinguished by their properly feminine love of their husbands: the latter, indeed, as proof of her love, adopted “a Masculine habite” in order to be properly “assistant” to her husband in the “hazards of the warre” (sig. E2). Presiding over them is Bel-Anna (played by the Queen herself) who “alone / Possesst all vertues, for which One by One / They were so fam’d” (sig. D3). Mounted in “three triumphant Chariots”, under Bel-Anna’s command, the Queens overcome the Hags whom they drive before them as they ride “triumphing about the Stage” in what the closing song presents as a formal Triumph of Fame (sig. E3v, F1-2). The vision of triumphant (but nevertheless implicitly subordinate) queenship celebrated in Jonson’s masque might almost be seen as a riposte to the very different queenly power celebrated in Shakespeare’s *Anthony and Cleopatra*, a play that makes its own use of Roman triumph.

In Shakespeare’s earlier work, by contrast, female rulers – as well as

<sup>5</sup> Except where otherwise indicated, citations from Shakespeare are to the RSC *Complete Works*, ed. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (New York: Modern Library, 2007). Significantly, the play’s first performance seems to have occurred shortly after the publication of Spenser’s first four books in January 1596.

warrior women more generally – tend to have more in common with Jonson's Hags than with his Queens: they are, at the least, dangerously ambiguous figures. When the Pucelle in 1 *Henry VI* overcomes the French Dauphin, Charles sees her as a virtuous "Amazon", one who (like Purchas's Elizabeth) seems to fight with the sword of Deborah (1.2.104-5); but from the point of view of the English this "sorceress condemned to burn" (5.4.1) is more Duessa than Britomart, and when in 3 *Henry VI*, the "She-wolf" (1.4.111), Queen Margaret, "play[s] the Amazon" (4.1.105), it is her monstrous nature that, to her enemies at least, stands exposed: "How ill-beseeming is it in thy sex / To triumph, like an Amazonian trull" (1.4.114-15) – just as in *Macbeth*, the murder of Duncan reveals the Lady Macbeth as a "fiend-like Queen", both "monstrous" and "unnatural" (5.7.114; 3.6.8; 5.1.545); whilst in *King Lear* Goneril and Regan, as they prepare to levy war against their own father, appear to Albany "most degenerate", falling away from their own kind to become "like monsters of the deep" (Q. passage, 4.2.150, 156), and to Lear himself as equally monstrous "Centaur[s]" (4.5.131). The vicious, manipulative Queen of *Cymbeline*, denounced as a "tyrant" by her step-daughter, Innogen (1.95), is not herself an Amazon, but it is she who goads her husband into war against Rome, and schemes to have the "placing of the British crown" upon the head of her son, Cloten (3.5.78). More playful and nuanced in their treatment of female belligerence are the two plays in which actual Amazons appear: the opening scenes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* both focus upon Theseus's conquest of the Amazon queen Hippolyta, and both look forward to the celebration of a marriage that will conclusively shrink this captive "into / The bound [she was] o'erflowing" (*The Two Noble Kinsmen*; 1.1.89-90).

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the Athenian ruler boasts to his prospective bride that "I woo'd thee with my sword, / And won thy love doing thee injuries" (1.1.17-18). Hippolyta's defeat will have its supernatural counterpart in the Fairy King's victory over his own insubordinate Queen, whose rebellion has brought disorder to the entire natural world (2.1.8). Adding to that chaos are the ridiculous fallings-out that afflict the four young lovers of the main plot, as they become "wood [i.e. mad] within this wood" (2.1.196) – confusions that are themselves an unlucky consequence of the fairy dispute whose misprisions they mirror. The "unnatural" character of Titania's rebelliousness is brought home by the prank that causes her to fall in love with a literal "monster", in the shape of the "monstrous" ass-headed Bottom (3.1.74, 3.2.6, 390) – a creature whose "translated" deformity (3.1.84) itself bodies forth the abnormal ugliness that a similar trick seems to reveal in Helena, from whom her beloved Lysander flees as though she too were "a monster" (2). The play's comic ending is only made possible by Titania's capitulation to Oberon's kingly authority (4.1)

and by the “blessèd power” of his magic (l. 65) – which also restores Bottom from his monstrous condition and brings the maddened young lovers to their senses. Now is the time that Puck has promised, when “every man should take his own . . . The man shall have his mare again, And all shall be well” (3.2.475-9); but something more than a simple restoration of the “natural” order of things is involved, as Bottom’s entranced memory of his “dream” (4.1.) suggests, since to be “translated” is in some profound sense to be “transfigured” – as, in Hippolyta’s eyes, the young lovers themselves appear to be (5.1.24). If the play ends in harmony (both literal and metaphorical), its final act is full of reminders of the paradoxical nature of what Theseus calls “the concord of this discord” (5.1.60) – something that characterises not only “the musical confusion / Of hounds and echo in conjunction” (4.1.109-10), but even the ridiculous generic mixture of the mechanicals’ play, with its “very tragical mirth” (5.1.57). The play’s last scene begins with repeated reminders of the “strange” character of what the audience have witnessed (5.1.1-2, 27); and if it concludes a display of harmonious accord as the reunited Oberon and Titania, with their fairy train, perform a masque-like ritual of blessing upon the marriage of four mortal couples, their dancing is not only parodied in advance by the mechanicals’ clumsy “Bergamask” (5.1.326), but ushered in by Puck’s strangely ominous prologue, which allows us to glimpse the possibility of a very different kind of ending:

Now the wasted brands do glow  
 Whilst the screech-owl, screeching loud,  
 Puts the wretch that lies in woe  
 In remembrance of a shroud.  
 Now it is the time of night  
 That the graves, all gaping wide,  
 Everyone lets forth his sprite  
 In the churchway paths to glide.  
 (5.1.345-52)

Puck, moreover, is allowed to round off the dancing with an epilogue that reminds the audience that mortal life itself is “No more yielding but a dream” (l. 398). As they retire to bed, the characters are left in a state of dream-like suspension, for even the weddings nominally celebrated here, with their confirmation of husbandly authority, have yet to be fully accomplished: “four days and nights”, we were informed at the beginning of the play, must pass before the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta, but the action has allowed only a single night to elapse, leaving its proper resolution quietly (but a little unnervingly) suspended.

Oddly enough, at the beginning of what seems to have been his last play, written a decade later, Shakespeare chose to resume the story of (the



still unmarried) Theseus and Hippolyta.<sup>6</sup> In the collaborative *Two Noble Kinsmen*, the teasing generic incongruities of the earlier comedy are intensified to produce a work whose oxymoronic yoking of comic and tragic elements ensures an ending in which "the conquered triumphs" while "The victor has the loss" (5.4.129-30). Opening with its own masque-like episode – here presided over by the figure of the marriage-god, Hymen – the play reintroduces us to the impending union of Theseus and Hippolyta: as they approach the temple where their wedding will be sealed, their festivities are interrupted by the funereal entry of "three Queens in black, with veils stained, with imperial crowns" (1.1.23 SD). Rendered powerless by their widowhood, the mourning women prostrate themselves at the feet of the bridal party, appealing for the return of their husbands' bodies, slain in battle against the tyrant Creon of Thebes. Given its slender relationship to the main plot, the dramatic space accorded to this encounter and its sequel is striking, for it significantly enlarges on its equivalent in the play's principal source, Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale". There Theseus is confronted not by a mere trio of queens, but by an entire "compaignye of ladyes, tweye and tweye"<sup>7</sup> (898); yet their appeal, together with the ensuing war to retrieve the missing corpses, takes up less than a hundred lines, while in Shakespeare's version the initial encounter alone extends for over two hundred lines, and is followed by two further scenes (1.4 and 1.5), the second of which includes an elaborate funeral procession – a dark counterpart to the play's masque-like opening.<sup>8</sup> It is worth asking why Shakespeare should have decided to enlarge this part of his source in the way that he did.

Clearly, part of the answer has to do with elegantly symmetrical contrasts appropriate to the mixed form of tragicomedy. Even before the entry of the black-clad Queens, the pastoral song that accompanies the opening pageant includes among its flowers "Marigolds on deathbeds blowing" and among its singing birds the ill-omened caw of a "boding raven" (1.1.11, 20); and the scene's subsequent juxtaposition of wedding and mourning anticipates a final scene in which the tragic funeral of one of the play's protagonists will preface a comic "end" as Theseus commands the mourners to put on "The visages of bridegrooms" for the marriage of the other (5.4.142-3), as Palamon is wedded to Hippolyta's sister, Emilia. In contrast to Chaucer's

<sup>6</sup> While the play is the joint work of Shakespeare and his successor as principal dramatist to the King's Men, John Fletcher, Shakespeare is generally assumed to have been responsible for the first act, with which I am primarily concerned here.

<sup>7</sup> Cited from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 898.

<sup>8</sup> The disparity appears even more striking when it is realised that the play in its printed form (2222 lines) is almost exactly the same length as Chaucer's tale (2247 lines).

ending – where “certeyn yeres” (2967) must pass between Arcite’s death and Palamon’s wedding – here only “A day or two” (113) will elapse before a second Athenian will possess another Amazon bride.

There is a sense in which the wedding of two Athenians to Amazon women might seem particularly appropriate to the hybrid form of tragicomedy, since such female warriors represent an unstable, and sometimes “monstrous” hybridisation of male and female characteristics. If, as Linda Bamber has so persuasively argued (1982), tragedy and comedy were themselves profoundly gendered, then tragicomedy could be seen as a generic equivalent of amazonian monstrosity: indeed it was as “hermaphrodites” or “monsters of poetry” that classically minded critics were inclined to dismiss experiments in this mixed mode.<sup>9</sup> Insofar, then, as the weddings that frame *The Two Noble Kinsmen* seem to involve the proper subjugation of Amazon women to male authority they can be seen as representing the happy triumph of comic decorum.<sup>10</sup> But beyond this simple reflection of the paradoxes of tragicomic design, the encounter with the prostrate queens invites us to contemplate more contentious questions of female power and disempowerment. In contrast to the unnatural authority of Amazon queenhood, the three Queens represent a queenliness that is simply a function of proper kingly power. Their widowhood, however, by stripping them of all that their conspicuous “imperial crowns” might seem to stand for, threatens their very humanity:

for our crownèd heads we have no roof  
Save this which is the lion’s and the bear’s,  
And vault to everything.  
(1.1.51-3)

So laments the First Queen; yet the Second Queen’s plea to Hippolyta draws attention to the very different effect of Theseus’s victory: by defeating the efforts of this “Most dreaded Amazonian . . . to make the male / To thy sex captive” (1.1.84-7), Theseus has subdued the “force” of this “soldieress” (91), thus restoring the proper order of things; by winning the “affection” of his prisoner he has shown himself “Born to uphold creation in that honour / First nature styled it in” (91, 8-9). In the final scene, the sudden death of Arcite will restore to Palamon his original claim to possess Emilia, his “stolen jewel”, thereby reducing a second Amazon to the properly sub-

<sup>9</sup> See for example Francisco de Cascales, *Tablas de Poéticas* (1617) as cited in Kluge 2007: 297

<sup>10</sup> The same is true of the Amazons who threaten the European arrivals on one of the new-world islands of John Fletcher’s *The Sea-Voyage*, but who turn out to be shipwrecked Portuguese ladies whom the play’s ending restores to domestic propriety.

ordinate condition of a wife, whilst rescuing the bereaved Emilia herself from the kind of abject powerlessness embodied by the mourning Queens.

The problematic nature of the female power represented in the figure of the Amazon is itself suggested by Shakespeare's deliberately awkward-sounding coinage "soldieress". But *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, as it strips its own Amazon Queen of her unnatural sway, returns her, in language that Knox would have understood, to her 'first nature', endowing her with another sort of power – one duly contained by the gendered norms separating the private from the public sphere. This is a power conferred by the "love" that, drawing on the language of chivalric romance, has rendered the lord of Athens himself "a servant / For the tenor of thy speech" (95-6). Theseus may warn that by becoming "sensually subdued", men may "lose [their] human title" (261-2); but the "dreaded Amazonian" Hippolyta will remind her sister that the very act of kneeling before Theseus to make her wedding vows will ensure her absolute possession of "The high throne in his heart" (1.3.108) – the only form of queenly power proper to her female kind.

Insofar as they lay claim to any larger power, Shakespeare's queens, as we have seen, are typically malign, vicious, and often murderous creatures. The one conspicuous exception – though she too can play the Amazon – is Cleopatra. The historical Queen of Egypt had been as ruthless as any male ruler, being responsible for the death of two of her own brothers, the pharaohs Ptolemy XIII (her former co-ruler, whom she defeated in civil war) and his successor Ptolemy XIV (whose murder she ordered). But Shakespeare's queen carries no such fratricidal taint. She is instead a figure whose mastery of performance – her histrionic command of both seductive female guile and triumphant masculinity – are sometimes reminiscent of that consummate royal actor, Elizabeth I. Written three or four years after Elizabeth's death, as nostalgia for the late queen had begun to set in, *Anthony and Cleopatra* (1607) belongs with a number of early seventeenth-century tragedies – among them Webster's *The White Devil* (1612) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614), Middleton's *The Changeling* (1622) and *Women Beware Women* (c. 1623), and Ford's *The Broken Heart* (c. 1632) – that place a woman at the centre of their tragic action; but, more directly than any, it addresses contentious issues of female power. It was not, of course, the first play to deal with history's most famous lovers: a pair of late sixteenth-century closet dramas – the Countess of Pembroke's translation of Robert Garnier's *The Tragedy of Anthony* (1590), and complementary *Tragedy of Cleopatra* (1594), written by the countess's protégé, Samuel Daniel – had treated the couple's ends separately. Shakespeare's title, however, like that of *Romeo and Juliet* (1595), insists on the intertwined nature of its protagonists' fates; but unlike his earlier tragedy it resolves this structur-

al rivalry in favour of the woman, devoting all of its long final scene to the Queen of Egypt.<sup>11</sup>

The boldness of this decision is easily dismissed as a simple consequence of the narrative sequence in Shakespeare's principal source, Plutarch's *Life of Marcus Antonius*. But where in Plutarch the facts of Cleopatra's death are a matter of conjecture, being based upon various 'reports', Shakespeare chooses to dramatise her suicide, turning it into a last theatrically self-conscious exhibition of queenly power:

Show me, my women, like a queen. Go fetch  
My best attires.

...

Give me my robe, put on my crown – I have  
Immortal longings in me.  
(5.3.227-8, 279-80)

The contrast with the embarrassing anti-climax of Anthony's own botched suicide in the fourth act – marked as that is by a sadly miscalculated echo of his earlier erotic boast, "The nobleness of life / Is to do thus" (1.1.38-9) – could hardly be more striking:

Thrice nobler than myself,  
Thou teachest me, O valiant Eros . . .  
I will be a bridegroom in my death, and run into't  
As to a lover's bed. Come then – and Eros  
Thy master dies thy scholar: 'to do thus'  
I learned of thee. (He falls on his sword.)  
How? Not dead? Not dead?  
(4.15.95-103; emphasis added)

The rhetoric that surrounds Anthony's actual end, with his insistence that "Not Caesar's valour hath o'erthrown Anthony, / But Anthony's hath triumphed on itself" (4.16.16-17) partially redeems his suicide; but the "power" enabling this redemption belongs to Cleopatra, as she and her maids haul Anthony into her monument – even if the erotic "power" of her last

<sup>11</sup> Even a tragedy as female-centred as Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* consigns the death of its nominal hero, the Duchess, to the fourth act, allowing Bosola – a mere servant, but a man – to emerge as a rival protagonist in the slaughter at the end of Act 5. Anxiety about the breach of tragic decorum involved in giving the play's catastrophe to a woman is reflected in the way that so many productions of *Anthony and Cleopatra*, from the late seventeenth to the early twentieth century, chose to place Anthony's corpse beside Cleopatra in the final scene, as if to reassert his own claim to tragic centrality

kiss is not enough to quicken a dying man (35-6, 41). In a work where the military and political power celebrated in formal Roman triumphs becomes a recurrent motif, Anthony's use of "triumphed", like Cleopatra's repetition of "power" is significant. At the play's very centre Shakespeare placed a scene which, because its relation to the plot seems obscure, is cut from most modern productions, though it is of significant thematic importance: it opens with a stage direction whose brevity belies the spectacular effect required: "*Enter Ventidius, as it were in triumph; the dead body of Paucorus borne before him*" (3.1 SD).<sup>12</sup> Clearly this entry is meant to imitate (as far as the Globe's resources would allow) one of those magnificent parades through the streets of Rome, the formal 'triumphs' that were accorded to victorious generals; and Silius is made to imagine Anthony granting Ventidius just such an honour: "So thy grand captain . . . / Shall set thee on triumphant chariots and / Put garlands on thy head" (9-11). Later, as we have seen, Anthony, in the fury that succeeds his defeat at Actium, will imagine both Cleopatra and himself as objects of display in Caesar's own "triumph":

Let him take thee,  
And hoist thee to the shouting plebeians  
Follow his chariot, like the greatest spot  
Of all thy sex; most monster-like be shown . . .  
(4.13.33-6)

Eros,  
Wouldst thou be windowed in great Rome, and see  
Thy master thus with pleached arms, bending down  
His corrigible neck, his face subdued  
To penetrative shame, whilst the wheeled seat  
Of fortunate Caesar, drawn before him, branded  
His baseness that ensued.  
(4.15.71-7)

No wonder that Caesar, when he learns of Anthony's death, should take comfort from the knowledge that Cleopatra's "life in Rome / Would be eternal in our triumph" (5.1.65-6); whilst it is the prospect of becoming just such a shameful property, "an Egyptian puppet" in a theatrical show of victory, that appears to determine the Queen's own suicide (5.2.109, 208).

Perhaps the nearest Egyptian equivalent to such displays of masculine power is to be found in Cleopatra's water pageant on the Cydnus, whose splendours are so famously evoked for by Enobarbus in 2.2. This may not be a triumph in the strict Roman sense, but in sixteenth-century usage the

<sup>12</sup> For further discussion of this entry, see the Oxford edition, Introduction: 60-1, and the commentary note to 0.2 on p. 219.

meanings of the word were extended to include any form of “public festivity . . . celebration . . . spectacle or pageant” (*OED* n. 4), including not just royal entries, coronations, and weddings, but even funerals. Thus it’s possible to think of the lovers’ grand processional entry in the first scene as a visual counterpart to Ventidius’s Roman triumph, and to recognise another in the “great solemnity” that concludes the tragedy, as the Queen and her women are carried from her monument to begin the “solemn show” of her funeral (5.2.362-4). The stage direction for the protagonists’ opening entry (1.1.10) is deceptively brief, but with its annunciatory fanfare, its “train” of courtiers, attendant ladies and fanning eunuchs, it required Shakespeare’s company to draw on their full resources to produce a triumphal spectacle, while Philo’s contemptuous commentary invites the audience to Anthony as the emasculated prisoner of the Queen’s erotic wiles. In this their entry has some resemblances to that of Theseus and Hippolyta at the beginning of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, where Hippolyta combines the roles of enemy captive and bride:

Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword,  
 And won they love doing thee injuries.  
 But I will wed thee in another key,  
 With pomp, with triumph, and with revelling.  
 (1.1.16-19)

In the Egyptian court, however, it is the Queen who acts the part of conqueror while Anthony – reduced (like the “eunuchs fanning her”) to become “the bellows and the fan / To cool a gypsy’s lust” – is cast as her helpless captive, an object of sorry ridicule: “The triple pillar of the world transformed / Into a strumpet’s fool” (1.1.9-10, 12-13). Where Theseus’ opening speech established his command over the scene, here it is Cleopatra who begins what emerges as a somewhat one-sided rhetorical contest, goading her opposite with a challenge that establishes her control of the ensuing dialogue: “If it be love indeed, tell me how much” (1.1.9-14). Undermining the swaggering hyperbole with which Anthony protests his devotion, she further unmans him with the mocking suggestion that not only is he in thrall to his absent wife (“Fulvia perchance is angry . . . thy cheek pays shame, / When shrill-tongued Fulvia scolds”, 33-4), but that he has also become the powerless “homager” (13) of a mere boy: “Who knows / If the scarce-bearded Caesar have not sent / His powerful mandate to you” (21-3). The result is that when, as they exit, Anthony addresses her as “my queen”, there is a disconcerting ambiguity to the phrase: is she then consort or suzerain to the man whom his fellow Romans see as falling “short of that great property / Which still should go with Anthony” (60-1)?

This teasing reversal of proper gender roles continues into the follow-

ing scene, where Anthony mocks himself both as subject to the "power" of Fulvia's railing (1.107-9), and as a victim of the supernaturally "enchanted" powers of a queen whom he later calls "this great fairy", and "thou spell" (1.2.128, 4.9.12, 4.13.36). In an exhibition of thoroughly histrionic pathos, Cleopatra will again scorn his thralldom to "the married woman", "Let her not say 'tis I that keep you here – / I have no power upon you; hers you are" (1.3.20-3). Using the paradoxical language of courtly love, Anthony seeks to legitimise his subordination by declaring himself Cleopatra's "soldier-servant" (1.3.70), but in the eyes of Octavius Caesar his subservience is of a more degrading kind: "He hath given his empire [i.e. rule, power] / Up to a whore" (3.6.66-7). For Caesar, it is as if, by his erotic enslavement to Cleopatra, Anthony has simply undone his masculine identity, rendering himself "not more manlike / Than Cleopatra, nor the queen of Ptolemy / More womanly than he" (1.4.5-7); while Pompey derides him as a man "tie[d] up" by the power of the his mistress's "witchcraft" (2.1.22-3) – a judgement that will be repeated by Anthony's own faithful officers. Bewailing his failure to capitalise on the material sources of his power, Camidius declares that "our leader's led, / And we are women's men" (3.8.69-70); while Scarrus laments his general's transformation into "the noble ruin of [Cleopatra's] magic" (3.10.17). "Unqualified" by the debacle of Actium, Anthony laments his subjection to a woman's "supremacy" that leaves his heart "tied by th' strings" to her rudder (3.12.43, 36-8): "You did know / How much you were my conqueror" (3.11.64-5).

In the build-up to this humiliating defeat, Enobarbus goads Cleopatra with the claim that "'tis said in Rome / That Photinus, an eunuch, and your maids / Manage this war" (3.7.13-5). But it is Anthony who is, implicitly at least, already stigmatised with eunuchism: Cleopatra may tease the "unseminared" Mardian with a reminder that she can "take no pleasure / In aught an eunuch has" (1.5.9-11); but ironically it is the eunuch's pathetic recollection of "What Venus did with Mars" (famously taming his masculine ferocity) that makes her think of Anthony: "O Charmian, / Where think'st thou he is now?" (18-19). Remembering Anthony's mythic ancestry, she may praise him as "this Herculean Roman" (1.3.84); but the audience are expected to recall that Hercules was famously unmanned by Omphale, who forced him to spin in women's robes, whilst she assumed his famous lion-skin and club – an episode of which the queen herself will remind the audience when she yearns nostalgically for the time when "I put my tires and mantles on him, / Whilst I wore his sword Philippan" (2.5.23-4); and her usurpation of that instrument of phallic power accords only too well with her boast that hers is a hand of power "that kings / Have trembled kissing" (29-30). After the surrender of their fleet at Alexandria, Anthony, convinced that Cleopatra has betrayed him "Unto an enemy's triumph", will convert that recollec-



tion of playfully exchanged roles, into a metaphor of decisive emasculation: "O, thy vile lady," he cries to the eunuch, Mardian, "she has robbed me of my sword!" (4.15.20, 22-3), and when, in that same scene, he hears the false news of Cleopatra's suicide, even her supposed death serves only as mortifying proof that he himself lacks "the courage of a woman" (4.15.60).

Of course this is not the only way in which the play invites us to look at Anthony: "Though he be painted one way like a Gorgon," says Cleopatra, invoking what might seem an oddly female type of serpent-headed monstrosity, "The other way's a Mars" (2.5.117-8). Her metaphor is borrowed from the fashionable taste for "perspectives" – ingenious pictorial images whose subject or meaning was determined by the angle from which they were viewed;<sup>13</sup> and while her invocation of the god of war may remind us of Mars's subjection to the goddess of love, it also sends us back to the Anthony remembered in Philo's opening speech, the warrior whose "goodly eyes . . . Have glowed like plated Mars" (1.1.2-4), and to Enobarbus's defiant general who can "speak as loud as Mars" (2.2.6). It is true that the reality of this figure is largely created by the poetry of nostalgia – by Caesar's invocation of Anthony's stoic heroism after the siege of Modena (1.4.55-71), or by Cleopatra's own magnificent elegy for the godlike figure whose "face was as the heavens . . . [whose] legs bestrid the ocean; [and] reared arm crested the world" (5.2.79-92). But if it is largely the persuasive force of such rhetoric that shapes the figure of an heroic Anthony, it is sufficiently underpinned by his courage in beating back the power of Caesar at Alexandria, and by his extraordinary magnanimity towards his followers, to make the contradictions of perspective seem persuasive. It is enough, after all, to break the heart of the cynical Enobarbus.

The case of Cleopatra, however, is a great deal more complicated, the source of her power more difficult to define, her nature beyond the reach of perspective's straightforward binaries. Whilst the play shows her exercising various kinds of power – including her irresistible sway over the imagination of others – these emerge as fleeting effects of a mastery of performance so far beggaring description that she begins to resemble that "strange serpent" which evokes Lepidus' wonderment by being shaped only "like itself". One of a trio of female rivals in the play, she is set first against Anthony's domineering first wife, the tireless female soldier Fulvia, and then against his second wife, the conventionally subservient and "most weak" Octavia, who appeals in vain to "Jove the god of power" (3.4.39-30), and whose anticlimactic return to Rome contrasts so humiliatingly with the triumphal entry planned by her brother:

<sup>13</sup> For an extended discussion of perspective as a key to the play's characterisation, see the Oxford introduction, 78-100.



Why have you stol'n upon us thus? You come not  
 Like Caesar's sister: the wife of Anthony  
 Should have an army for an usher

...

Nay, the dust  
 Should have ascended to the roof of heaven,  
 Raised by your populous troops.  
 (3.6.42-50)

Structurally we might expect Cleopatra to represent a mean between these opposites, but, as Octavia herself is made to remind us, this is a world that offers "No midway / 'Twixt . . . extremes at all" (3.4.19-20). Instead, Cleopatra chooses to outgo her rivals in both roles – at Actium defiantly insisting that "as the president of my kingdom [she] will / Appear there for a man" (3.7.17-18), and in her suicide, claiming a courage that affirms her true nuptial "title" as Anthony's real wife: "Husband, I come" (5.2.286). Considered together, these contrasting gestures might seem to present another version of the perspective that renders Anthony both Mars and Gorgon; but instead they belong to the gallery of theatrical personae whose "infinite variety" arouses wonder even in the unillusioned Enobarbus (2.2.242).

For the besotted Anthony of the opening scene, Cleopatra is the incarnation of love and beauty – a mortal Venus in whom "every passion fully strives / To make itself . . . fair and admired" (1.1.46, 52-3); but she herself – as if remembering Theseus's mockery of lovers who discover "Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt" (*MSND*, 5.1.1.) or the *Sonnets*' play with the seeming opposition of "black" and "fair"<sup>14</sup> – mocks her own African skin for being "with Phoebus amorous pinches black" (1.5.28). Lamenting that she is now "wrinkled deep in time", Cleopatra makes her erotic power, like Anthony's martial prowess, a matter of nostalgia – albeit of an ambivalent kind; for if she imagines her affair with "great Pompey" as the conquest of a man whom she made "die" with simply looking on beauty (31-4), her liaison with Julius Caesar reduces her to a "morsel for a monarch", a mere tit-bit served up for the pleasure of a powerful man – little different, it might seem, from the woman whom Roman propaganda dismisses as a "gypsy" and a "strumpet" (1.1.10, 13). It is characteristic of the play's technique, however, that no version of the queen is allowed to go unchallenged; so Cleopatra's ironic self-mockery is immediately displaced by Alexas's show of formal deference to her royal authority. "Sovereign of Egypt, hail" he greets her, as he delivers his master's tribute of an "orient pearl". Not just a familiar love-token, the pearl is also the symbol of Anthony's promise to "piece / Her opulent throne with kingdoms" that "All the East . . . shall call her mis-

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. *Sonnets* 127, 130, 131, and 132.

ress" (41, 45-7) – a vision of extraordinary royal power that is itself rendered slyly equivocal by its unavoidable play upon "mistress".

The fulfilment of Anthony's promise comes in 3.6, with the spectacle described by Caesar in which Cleopatra and Anthony "on a tribunal silvered . . . in chairs of gold / Were publicly enthroned", Cleopatra wearing "th'habiliments of the goddess Isis" as their children are proclaimed "the kings of kings" (3.6.3-17). But scarcely has Caesar evoked this splendid display than he is scorning her as the "whore" whose power consists only in her ability to "nod" her lover to her (3.6.66-7). Never, perhaps, does Cleopatra's queenly power appear more absolute than in Enobarbus's evocation of the scene on the Cydnus where her barge itself resembles a "burning throne" that bends nature itself to her display. Here, in Agrippa's phrase, the queen "appeared triumphantly indeed" (2.2.195); and if there is a hint of irony in "appeared", it is immediately annihilated by the evocative force of Enobarbus's rhetoric, which persuades the audience that her pageant was not just a piece of theatre, but itself an engine of power, since through it this "most triumphant lady . . . purs'd up [Anthony's] heart" (190-4). Agrippa may attempt to undercut the effect of her magic with a satiric reduction of her earlier Roman conquest:

Royal wench!

She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed,  
He ploughed her, and she cropped.  
(233-5)

But Enobarbus is ready with an answer that takes up the contemptuous implications of "wench", only to insist that in Cleopatra's case even her least regal gesture can be a source of its own paradoxical kind of dominion:

I saw her once

Hop forty paces through the public street;  
And having lost her breath, she spoke, and panted,  
That she did make defect perfection  
And breathless, power breathe forth . . .

. . .

for vilest things

Become themselves in her, that the holy priests  
Bless her when she is riggish.  
(235-47)

It is an odd kind of "power" that Enobarbus attributes to the queen at this point – utterly unlike the queenly power displayed on the Cydnus, even if the paradoxically breathless breathing of her power does seem to echo the fans of those "pretty dimpled boys" that seemed "To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool, / And what they undid did" (211-12); but what

above all links the two spectacles is their perfect mastery of contrasting styles of performance.

There are of course episodes in which Cleopatra lays claim to more orthodox forms of queenly power. Indeed the woman who defies Anthony by leading her own ships into battle at Actium may even seem to act like the amazonian queens of John Knox's nightmares; but her precipitate flight from the conflict almost immediately suggests that she does, after all, lack "the heart and stomach of a man". Wanting "great Juno's power", she is "no more but e'en a woman, and commanded / By such poor passion as the maid that milks" (4.16.36, 74-5). Despite this, however, she has stomach enough to stage a suicide "after the high Roman fashion" that not only trumps Anthony's messy end, but that shows her "conqueror of myself" (62), thereby claiming a kind of power that allows her to mock worldly greatness:

'Tis 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 deed 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.  
(5.2.2-7)

The echo of her earlier teasing hyperbole, "There's beggary in the love that can be reckoned", might even seem to act as a measure of the moral distance she has travelled in response to Anthony's downfall – except that, almost in the next breath, she returns to the figure of beggary to mark her own kneeling subjection to Caesar himself ("If your master / Would have a queen his beggar . . . I hourly / Learn a doctrine of obedience", 6-17, 30-1); and in the exchanges with Proculeius, Dolabella, and Caesar – as well as in her calculated humiliation of her treasurer, Seleucus – it is never possible to know how seriously to take her efforts to negotiate with the man she repeatedly addresses as "My master and my lord!" (5.2.116, 136, 190), using a term of subordination ("my lord") formerly reserved for Anthony. The audience cannot be sure if Cleopatra really envisages another in her sequence of Roman conquests, or if this is all a charade designed to distract from her real intentions. It is not until Dolabella confirms Caesar's intention to send her with her children as prisoners to Rome, that we can feel certain her mind is made up. Even then, however, Cleopatra is made to remind the audience that all they actually see upon the stage is a mere simulacrum of her extraordinary power, in which yet another troupe of "quick comedians" are staging her story, "boying" her greatness. The sudden shifts of tone that

mark the play's closing sequence serve more than anything to demonstrate the power of theatrical performance, of Cleopatra's dazzling ability to shift from role to role. So the high poetry of her proud insistence that she has transcended her female changeability –

I have nothing  
Of woman in me – how from head to foot  
I am marble constant; now the fleeting moon  
No planet is of mine.  
(5.2.238-41)

– is immediately followed by her playful-sounding prose exchange with a Clown who bears a sly resemblance to the traditional figure of Death as a jester. That in turn gives way to the tragic magnificence of “Give me my robe, put on my crown – I have / Immortal longings in me” (279-80) in a succession of speeches whose tone then oscillates between defiant mockery of Caesar (283-6), wifely deference (286), tenderness towards her women, and erotic ecstasy (“The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch / that hurts and is desired”, 294-5) – between maternal reverie (“Dost thou not see my baby at my breast . . .”, 308), a sudden flash of her old vulgar jealousy (“If she first meet the curled Anthony, / He'll make demand of her”, 300-1), and the fierce satiric humour with which she harangues the asp:

Poor venomous fool,  
Be angry, and despatch, O, couldst thou speak  
That I might hear thee call great Caesar “Ass  
Unpolicied!”  
(304-7)

It is a sequence whose astonishing variety makes exceptional demands on the virtuosity of any actor – let alone on one of those squeaking boys whom Shakespeare imagined performing it. But it is perfectly contrived to remind us of the true nature of the queenly power that this play sets out to celebrate – one that, in an artful evasion of misogynistic pieties, belongs to the theatre alone. If Shakespeare's Cleopatra, like the serpent of Nile, is so much of her own shape and colour as to evade conventional description, the play openly deceives us into thinking it has nevertheless captured her. Anthony's crocodile “lives by that which nourisheth it, and the elements once out of it, it transmigrates” (2.7.43-4): *The Tragedy of Anthony and Cleopatra* effects exactly that strange translation.

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