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Beyond the Erotic: Seduction and Propaganda in Shakespeare's Anthony and Cleopatra

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Abstract: *In Shakespeare's Anthony and Cleopatra, success and achievement are associated with masculine figures. In the clash between Octavius, the Caesar of Rome, and his rival Marc Anthony military victories are commemorated and political alliances are weaved to celebrate their greatness and postulate their immortality. One vital part of the play is these men's struggle to sustain their honour and reputation in achieving success. However, another shadow story is grafted to this clash over power and sovereignty: that of Cleopatra a "most triumphant lady" (2.2). She transcends the temptress and the devious femme fatale stereotypes to impose a potent feminine leadership. This paper will discuss how her eroticization of the body and the word will shape an effective propaganda discourse that dictates the way she is seen by others. Seduction is weaponized to turn Egypt and its Queen into a spectacle of a cunning and successful feminine political Leadership. As she controls perception and self-representation, Cleopatra will claim dominion over her lover and her enemy alike.*

Keywords: *Achievement, Cleopatra, Death, Propaganda, Seduction*

I. INTRODUCTION

Antony and Cleopatra like many of other plays by William Shakespeare carries behind it the symbolism of the Gemini, of opposites that the dramatist brings together in a delicate balance. At first glance, the play seems to be a ghastly study in defeat and failure for its main female character, Cleopatra. The tragedy takes place at a tantalizing transitional interim in history; when the republic falls, creating the era of classical imperialism in which Rome would spread its might all over the world. In the play, Cleopatra, the Queen of Egypt, convinces her lover Marc Antony, an illustrious Roman Triumvir, to forsake his duties and remain with her in Alexandria. As lush and opulent Egypt corrupts reasonable and stoic Rome, a revolted Octavius wages a relentless war on the lovers. After won and lost skirmishes, Anthony is defeated and kills himself. Cleopatra is captured by Caesar's soldiers and she commits suicide to thwart her enemy's intention to parade her in Roman streets.

There appears to be no place for success and achievement for Cleopatra when the play ends with a devastating loss of her throne and life. However, this paper will discuss how Cleopatra transforms material defeat and cultural bias into occasions for displays of achievement and success; how she refines seduction and the spectacle into propaganda paradigms that enshrine the image of a "*most triumphant lady*" (2.2). It attempts to show how she becomes a force entering the play from beyond Western society with a presence that overflows the measure, the mundane, and the proper; mesmerizing her opponents by disorienting them. Shakespeare's heroine suspends the immemorial compass-points of masculine hegemony.

Therefore, the first part of the article provides an overview of the concept of propaganda in Renaissance England in an attempt to establish a contextual foundation for the article's thesis. The second part will expand in tandem with two major concepts: Cleopatra's seduction stratagem and her suicide's significance in an effort to explore how they contribute to the heroine's aspirations for achievement. Finally, the conclusion comments on Cleopatra's symbolic immortality. As her enemies stand over her dead body, the representation that she crafts of herself in life begets continuous fascination that transcends the confinement of the grave and the caprice of time.

II. Propaganda in The Shakespearean Stage

There is a general tendency to understand propaganda as a pejorative concept that is regarded with suspicion and distrust. Jowett and O'Donnell remark that "words frequently used as synonyms for propaganda are lies, distortions, deceit, manipulation, mind control" (2012:2). With World War Two, Nazi Germany brandished propaganda as a major tool of psychological warfare boosting and reaffirming military efforts. It justified and legitimized a discourse of genocide and oppression basing its claims upon the invincibility of the nation's cause. It ushered an era of violence, during which the German Propaganda Ministry's control over means of communication blurred the lines between truth and falsehood.

However, 'propaganda' at its essence convey neutral denotations. In their book, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, Jowett and O'Donnell define it as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (2012:7). The core of their argument lies on the word 'intent' which can be horrendous or innocuous. A propaganda campaign to galvanize mass efforts to denounce and support victims of domestic violence or compulsory education for underaged children is salutary unlike a campaign that advances patriarchy and misogyny. Propaganda can serve national advancement and social solidarity.

Even though Propaganda might seem a current term intimately connected to modernity, the origins of the word itself goes back to the 16th century. In 1622, the Vatican founded the Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide (The Sacred Congregation for Propagation of the Faith). The purpose of the institution was to reassert Catholicism against the rising influences of Puritanism and Calvinism. It seems that the connection between propaganda, achievement, and perception has been already established since the Early Modern period. It even expands from the theological to the political. For instance, in 1532 in England, the Appeals Act was issued forbidding British people from sending appeals -religious or other- to the Pope in Rome. Instead, Henry VIII became the final authority on sacred and secular matters in England. To validate the act, a ferocious national campaign declared the king to be a descendent of Constantine the Great – the founder of Christendom- on his maternal side. Multiple resources made direct references to these associations such as Bishop Edward Fox's treatise *De vera Differentia* (1534) and Vergil's *Anglica Historia* (1534). Similar strategies were used by queen Elizabeth I to cement her claim to the British throne. From Gloriana to the Virgin Queen, the objective was to popularize among the British people the self-image of a supreme ruler in a world where power is a masculine prerogative.

III. Seduce to Control

Contextually, *Antony and Cleopatra* depicts a ravenous frame-by-frame imperialist invasion of eastern territories and bodies. Masculine virtues are extolled. Antony is a military general whose "*legs bestrid the ocean: his rear'd arm Crested the world*" (5.2). Octavius is the "*Sole sir o' the world*" (5.2), a consummate rhetorician and politician smoothing his speech into the glib diplomacy of the dawning age of empire. On the other hand, feminine virtues are discredited. Cleopatra is a libertine, volatile, and duplicitous woman obeying no laws but her own as Antony curses her:

> *Triple-turn'd whore! 'tis thou*
> *Hast sold me to this novice …*
> *Betray'd I am:*
> *O this false soul of Egypt! this grave charm, …*
> *Like a right gipsy, hath, at fast and loose,*
> *Beguiled me to the very heart of loss*" (4.12).

Her feminine otherness influences and tarnishes Antony's symbolic identity of a 'successful leader' turning his previous military achievements into arbitrary events conditioned by contextual moments.

Across masculine conversations in the play, Cleopatra is introduced as a linguistic construct. Her subjectivity is extended and abridged through language and discourse; "*if report be square to her*"(2.2), "*my reporter devised well for her*" (2.2), "*I will tell you* [of her]" (2.2), "*she in the habiliments of the goddess Isis that day appear'd; … As 'tis reported*" (3.6), and "*let me report to him Your sweet dependency*" (5.2). Cleopatra is the product of speech; a speech that is articulated by others and not the self and where Rome is the author and Cleopatra is the text. In "*Death of the Author*", Barthes states "to give an author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final significance, to close the writing" (1985:4). To confine Cleopatra to the moment of enunciation is to deprive her of any kind of continuity or power. She is the 'said' removed and distanced from meaning production. She is an inert 'content' whose truth or falsity is assessed and determined on the level of speaker and receiver. Hence, her existence and significance cease once the speakers are silent.

However, many scholars seem to allocate an implicit but a present vocal presence to Cleopatra. Alexander Leggatt advances that in Shakespeare's tragedy:

> Cleopatra in her own way turns political failure and death into personal triumph. Historical drama deals naturally in ending, loss, failure. The most impressive characters in Shakespeare's political world are not the winners but those who have confronted and absorbed the experience of loss, whose achievement is not to order a state but to assert themselves against inevitable ruin. (1988:244)

Accordingly, success becomes intrinsic. Against the utilitarian processes of the world, the tragic hero's true gain is the sustaining of inner values. As the world disintegrates under Roman yoke, Cleopatra's achievement is her ability to transform her inadequacies and insufficiencies into coherent acts of self-confirmation; into putting order within rather than without. Hence, Cleopatra's first meeting with Antony on the Cydnus River and her death scene turn into monumental instances that feature a heroine who rewrites failure into an apotheosis of glory.

As soon as he returns to Rome, Enobarbus -Antony's retainer- is questioned by his friends about the infamous queen of Egypt. Relating his first glimpse of Cleopatra, he says:

I will tell you,
The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne,
Burn'd on the water. The poop was beaten gold;
Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
The winds were love-sick with them; the oars were silver,
Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
The water which they beat to follow faster,
As amorous of their strokes (2.2)

Cleopatra presents herself as a feast for the mind and the senses. Bright bold colors surround her "*burnished, burn'd, gold, purple, silver*". Their piercing effects are softened by the sound of the flutes; a marker of an ethno-cultural difference of this first meeting with the queen of Egypt. She creates a background score to an appearance that reinforces images of newness and estrangement in this encounter with Antony.

It is not only the queen that is presented as a locus of attention. Likewise, her entourage is otherworldly. Enobarbus continues his remembrance of the barge saying:

"On each side her
Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
With divers-colour'd fans, whose wind did seem
To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool…
Her Gentlewomen, like the Nereids,
So many mermaids, tended her i'th'eyes, …
From the barge a strange invisible perfume hits the sense of the
Adjacent wharfs" (2.2)

Cupids, Nereids, and mermaids confer a mythical dimension to this appearance where a woman is turned into a goddess "*O'erpicturing that Venus where we see/ The fancy outwork nature*" (2.2). It accounts for Cleopatra's non-contingent being. According to Peter Stockwell "an attractor is a conceptual effect rather than a specific linguistic feature" (2009:56). The barge with its vivid colors and sounds is the first attractor for Cleopatra's Roman audience. Before they disentangle themselves from this initial image, they are engulfed within a replacement, her servants and maidens. They are the new attractor; a cynosure maintaining the intensity of the audience's fascination and attention.

While the Queen's exterior environment is exposed to the gazing crowds, Cleopatra shrouds herself in mystery. Enobarbus' accounts of her are brief "*for her own person it beggared all description*" (2.2). Barthes states:

> Beauty cannot really be explained: in each part of the body it stands out, repeats itself, but it does not describe itself ... thus, beauty is referred to an infinity of codes: lovely as Venus? But Venus lovely as what? As herself? There is only one way to stop the replication of beauty: hide it, return it to silence, to the ineffable, to aphasia, refer the referent back to the invisible. (1974:33)

Through a manipulation of appearances, Cleopatra turns her beauty into a surface that does not reflect but absorbs. More than this, to blur the distance between the real and its double, in this first meeting with Rome, she turns herself into an absent center. She remains within the realm of the imaginary rather than that of the tangible world. This linguistic absence magnifies her anonymous sensuality and she becomes a personalized ideal of beauty in the mind of every man. What Enobarbus's words leave unsaid, the imagination of each eager mind will complete. Her resistance to descriptions and definitions reveals a projection of a feminine beauty that nullifies all attempts to particularize it beyond the vague reference of her "*delicate cheeks*" (2.2). Cleopatra relocates her body beyond the reach of the visible, beyond rhetoric, and language's capacity to make meaning.

In post-colonialism, the exotic other is turned into a spectacle. It is looked at, gawked at, and laughed at. What if the exotic turns itself into a spectacle? What does it mean? What does it imply? Cleopatra arranges her first meeting with Antony to be a Spectacle. Her arrival on the Cydnus elevates the sight as the highest source of knowledge. What you know is what you see. In his book *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord argues that in the spectacle "the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings — dynamic figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behavior" (1995:18). Accordingly, Cleopatra transforms the reality of her otherness in Roman eyes into a series of alternative images; images that are no longer a manifestation of her alienation to her audience. The "*tawny*, "*gypsy*", "*wench*" become "*gold, purple, silver*". The darkness of her skin is replaced with light and light is the new reality of her being. To a certain extent, the spectacle allows Cleopatra to hide and transform what Rome hates and fears into an exciting fantasy.

Debord adds that "The spectacle presents itself as a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned. Its sole message is: "What appears is good; what is good appears." The passive acceptance it demands is already effectively imposed by its monopoly of appearances, its manner of appearing without allowing any reply" (1995:12). Cleopatra stages this arrival as a monologue of self-praise. It is a self-portrait of her power and the identity of Eastern culture. She creates an affective image that provocatively turns upside down common assumptions about her person and her sovereignty. The manner in which the Queen appears will dictate and define the way she is to be seen and understood by outside and foreign observers.

Debord contends that the spectacle "destroys the 'faculty of encounter' and replaces it with a social hallucination: a false consciousness of encounter, an 'illusion of encounter'" (1995:217). As a political leader, Cleopatra's awareness of the threat of Rome prompts her to create a counter discourse of elusive and mutable signs. The Barge Scene carries an embedded narrative. The successful sustaining of symbolic images of mythical beauty and wealth overlaps reality with an equally successful propaganda of an altered truth; Cleopatra is not a powerless sovereign, Egypt is not a conquered territory, and Rome is not the indomitable foe. The heroine redefines success and achievement not in terms of activity but in terms of representation; a representation that she fabricates and propagates.

Accordingly, what Cleopatra invokes when she first meets the Roman General and his court is not a sexual Cleopatra but a seductive Cleopatra. In this context, Belsay maintains that seduction "is a matter of nuances; it is witty and creative; it can be sublime. Seduction depends on a play of surfaces. It produces illusions, but refuses to participate in them … seduction defers satisfaction in order to sustain the pleasure of anticipation" (2003:39). The spectacle of Cleopatra's arrival is a performance that disseminates seduction. It is a theatrical display of visual and sensory adventures until the audience is absorbed into this insidious interplay of surfaces. In the play, Enobarbus comments "*the city cast her people out upon her; and Antony enthroned i'th'market-place did sit alone whistling to the air; which for vacancy had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too*" (2.2). Her seduction strategy thrives on the challenge of an obstacle to overcome with Cleopatra herself being that ethereal obstacle. By withholding satisfaction, she turns passion and desire into threats that can inundate the rational mind with promises of jouissance. For Enobarbus "*She makes hungry where she most satisfies*" (2.2). For Antony, she is a "*wrangling queen! Whom everything becomes- to chide, to laugh, to weep*" (1.1) and for Octavius she is "*bravest at the last*" (5.2). Cleopatra transmutes the Renaissance calculating courtesan into an aesthetic myth of womanhood. She destabilizes familiar Roman hierarchies, defies the rational, and compromises the prohibited, customs, and the socially proper. Again, the signifier that is Cleopatra is continuously self-deferred relegating her into some mysterious unreachable distance, into "*infinite variety*" (2.2).

Cleopatra, the colonized, re-appropriates propaganda to change it from an apparatus of deceit into the subaltern's expression of cognitive and ideological resistance. Marshall Soules observes that "we see before we understand, giving images persuasive power beyond reason's reach. Spectacles … send powerful visual

messages before audiences understand their significance" (2015:87). The spectacle of her floating vessel down the Cydnus allows Cleopatra to refract her dissidence and revolt against Rome into simplistic images of amorous pursuits. It veils her shrewd political mind and her relentless ambition to keep her country out of Roman clasp. It allows her to control Antony's passions and threaten the stability of the empire when she cleaves the Roman state into warring factions. Towards the end of the play, whereas Antony already kills himself in the fourth act, Cleopatra stays alive until the final scene. The preparations and execution of her suicide are dragged out over the entire fifth act; conventionally, this prominent position is reserved for the tragic hero. Cleopatra's suicide becomes another instance where the spectacle and seduction are expressions of an everlasting achievement.

Edwards claims that "Dying is fundamentally an active rather than a passive process; [dying is] an act of communication with the living" (2007:5). In the play Cleopatra calls her handmaids "*show me, my women, like a queen: go fetch my best attires. I am again for Cydnus to meet Marc Antony … bring our crown and all*" (5.2). In her final moments, Cleopatra proclaims another performance of death with costumes, props, gestures, and staging. The visual spectacle of her suicide is supplemented with an elaborate treatment and display of a body that is regally dressed, trimmed, and draped over her monument. The choice of poison preserves the body from trauma and perpetuates an aesthetic photograph permanently fixing her death in memory as Octavius observes "*she looks like sleep, as she would catch another Antony in her strong toil of grace*" (5.2).

Cleopatra converts failure into victory through a self-designed death "*it is great to do that thing that ends all other deeds; which shackles incidents and bolts up change"* (5.1). The scene of Cleopatra's death deflects the image of the corpse that suffers putrescence and formlessness to reinforce instead alternative imageries - invoked by scholars like Murr (1988), Deats (2005), and Hamlin (2013) - of Eve and Mary. One is of desire and temptation especially through the presence of the serpent. The other is of innocence as Cleopatra hushes Charmian "*dost thou not see my baby at my breast, that sucks the nurse asleep*?" (5.2). It suggests Mary and child iconography. Baudrillard claims that seduction is "a conspiracy of signs" and "every discourse is threatened with this sudden reversibility, absorbed into its own signs" (1990:9). In this spectacle of death, both Adam and the Christ are forgotten while Eve and Mary are foregrounded. They represent a feminine body that has enclosed the fate of humanity within its womb; Eve the first mother has secured Man's continuity and Mary has secured the means of his salvation. Both of these tropes – passion as well as motherhood - mirror a living and fertile world that recalibrates the picture of the decomposing corpse. It clears a legacy for a feminine sovereignty that can still communicate beyond death.

IV. Conclusion

The sumptuous display of Cleopatra's corpse gains a political significance. She reclaims her ruler identity. Her crown and her robe are symbols of her authority and heritage. They are arranged as reminders of "*a princess descended of so many royal kings*" (5.2). For Baudrillard "politics is not a real activity, but a simulation model whose manifest acts are but actualized impressions" (1990:65). Exposing the Queen's corpse with its adornments and embellishments to Roman eyes provides an opportunity to combat vulnerability and uncertainty about the fate of the conquered East by refocusing attention from Egypt's defeat into a reflection of a resilient and enduring state. Cleopatra rewrites history by outdoing in regal dignity Octavius' intentions to turn her existence into a homage to his success "*for her life in Rome would be eternal in our triumph*" (5.1).

Gschwandtner observes that "it is the lack of self-knowledge that stands in the way of finding the meaning of success and finding success meaningful" (2010:12). Cleopatra revolves in a granular environment where love, politics, and morality are shifting variables. Her ability to acknowledge the mercurial nature of these power nodes allows her to change accordingly. By testing her limitations and boundaries against these paradigms, she creates a mutable self that does not simply wear various visages but becomes multiple beings. This self-knowledge is at the core of her audacious choices that define her destiny and shape her idiosyncratic successes: successes that are not attuned to social stereotypes and guidelines.

For many scholars such as Manninen "Octavius unheroically presses on from success to success knowing the power he achieves assures neither permanence nor affection" (2015:206). Unlike Octavius, the Queen of Egypt "*turns her desolation … a better life*" (5.2) securing both permeance and affection "*she levelled at our purposes and being royal took her own way*" (5.2). Shakespeare's Cleopatra performs a posthumous feminine

achievement that will be unchangeable, enduring, and haunting. Her final success resides in her monopoly over a historical narrative that will determine who to be remembered and how to be remembered.

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