The Fine Art of Lying in Early Modern English Drama

Selected Papers
from the IASEMS Graduate Conference
“The Fine Art of Lying: Disguise, Dissimulation, and Counterfeiting in Early Modern Culture”

The British Institute of Florence
Florence, 7 April 2017

Edited by
Angelica Vedelago and Kent Cartwright

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A Matter of Speculation: Cleopatra's "Infinite Variety" in Her Performance of Suicide

Angelica Vedelago

Introduction

The Shakespearean character of Cleopatra has always invited critics to speculate upon the inner motives behind her actions. In *Antony and Cleopatra* Shakespeare seems to "frustrate our reasonable desire for certainty" in a more marked way than in other plays (Adelman 1973: 15): he gives Cleopatra no soliloquies or asides. Given this lack of psychological insight, questions about Cleopatra's supposedly real motives become even more irrelevant than those concerning any other fictional character: as Janet Adelman bluntly observes, "we cannot judge what we do not know" (Adelman 1973: 14). Likewise, Michael Neill points out that the level of "psychological exteriority" makes "the whole question of 'sincerity', of what Cleopatra (or Anthony) 'really' feels a matter of constantly teasing conjecture" (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 79). However, it is exactly the play's enigmatic quality that invites critics to account for the characters' inner intentions: any attempt at "conventional explicatory criticism" (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 79) might be impaired, but the whole play manifestly calls for speculations, with characters trying "to understand and judge each other and themselves" (Adelman 1973: 20). With her "infinite variety" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, II, 2, 243),[40] Shakespeare's Cleopatra inevitably elicits questions about her actions from both the other characters and the audience.

In line with the theme of this conference – disguise, dissimulation and counterfeiting in early modern culture – this paper focuses on the last scene of the play looking at three aspects of Cleopatra's "infinite variety" which best testify to her ambiguity: her rhetorical skills, her simulative and dissimulative techniques, and finally her preparations for suicide. My aim is not to formulate another interpretation of her inner motives, which is bound to remain a matter of speculation; it is rather to analyse how Shakespeare lures the audience into speculating. And he achieves this by having Cleopatra use various strategies – irony, flattery, simulation and dissimulation – which all enhance the uncertainty surrounding her character. Furthermore, in the scene of Cleopatra's suicide the distance between the queen and the audience is conflated by means of now veiled, now overt metatheatre, a device that reminds the audience of the play's fictional nature but contextually invites them to generate further comments and judgements on the character of Cleopatra.

The essay will be accordingly divided into three parts: I will first concentrate on Cleopatra's rhetorical skills of irony and flattery; second, on her use of (possibly) simulative and dissimulative strategies; and finally on the rituals she performs to commit suicide. The scope will be initially limited to the boundaries of the "dramatic or written text" but will gradually expand to encompass also the level of the "theatrical or performance text" (Elam 2012: 2). Finally, I will suggest that the serpent – featuring both as recurring image and as

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[40] All quotations from *Antony and Cleopatra* are taken from Shakespeare 1994 and the title of the play will henceforth be omitted in the following quotations.

stage object in the play – ideally encapsulates Cleopatra's "infinite variety" as analysed in both levels of the text.

Cleopatra's irony and flattery

Theorists of eloquence since Classical antiquity often expressed the fear that rhetoric may become a tool at the service of falsehood (Hadfield 2017: 158-159). Early modern English authors also shared this concern: Leonard Cox in *The Arte or Crafte of Rhetoryke* (1530), William Baldwin in his best-selling *A Treatise of Moral Philosophie* (1547), and George Puttenham in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) all reflect upon the risk of falsehood which rhetoric entails (Hadfield 2017: *passim*). What is more, other European works on the topic were circulating in translation, for instance Matthieu Coignet's *Politique Discourses upon Trueth and Lying*, translated from French by Edward Hoby in 1586, and Montaigne's *Essays*, translated by John Florio in 1603 (Hadfield 2017: 160, 179).

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare proves to be receptive to contemporary reflections on the ethics of rhetoric and its violations: Cleopatra in particular offers a sample of how a rhetorician of her calibre can manipulate her interlocutors. In this section, we shall focus on Cleopatra's use of flattery, one of the main faults imputed to the Egyptian queen in Shakespeare's major source for the composition of this play, Plutarch's *Life of Antony*:

> Plato writeth that there are four kinds of flattery; but Cleopatra divided it into many kinds. For she, were it in sport or in matters of earnest, still devised sundry new delights to have Antonius at commandment, never leaving him night or day, nor once letting him go out of her sight (Plutarch 1964: 205).

In Plutarch as well as in Shakespeare, the main targets of Cleopatra's flattery are Antony and her enemy Octavius Caesar, directly or by means of his supporters. On one occasion, Cleopatra addresses flattering messages to Caesar through his messenger Thidias so effectively that Enobarbus comes to doubt her allegiance to Antony:

> CLEOPATRA. He is a god and knows
> What is most right. Mine honour was not yielded,
> But conquered merely.
> ENOBARBUS. [Aside] To be sure of that,
> I will ask Antony. Sir, sir, thou art so leaky
> That we must leave thee to thy sinking, for
> Thy dearest quit thee. (III, 13, 60-66)

Here Cleopatra is confirming Thidias' insinuation that she did not attack Caesar willingly but under Antony's influence. Also, the queen asserts her submission to Caesar by performing all the gestures of a servant to a master, from kissing his hand to kneeling at his feet:

> Most kind messenger,
> Say to great Caesar this in deputation:
> I kiss his conqu'ring hand. Tell him I am prompt
> To lay my crown at's feet, and there to kneel
> Till from his all-obeying breath I hear
> The doom of Egypt. (III, 13, 73-78)

Is Cleopatra's flattery – that is her magnifying of his standing and the minimizing of her own

– aimed at ingratiating herself to Caesar, or is it combined with another of her rhetorical strategies, i.e. irony? Here we enter the realm of the motives of a fictional character and cannot reach a definitive answer. David Bevington seems persuaded that Cleopatra "is merely playing up to Thidias, restating Caesar's position with a kind of deflating mockery" but he immediately hesitates and undercuts his former statement: "But one cannot be certain; Enobarbus is not" (Bevington in Shakespeare 1990: 188, note to lines III, 13, 62-63). In his aside quoted above, Enobarbus doubts whether she is actually abandoning Antony as a sinking ship. Enobarbus' reaction best reflects the audience's bafflement at Cleopatra's indecipherable behaviour and exemplifies his role of commentator; in other passages, Enobarbus even voices Plutarch's own comments and transposes them into the play (Wilders in Shakespeare 1995: 59).

Although in Act III, scene 13 we are left without any clue as to whether Cleopatra is using flattery conventionally, as a way to win Caesar's favour, or if she is being ironical, in the last scene the irony behind her flattery towards Caesar is more clearly identifiable: what appears an ingratiating gesture also reads as subtle mockery. Cleopatra deploys an effective combination of flattery and irony against Caesar, either indirectly by means of his servant Proculeius, or directly in her final meeting with him. In her dialogue with Proculeius in Act V, scene 2, Cleopatra feigns acknowledgement of Caesar's superiority when she claims to be "his fortune's vassal":

> Pray you, tell him
> I am his fortune's vassal, and I send him
> The greatness he has got. I hourly learn
> A doctrine of obedience, and would gladly
> Look him i'th'face. (V, 2, 28-32)

Shakespeare has left some clues to unmask the irony behind Cleopatra's fawning words. As Bevington notes, the formal beneficiary of Cleopatra's promise is Caesar's fortune, not Caesar himself (Bevington in Shakespeare 1990: 239, note to line V, 2, 29). That Cleopatra should make herself the vassal of Caesar's fortune is hardly believable in light of her outpouring of contempt for Caesar at the outset of the scene, which further invalidates her promise of submission:

> 'Tis paltry to be Caesar –
> Not being Fortune, he's but Fortune's knave,
> A minister of her will. (V, 2, 2-4)

Moreover, Cleopatra's ironical attitude is evident since her confrontation with Proculeius:

> PROCULEIUS. Caesar sends greeting to the Queen of Egypt,
> And bids thee study on what fair demands
> Thou mean'st to have him grant thee.
> CLEOPATRA. What's thy name?
> PROCULEIUS. My name is Proculeius.
> CLEOPATRA. Anthony
> Did tell me of you, bade me trust you, but
> I do not greatly care to be deceived
> That have no use for trusting. If your master
> Would have a queen his beggar, you must tell him
> That majesty, to keep decorum, must
> No less beg than a kingdom. If he please
> To give me conquered Egypt for my son,

He gives me so much of mine own as I
Will kneel to him with thanks. (V, 2, 9-21)

Proculeius tries to deceive Cleopatra into believing not only that she can demand anything she wants – with Caesar paradoxically "bid[ding]" her to think "what fair demands" she has – but also that such power sets her in a position of superiority. However, Cleopatra appears to be perfectly aware of her inferiority: she is the one who has been defeated at the battle of Actium, a fact which the offer made by Caesar only foregrounds. Therefore, she perceives that Proculeius is trying to depict a distorted version of offer-demand relations in which the roles of the winner and loser are inverted.

Cleopatra's counterattack displays such awareness. Her second speech contains various figures of speech – a litotes, a paradox and a meiosis – all creating a "verbal irony", i.e., "the simplest form involving a discrepancy between statement and intent" (Buchanan 2010: 255). The litotes is to be found in the expression "I do not greatly care to be deceived": with an ironic move, Cleopatra conveys the message that she carefully looks after her own interests.[41] Therefore, Proculeius should realize that he cannot make a fool of her by getting her to believe that she has the upper hand. This explains why Cleopatra's irony in her answer is not tainted with flattery as usual: she questions his truthfulness with irony.

The litotes in line 14 links up with line 15 to form a paradox, a device which early modern critics such as Puttenham regarded as a figure of speech (Puttenham 1589: 189).[42] However, lines 14-15 – "I do not greatly care to be deceived / That have no use for trusting" – do not represent a paradox in the sense given by Puttenham in *The Arte of English Poesie*, in which he defines it as something "marvellous", which poets do not describe "simply but with some signe of admiration".[43] Rather, I intend here "paradox" more in its meaning as "apparently absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition" (*OED*: "paradox" A.2.a).[44]

Applying this conception, the paradox in lines 14-15 lies in the parallelism between deceit and trust. Cleopatra establishes this unexpected association after she comes to know Proculeius' name. She realizes that this man is the one Antony recommended to her as the only trustful person among their enemies ("None about Caesar trust but Proculeius", IV, 16, 50). Despite Antony's advice, however, she makes it clear that she does not want to establish any relation of trust, affirming that she is one "that ha[s] no use for trusting" (V, 2, 15). Bevington interprets this line as "I who know how dangerous trusting can be" (Bevington in Shakespeare 1990: 238, note to lines 14-15). However, a more literal interpretation of the relative clause is even more telling. If we consider the *OED* definition of "have no use for", lines 14-15 could be paraphrased as follows: "I have no great fondness for the idea of being deceived, I who do not need trusting" (*OED*: "use" P14: "to have no use for": a. "to be

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[41] Both Bevington and Neill appear uncertain as how to interpret this line, either literally or ironically (Bevington in Shakespeare 1990: 238, note to line V, 2, 14). However, Neill favours the latter option. He suggests two alternative paraphrases for this line – either "it is a matter of indifference to me whether I am deceived or not" or "I have no wish to…" – but to him the second "better fits the context" (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 303, note to line V, 2, 14).

[42] Since the twentieth century, critics have considered paradox more as "a mode of understanding by which poetry challenges our habits of thought" (Baldick 2001: 183) rather than a figure of speech.

[43] This definition coincides with one of the meaning attributed also today to the word, i.e., "a statement or tenet contrary to received opinion or belief, *esp.* one that is difficult to believe" (*OED*: "paradox" A.1.a).

[44] In his first book, Puttenham also proves to use the term 'paradox' to indicate a contradiction: "There be wise men, and of them the great learned man *Plutarch* that tooke upon them to perswade the benefite that men receive by their enemies, which though it may be true in manner of *Paradoxe*, yet I find mans frailties to be naturally such" (Puttenham 1589: 46). However, in this passage the implied meaning is that the thought of someone receiving benefits from their enemies is contrary to any expectation: again the focus is not so much the self-contradiction in a statement but the wonder caused by something that goes beyond the received opinion, in line with the etymology παρὰ δόξαν "contrary to expectation" (*OED*).

without need of something"; this meaning of the phrase was already in use in Shakespeare's time). Being thus paraphrased, Cleopatra's statement would then suggest a relation of similarity, if not identity, between "trusting" and "deceiving": they are not presented as opposed concepts, as Bevington's interpretation posits, but they are paralleled as if any concession of trust necessarily entailed a share of deceit. This may be seen as an example of what Michael Neill defines as the "Egyptian" use of paradox in the play, in which "opposites flourish in mysterious complementarity" (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 102). However, in a Roman perspective, from which paradox is "only self-devouring contradiction" (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 102), Cleopatra's disillusion with the idea of trust exposes the intrinsic hypocrisy of the Roman world: Rome's much renowned and celebrated virtues are not substantiated by coherently virtuous actions.

Cleopatra's answer to Proculeius ends with another figure of speech – the meiosis or, in Puttenham's terms, the 'meiosis or the Disabler' or "extenuation or diminution" (Puttenham 1589: 183) – consisting in an "understatement or 'belittling'" (Baldick 2001: 149). By comparing herself to a beggar, Cleopatra belittles herself but not "for modesties sake, and to avoid the opinion of arrogancie", which is the function Puttenham attributed to meiosis (Puttenham 1589: 183). As Neill has supposed, Cleopatra's self-diminution may here have an "ironic inflection" (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 303, note to line V, 2, 16).[45] If we look at the context, Cleopatra is clearly being ironic. Proculeius has just tried to flatter her by saying that she can ask whatever she wants but, at the same time, has implicitly reminded her that she is the one who should "study on what fair demands" (V, 2, 10) she has and Caesar is the one who can "grant" (V, 2, 11) her what she asks. As a reaction, Cleopatra takes the idea of asking to the extreme of begging, but the fact that she is begging "no less [...] than a kingdom" (V, 2, 18) demonstrates that she is not being modest at all. The paradox of begging a kingdom exposes the irony implicit in the meiosis, thus confirming the "ironic inflection" hypothesized by Neill. Furthermore, the ironic nuance is emphasized in another paradox intervening in the immediately following lines:

> If he please
> To give me conquered Egypt for my son,
> He gives me so much of mine own as I
> Will kneel to him with thanks. (V, 2, 18-21)

Cleopatra declares she will kneel at Caesar's feet provided he gives her what she requires of him. At first glance, this seems an ingratiating remark, echoing her words to Caesar's messenger Thidias quoted above (III, 13, 73-78). However, if we consider the formulation of the sentence, she is equating "conquered Egypt" with "so much of mine own"; therefore, she is pointing out that if Caesar fulfils her request, he will be merely giving her what has been hers all along.

Suicide: simulation (?) and dissimulation

In the second half of her dialogue with Proculeius – after their mutual exchange of false, flattering remarks and promises – Cleopatra's suspicion of any form of trust seems to be justified: the guards abruptly seize her, apparently by Proculeius' order. Once Cleopatra sees that her freedom is being threatened, she tries to stab herself. And it is at this point that Proculeius unintentionally suggests how important her life is to Caesar:

[45] The association between queen and beggars is a recurring trope in Shakespeare and is based on a ballad on the same theme (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 303, note to line V, 2, 16).

PROCULEIUS. Do not abuse my master's bounty by
Th'undoing of yourself. Let the world see
His nobleness well acted, which your death
Will never let come forth. (V, 2, 43-46)

The reason why Cleopatra's life is so important to Caesar will be clarified later, in Cleopatra's dialogue with another servant of the emperor, Dolabella: Caesar wants to lead her in triumph as her trophy. However, here we are already given a hint at Caesar's intention to display his power – or "bounty" in Proculeius' perspective – by means of Cleopatra: the word "acted" inevitably underscores Caesar's aim to set up a show of his "nobleness", in which Cleopatra is apparently meant to play a fundamental role. This is not the first reference to Caesar's triumph: in an outburst of anger against Cleopatra, Antony had wished that Caesar would take her, "hoist[ing]" her "up to the shouting plebeians" (IV, 13, 34). Cleopatra herself imagines the "imperious show" that "full-fortuned Caesar" might want to set up (IV, 16, 25-26). The prospect of Caesar's triumph does not constitute a real possibility to the audience when it is envisaged by Antony, whose words are just a curse coming from an enraged lover ("Let him take thee…", IV, 13, 33 ff.); nor does it have any more substance in Cleopatra's mouth, since she is only imagining and rejecting the worst scenario that she can think of. However, these inconsistent references coupled with Proculeius' hint at an acting of Caesar's "bounty" (V, 2, 43) and "nobleness" (V, 2, 45) do give the idea of Caesar's triumph more reality, as it now sounds like a decision that Caesar has already taken and that Proculeius, as his servant, has been informed about.

What effect does the awareness of Caesar's plans produce on Cleopatra? When Proculeius gives her clues about the future Caesar holds in store for her should she remain alive (V, 2, 44-46), Cleopatra summons death:

Where are thou, Death?
Come hither, come! Come, come, and take a queen
Worth many babes and beggars! (V, 2, 46-48)

Then, she delivers a self-assertive and characteristically hyperbolic speech,[46] which seems a genuinely outraged reaction to the prospect of being carried to Rome in triumph:

Sir, I will eat no meat, I'll not drink, sir;
If idle talk will once be necessary,
I'll not sleep, neither! This mortal house I'll ruin,
Do Caesar what he can. Know, sir, that I
Will not wait pinioned at your master's court,
Nor once be chastised with the sober eye
Of dull Octavia. Shall they hoist me up
And show me to the shouting varletry
Of censuring Rome? Rather a ditch in Egypt
Be gentle grave unto me! Rather on Nilus' mud
Lay me stark nak'd and let the water-flies
Blow me into abhorring! Rather make
My country's high pyramides my gibbet
And hang me up in chains! (V, 2, 49-62)

An echo of Antony's curse ("Let him take thee / And Hoist thee up to the shouting

[46] About the role of hyperbole in the play see Adelman (1973: 111 ff) and Neill (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 68 ff).

plebeians!", IV, 13, 33-34), this speech may tell a lot about the reasons behind her suicide. It would appear clear that she decides to die not so much out of despair for Antony's death – or at least not solely for this reason – but mostly because she cannot bear the idea of being imprisoned and led to Rome as an "Egyptian puppet" (V, 2, 208).

Now, we cannot establish how "genuinely" Cleopatra means to kill herself; however, what we can do in relation to her suicide is to look at how her outward stance towards it changes in the play. Before getting to know about Caesar's intentions from Proculeius, Cleopatra's utterances about suicide are quite contradictory. At first, she toys with the idea of killing herself, and on one occasion, even with irremediable consequences. Following Charmian's advice, Cleopatra makes Antony believe that she killed herself, while she hides in her funerary monument.[47] However, in so doing, she unwittingly gives him one more reason for suicide, i.e., the shame of "lack[ing] / the courage of a woman" (IV, 15, 59-60).

In the following scene, when Antony, close to death, is brought to her and laid at the bottom entry of her monument, she does not go to him there, but instead has him lifted up to an upper entry, because she fears to "be taken":

> I dare not, dear –
> Dear my lord, pardon – I dare not,
> Lest I be taken. Not th'imperious show
> Of the full-fortuned Caesar ever shall
> Be brooched with me, if knife, drugs, serpents have
> Edge, sting, or operation. I am safe. (IV, 16, 23-25)

Her feigned suicide in Act IV, scene 14 becomes here partially substantiated by this declaration of intention to die by any means at her disposal, be it a "knife", "drugs" or "serpents". Now Cleopatra sees herself "safe" only in her monument but not in the way it was before, as a hiding place from Antony's rage (IV, 14): now, for her, safety is only in death. The monument, in which all the action of the last scene will take place (Neill 1994: 128), prematurely fulfils the function for which it was built, a tomb, a physical counterpart for "house of death" (IV, 16, 82) into which Cleopatra wants to rush, as she metaphorically refers to her suicide:

> Then is it sin
> To rush into the secret house of death
> Ere death dare come to us? (IV, 16, 81-83)

After her lover's last gasp, Cleopatra's gives way to despair and contempt for the world ("there is nothing left remarkable / Beneath the visiting moon", IV, 16, 69-70). She now seems mostly concerned to do "what's brave, what's noble" (IV, 16, 87) "after the high Roman fashion" (IV, 16, 88). Nevertheless, far from fulfilling her stoic project, she indulges in talks about suicide, leading Laurens J. Mills to exclude "any interpretation of her tragedy as a love tragedy" (Mills 1960: 155). Indecisiveness prevails over firmness of intentions.

As mentioned above, Cleopatra abandons her temporizing when she attempts to stab herself in front of Proculeius and invokes death once she realizes that Caesar wants to lead her in triumph (V, 2, 46-48). Only then does she pronounce her firm protestation of freedom. However, after the dialogue with Proculeius, the queen prompts Dolabella, someone she appears to trust despite his being among Caesar's supporters, to give her explicit confirmation of what she knows already:

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[47] We know that it was a funeral monument from Plutarch (Plutarch 1964: 272, 279; Neill 1994: 353-354).

CLEOPATRA. Know you what Caesar means to do with me?
DOLABELLA. I am loath to tell what I would you knew.
CLEOPATRA. Nay, pray you, sir.
DOLABELLA. Though he be honourable –
CLEOPATRA. He'll lead me then in triumph?
DOLABELLA. Madam, he will: I know't. (V, 2, 106-110)

By insisting on Cleopatra's hesitation, Shakespeare here seems to invite us to reflect once again upon her motives: why is she asking for confirmation about Caesar's plans if she had declared her intention to die on many occasions? How reliable is her promise to kill herself? What impact do Proculeius' and Dolabella's revelations of Caesar's plans have on her? Critics have variously assessed the relation between Cleopatra's decision to commit suicide and her meetings with Proculeius and Dolabella; some of them have even questioned whether Cleopatra's decision is in any way related to these dialogues.[48] Just as Cleopatra manipulates her interlocutors on stage, so does Shakespeare with his audience, casting doubts as to the reasons behind her suicide. Inscrutability stands as one distinctive feature of Cleopatra's character, no matter how masterfully persuasive might sound her protestation of freedom through death. We can only accept that there is more than one viable interpretation and that this is exactly the point with Shakespeare's Cleopatra. What is more, everyone in the audience would know that Cleopatra eventually kills herself; what is relevant here is how she gets to accomplish her suicidal plans, i.e., which strategies she employs.

Along with her rhetorical skills analysed in section 1, Cleopatra adopts two other strategies: at first, simulation and, later, dissimulation, depending on the different purposes she has. The definition of these terms provided by Francis Bacon in his *Essays* coincide with my interpretation of Cleopatra's twofold tactics in this context:

> There be three degrees, of this Hiding and Vailing of a Mans Selfe. The first *Closeness*, *Reservation*, and *Secrecy* […]. The second *Dissimulation*, in the *Negative*; when a man lets fall Signes, and Arguments, that he is not, that he is. And the third, *Simulation*, in the Affirmative; when a Man industriously, and expressely, faigns, and pretends to be, that he is not (Bacon 1625: 27).

What I suggest is that Shakespeare has Cleopatra shift her strategy from simulation to dissimulation after her meetings with Proculeius and Dolabella, when it becomes clear that Caesar wants to lead her in triumph. This bears out the hypothesis that she kills herself mainly out of fear of becoming one of Caesar's captives and sees self-imposed death as the only way to preserve her freedom. In light of this assumption, her dialogue with Proculeius could easily be interpreted as mere impulsiveness, standing out as a rare insight into her inner thoughts: once she realizes that she is going to be treated like a captive, she immediately tries to stab herself and, being prevented from doing so, she bursts out claiming her freedom and declaring her intention to kill herself. From this perspective, there is no simulation. However, two aspects may lead us to interpret her attempt at suicide in Act V, scene 2 rather differently: the precedent of her feigned suicide in Act IV, scene 14 to Antony's detriment and her

[48] In particular, there appears to be a strong emphasis on Dolabella's revelation. According to John Wilders, this meeting is decisive: "it is only when she discovers from Dolabella that the latter option [i.e., to come to terms with Caesar] is not open that she resolves finally on suicide" (Wilders in Shakespeare 1995: 46-47). By contrast, Richard C. Harrier affirms that the queen has planned to kill herself "only if her terms are not met" in the negotiations with Caesar (Harrier quoted in Stirling 1964: 305-306). Similarly, Brents Stirling believes that although "from IV, 15 [IV, 16 in Shakespeare 1994] onward Shakespeare implies from time to time that Cleopatra is hedging", he never leads us to think that Cleopatra regards suicide as the last resort; in Stirling's view, "the effect" conveyed is "one of growing assurance that Cleopatra will not temporize" (Stirling 1964: 306).

temporizing up to that point suggest that she might well have simulated to stab herself. True, she had no certainty that someone would stop her at this point,[49] but the guards had just received the order to seize her and there was a high probability that they would try and prevent her from killing herself. Also, since it is thanks to her sensational gesture that Cleopatra gets the information she was looking for, i.e., what were Caesar's intentions with her alive. One might even conjecture that the reason why she feigned to stab herself is to see Caesar's reaction through Proculeius if she were to die.

It could therefore be argued that in the last scene Cleopatra initially adopts a strategy in which she "industriously, and expressly feigns and pretends to be" what she is not (Bacon 1625: 27): this means that she feigns to be willing to die, whereas the events show that she is only temporizing. In line with this interpretation, in her dialogue with Proculeius Cleopatra is only feigning an attempt of suicide, vainly threatening to let herself die out of hunger and thirst, and indulging in a seemingly uncontrolled reaction at his hinting at Caesar's plans for her. She also wants Proculeius to report that she longs for death ("Say I would die", V, 2, 70). It must be added, however, that her making sure that her intention to die is reported to Caesar could back up both hypotheses: on the one hand, i.e., if she is just being impulsive, this would be a clear warning to his enemy; on the other, i.e., if she is simulating, she would be using her life as a leverage to attract him so as to manipulate him directly as she will do in the Seleucus scene.

Whatever her inner motives for suicide – love for Antony or avoidance of captivity or both – it is clear that, when she finally meets Caesar, Cleopatra abandons her impulsiveness or her simulation and turns to a strategy of dissimulation instead. In Bacon's terms, she "lets fall Signes, and Arguments" that she is not what she is (Bacon 1625: 27). While in front of Proculeius she threatens to starve herself to death, in front of Caesar she makes it very clear that she is not meditating suicide at all. And actually, unlike Plutarch, Shakespeare does not mention Cleopatra's request to be buried with Antony (Plutarch 1964: 290), which would lead Caesar to believe she was contemplating suicide. It takes a long time before she actually does the deed she has so often anticipated. However, far from witnessing to hesitation, her stalling here seems strategic: if we assume that defending her freedom is the motive behind her suicide, her new strategy, i.e., dissimulation, may equally serve this purpose.

In her direct confrontation with Caesar, Cleopatra makes the most of her dissimulative skills in order to dispel any doubt about her intention to live on. Cleopatra kneels before Caesar, and at his request to rise, she seals her act with words of submission:

> Sir, the gods
> Will have it thus: my master and my lord
> I must obey. (V, 2, 115-117)

And when Caesar minimizes the attack she and Antony have made on Rome as "things but done by chance" (V, 2, 120), Cleopatra plays the victim pleading her womanly "frailties" (V, 2, 123) as excuse:

> Sole sir o'th'world,
> I cannot project mine own cause so well
> To make it clear, but do confess I have
> Been laden with like frailties which before
> Have often shamed our sex. (V, 2, 120-124)

[49] I thank one of the reviewers for this observation.

Interestingly, Cleopatra opens her rhetorically refined plea by questioning her very dialectic ability. However, she is only indulging in false modesty in order to produce a harmless and vulnerable image of herself; hence, here we have a proper case of meiosis or belittling in Puttenham's sense as mentioned above (Puttenham 1589: 183). Cleopatra's own words disprove her: her obsequious address to Caesar already exposes her mastery of rhetoric. Also, the audience had the chance to appreciate her rhetorical skills on many occasions earlier in the play: not only in her deployment of flattery and irony, as we have seen in section 1, but also in the hyperbolic narration of her dreams about Antony to Dolabella (V, 2, 82-92).

Cleopatra's dissimulative strategy goes even further: after she has aroused pity playing on her femininity and presumed lack of eloquence, she apparently sets up a scene with her treasurer Seleucus as part of her strategy to lead Caesar to think that she has no intention to commit suicide. Cleopatra hands him over a list of her possessions and summons her treasurer to confirm the amount. However, the latter refutes his queen's statement as he points out that she has made no mention of half of her treasure. Cleopatra's outraged response to the disloyalty of her servant, however, dissimulates her intention to make Caesar believe that she wants to keep her jewels for herself for future occasions, which would then mean she is not even considering suicide as an option (Bevington in Shakespeare 1990: 246, note to line V, 2, 139; Stirling 1964: 300).

The Seleucus scene perfectly exemplifies Cleopatra's dissimulative art. Her feigning is so effective that it still leaves a question open: it is not exactly clear to what extent this dissimulation involves Seleucus himself, i.e. whether he is serving as Cleopatra's unwitting instrument or he is consciously participating in her schemes. In this regard, it is worth comparing Shakespeare's scene with his source. In Plutarch Seleucus is there "by chance" (Plutarch 1964: 287), and it is by his own initiative that he disclaims Cleopatra's list of her possessions, whereas in Shakespeare he is prompted by Cleopatra to verify and confirm her declaration. This change is significant: as Bevington and other critics have pointed out,[50] Cleopatra and Seleucus might have orchestrated "a prearranged scene of deception" (Bevington in Shakespeare 1990: 246, note to line V, 2, 139), whilst in Plutarch, as Stirling explains, "Cleopatra's ruse is all alone and is an impulse of the moment" (Stirling 1964: 300).

Moreover, in the Seleucus scene, dissimulation intersects with flattery. The queen skilfully interjects her outburst of indignation at her treasurer's (possibly feigned) treachery and disloyalty with an ingratiating reference to Caesar's sister:

> O Caesar, what a wounding shame is this,
> That – thou vouchsafing here to visit me,
> Doing the honour of thy lordliness
> To one so meek – that mine own servant should
> Parcel the sum of my disgraces by
> Addition of his envy! Say, good Caesar,
> That some lady trifles have reserved
> Immoment toys, things of such dignity
> As we greet modern friends withal; and say
> Some nobler token I have kept apart
> For Livia and Octavia, to induce
> Their mediation – must I be unfolded
> With one that I have bred? (V, 2, 159-171)

Only when Caesar has gone, does Cleopatra throws off her flattering mask. It is now apparent that she has been only pretending to accept his conditions:

[50] Stirling quotes many critics who agree on the same interpretation of the scene with Seleucus (Stirling 1964: 300).

He words me girls, he words me, that I should not
Be noble to myself. (V, 2, 191-192)

Up to this point, Cleopatra has proven to be an excellent manipulator by means of her rhetorical skills and her mastery of both simulative and dissimulative art: the first victims of this manipulation are the spectators, who are unable to identify what aim Cleopatra is pursuing up to her meetings with Proculeius and Dolabella. However, her new awareness of Caesar's intentions makes her increasingly "marble-constant" (V, 2, 240), as she defines herself towards the accomplishment of her suicidal plans. Her "resolution's placed" (V, 2, 238); now, it is only a matter of "acting it out".

Suicide and metatheatre

From Caesar's exit on, the focus shifts onto Cleopatra's orchestration of her suicide: Cleopatra here finally enacts what she has only been talking about heretofore. However, the audience was familiar with the story: everyone would expect her to commit suicide from the outset of the play. How can Shakespeare revive this event beyond a mere reproduction of historical facts? His signature in the story's end is identifiable in the metatheatrical pattern of the suicide scene: Cleopatra's self-annihilation is presented as a most macabre play to be performed. Although metatheatre is a recurring feature in Shakespeare's later production (Holland 2004), Cleopatra's is "the most self-consciously *performed*, the most elaborately gestural dying in all Shakespearean tragedy" (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 78). As she prepares for suicide, the queen has her clothes changed on stage, thus literally "disguising" herself, i.e., putting herself out of her usual guise:[51]

Show me, my women, like a queen. Go fetch
My best attires. I am again for Cydnus,
To meet Mark Anthony. (V, 2, 227-229)

The theme of disguise is crucial in terms of metatheatrical references: it is linked to the early modern theatrical practice of casting male actors, especially young ones for female roles (Shapiro 1969: 46).[52] Gender cross-dressing in theatre is referred to more openly in the second half of the last scene of the play (V, 2), before Cleopatra begins to direct the staging of her own death. When Cleopatra hears the information Dolabella has been able to gather about Caesar's plans, which includes taking her and her children to Rome, she bursts out in anger and pictures the welcome she would receive if she came as Caesar's trophy:

Saucy lictors
Will catch at us like strumpets, and scald rhymers

[51] The "primary" sense of "disguise" is "to put out of one's usual guise, manner, or mode (of dress, etc.)" (*OED*).
[52] With reference to *Antony and Cleopatra* and the possible use of a boy for the demanding role of the queen, Joy Leslie Gibson writes: "the part of Cleopatra is often quoted as being impossible for a boy to play, and indeed, there is no record of it having been performed in Shakespeare's time. Perhaps he decided that he would rather not have some 'squeaking Cleopatra' play the part. Nevertheless, the role was written with a boy in mind" (Gibson 2000: 104). As Jason Scott-Warren admits, "the near-total absence of female actors from the professional stage before the Restoration" remains still inexplicable, also because England is the only exception in Europe in that regard: on the continent women were not prevented from acting (Scott-Warren 2005: 115). For further reference to this early modern practice in the play see Cleopatra's outburst of sorrow at Antony's death: "Young boys and girls / Are level now with men" (V, 2, 67-68). Cleopatra's disclaiming of her own womanhood in V, 2, 237-238 ("I have nothing / of a woman in me") could equally contain a reference to this early modern practice.

Ballad us out o'tune. The quick comedians
Extemporally will stage us, and present
Our Alexandrian revels – Anthony
Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
I'th'posture of a whore. (V, 2, 214-221)

Cleopatra's anticipatory outline would strike contemporary audiences as ironic on account of its references to the early modern practice of transvestism amongst male actors. As Bevington has noticed, Cleopatra is here breaking "theatrical illusion" (Bevington in Shakespeare 1990: 29).[53] As a result, the boundaries between stage and reality become blurred. The use of the noun "boy" as a verb – an example of anthimeria,[54] which had puzzled Shakespeare's nineteenth-century editors (Rackin 1972: 201) – performs in language the substitution of a woman with a boy. Just as the noun substitutes for the verb, so a boy takes the place of a woman. Shakespeare thus turns the boy's sex, which was "a visible 'defect'" into an "aesthetic advantage" (Gruber 1985: 40). When Cleopatra asks her women for her "best attires" (V, 2, 228), she is therefore adding another layer of disguise to her transvestising.

Cleopatra also demands to wear her royal attributes ("Bring our crown and all", V, 2, 232; "Give my robe. Put on my crown", V, 2, 279), which all stand out as "presentational" images but also as objects on stage symbolizing Cleopatra's "majesty and queenliness in death" (Charney 1963: 122-123). Her servant Charmian, who is about to commit suicide in turn, makes sure that the effect of Cleopatra's ultimate disguise will last even after her death: as her last tribute to her queen, she performs the final adjustments of Cleopatra's royal attire, by straightening the queen's crown on her now lifeless body:

Your crown's awry;
I'll mend it, and then play. (V, 2, 316-317)

The verb "play", which Charmian uses to adumbrate her impending suicide, gestures towards the metatheatrical quality of her death and Cleopatra's. Furthermore, as Rackin suggests, here "the word 'play' emphasizes both the hedonistic and the theatrical aspect of the very Egyptian death these women are contriving" (Rackin 1972: 209).[55] This multiple rehearsal of the coronation act has led Michael Neill to identify an "anachronistic borrowing from the language of contemporary political pageantry" (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 126).

Cleopatra's staging of her own suicide comes as the culmination of other metatheatrical passages distributed throughout the play; these moments all involve the queen, either as a skilled actress "whom everything becomes, to chide, to laugh, / to weep" (I.1.51-52) in her histrionic "infinite variety", or as a director. In one of her outbursts of jealousy in Act 1, she instructs – and in a way directs – Antony on how he "should perform his grief" (Bates 2012: 435) for the death of his first wife Fulvia:

I prithee turn aside, and weep for her;
Then bid adieu to me, and say the tears

[53] As Phyllis Rackin argues, the "squeaking boy speech" opens another major issue, namely "the issue of the nature of the plays" (Rackin 1972: 207). Rackin discusses the implications of the metatheatricality of the play for the contemporary debate about theatrical conventions and tastes: "The play seems perfectly calculated to offend the rising tide of neoclassical taste and to disappoint rational expectation"; Shakespeare thus "defies the expectations of reason and the possibilities of realistic representation […] [by reminding us] that he cannot truly represent" Cleopatra's greatness by means of a "squeaking" boy (Rackin 1972: 207).

[54] "The substitution of one part of the speech for another" (Rackin 1972: 201).

[55] The hedonistic aspect of death is enhanced by the images of the figs and the snakes, both symbols of sexuality; (Adelman 1973: 63).

> Belong to Egypt. Good now, play one scene
> Of excellent dissembling, and let it look
> Like perfect honour. (I, 3, 77-81)

Something similar happens early in Act IV, scene 16, the scene that ends with Antony's death. As if foreboding the impending death of her lover, Cleopatra depicts her sorrow in ways which suggest that she is preparing to rehearse the part of a lady in grief and in love, more than actually to grieve:

> All strange and terrible events are welcome,
> But comforts we despise. Our size of sorrow,
> Proportioned to our cause, must be as great
> As that which makes it. (IV, 16, 3-6)

The use of the word "must" turns what should be a verbalization of her inner feelings into a self-imposed attitude.

What effect does metatheatre produce in the suicide scene? In general terms, metatheatrical references enlarge the scope of the "dramatic or written text" to include also the "theatrical or performance text" (Elam 2012: 2). Metatheatre works as "estranging device building up to an increased awareness of [the audience's] role as receivers in the theatrical event" (Soncini 1999: 18). By pointing to the inherently fictional nature of the play, Shakespeare reminds us of our condition as spectators: in so doing, he establishes a complicity with the audience, winking at them about their suspension of disbelief. However, the audience is not treated as passive onlookers: the audience is asked to fill in the gaps, is engaged "in the creation of meaning" (Soncini 1999: 12). In this play, in which "not even scepticism is a secure position", spectators are "forced to participate in the act of judgement" (Adelman 1973: 24). This applies to both of the dimensions of the play we have identified, the dramatic and the performative text. At the dramatic level, the reliability of any judgement about Cleopatra's inner states has been questioned throughout the play, and it is exactly this feature that engages both the other characters and the audience in speculations about her. Adelman sees this uncertainty as a crucial feature of the play as a whole: it is "the very indirectness of *Antony and Cleopatra* that insures the direct participation of the audience in it" (Adelman 1973: 31). In the play, Cleopatra herself acknowledges the impossibility of producing any final judgment on people's motives by comparing Antony to a piece of anamorphic art, with images changing depending on the perspective (Bevington in Shakespeare 1990: 136, note to line II, 5, 118-119):

> Though he be painted one way like a Gorgon,
> The other way's a Mars. (II, 5, 117-118)

A similar anamorphic effect is achieved at the performative level with metatheatre (Soncini 1999: 19): Shakespeare occasionally unveils the theatrical illusion lurking beneath the main representational level. In so doing, he adds a further layer of complexity for the audience, in case it should not be puzzling enough with Cleopatra's baffling actions and words. However, as Adelman puts it, "Shakespeare is not dallying with us only to confuse us". Metatheatre is an instrument to enhance the audience's self-consciousness not only as spectators but also as commentators and judges of the events just like the other characters or as "silent extensions of them" (Adelman 1973: 39).

In the last scene, however, metatheatre acquires a further significance. Cleopatra's performance of suicide is not just another hint at theatrical self-reflexiveness, it is a play within a play in its own right. And Cleopatra undertakes the role of director of this embedded

play, in which she also happens to perform the main action. For the first time, we know that her words will correspond to her deeds: there is no more space for irony or flattery, simulation or dissimulation, as she finally accomplishes what she has postponed, after much temporizing and scheming. However, the characterization of her suicide as a performance directed by herself does not drive away the doubts regarding her inner motives: far from compensating for Cleopatra's ambiguity, this metatheatrical performance heightens Cleopatra's "infinite variety" by way of attaching a new role to her character, namely the role director of her own death.

Cleopatra's ability to manipulate either with her rhetorical skills or her deceitful strategies alongside the metatheatrical performance of her suicide are all aspects that seem to be reunited and conflated in the image of the serpent,[56] the instrument of Cleopatra's self-imposed death. As is well known, some of the details in the mechanics of Cleopatra's death come from *The Life of Antony*; one of them is the countryman bringing a basket of figs containing the instrument for the suicide: several asps in Shakespeare,[57] one asp only in Plutarch. And yet, what in Plutarch figures as a mere detail – an asp as Cleopatra's weapon of self-destruction – achieves in Shakespeare a major significance since the appearance of the serpent is where the dramatic and the performative text intersect: the snake is not just a word, or, in Maurice Charney's terms, a mere "verbal image" (Charney 1963: 8). Since a true reptile is thought to enter the stage, the serpent gains the status of "non verbal or 'presentational' image", i.e., an image "that is not part of the spoken word of the text, but directly presented in the theatre" (Charney 1963: 7-8), thus exploiting the characteristically theatrical mode of ostension, namely the action of pointing out an object.[58] What is more, far from being just put on display, the serpent is made to perform no less than the killing of Cleopatra, one of the key-actions in the play. The customary "distinction between the active subject, embodied by the actor, and the objects to which he relates and which participate in the action through his agency" is thus undermined (Elam 2002: 13).

It must be added, however, that even on the purely dramatic level, the serpent as a "verbal image" stands as the ideal metaphor for the various declinations of Cleopatra's baffling changeability: she can deceive and change her "skin" at will just like a serpent. And this metaphorical connection between the image of the serpent and Cleopatra explicitly surfaces in the play-text in various associations, each referring to a different aspect of Cleopatra's "infinite variety".[59] Antony calls her his "serpent of old Nile" (I, 5, 25) or defines the time spent in Egypt under the spell of Cleopatra's seductive and serpentine enchantment as "poisoned hours" (II, 2, 95); "the flattering thought that Antony is thinking of her" (Bevington in Shakespeare 1990: 107, note to line I, 5, 28) is to Cleopatra a "most delicious poison", which she consciously administers to herself (I, 5, 27).

And once we look at the play from the performative perspective, the asps also feature as actors, who, directed by Cleopatra, are made to play a crucially instrumental role in the gruesome show of the queen's suicide. As Cleopatra remarks while she applies the first asp to her arm, poor instruments may bring liberty and do noble deeds:

> What poor an instrument
> May do a noble deed! He brings me liberty. (V, 2, 236-237)

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[56] Here I will be discussing only parts of the various declinations of the symbolism attached to the serpent. For more details on this topic, see Adelman (1973: 62-64) and Madelaine (Madelaine in Shakespeare 1998: 22).

[57] We infer that in Shakespeare there is more than one asp from the stage directions: "She applies an asp" (V, 2, 297 SD) and "She applies another asp" (V, 2, 306 SD).

[58] Keir Elam defines ostension as "the most 'primitive' form of signification" upon which theatre draws and explains its functioning as follows: "in order to refer to, indicate or define a given object, one simply picks it up and shows it to the receiver of the message in question" (Elam 2002: 26).

[59] Another symbol for Cleopatra's changeability is water, notably the river Nile (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 85).

Moreover, the serpent/actor is to Cleopatra here not just an instrument of death, but also a "baby":

> Peace, peace!
> Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,
> That sucks the nurse asleep? (V, 2, 307-309)

In a mutual exchange of life and death – a morbid maternal relationship, Cleopatra feeds a dreadful serpent / "baby", which in return gives death to her. Mary Olive Thomas interprets Cleopatra's maternal attitude towards the serpent as a way to assert her vitality even when she is about to die (Thomas 1963: 181). In the immediately following lines, "Cleopatra's imagination transforms the asp to a surrogate for Antony himself" (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 124), thereby turning the maternal care for the serpent into sexual pleasure:

> As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle –
> O Anthony! Nay, I will take thee too. (V, 2, 310-311)

The serpent on Cleopatra's breast evokes not only maternity or erotic pleasure: as Neill has pointed out, this image also recalls "the *macabre* tradition" (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 124), especially the *gisant* sculptures of rotting cadavers with worms in *transi* tombs, with which Shakespeare must have been familiar.[60] This macabre association is prepared by the ambiguous references to the serpent as a worm when the Clown brings the basket of figs with the asps inside Cleopatra's monument. Cleopatra welcomes him, asking if he has brought "the pretty worm / of Nilus" (V, 2, 242-243), and the Clown himself repeatedly refers to it as a "worm". Although the Clown's remarks are full of sexual overtones ("she [a woman] makes a very good report o'th'worm", V, 2, 254; "I wish you joy of the worm", V, 2, 259), some of them also sound ominous: "His biting is immortal" (V, 2, 246), where by immortal he means "mortal" (Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 318, note to line V, 2, 246); "there is no goodness in the worm", V, 2, 265-266). From this perspective, Cleopatra's maternal relationship towards the asps is turned into a process of decomposition of the queen's body. Moreover, this macabre effect is all the more enhanced by the backdrop, Cleopatra's funerary monument.

Cleopatra's relationship with the serpent can be seen as yet another, multiple paradox in this play. Not only does Cleopatra use a life – that of the asp – to end life (Bates 2012: 440); she nourishes this very life with her body, thus prefiguring its putrefaction by worms, and in exchange she receives death. Yet, the Clown had warned her: "Give it nothing I pray you, for it is not / worth the feeding" (V, 2, 268-269). On the other hand, when she is about to annihilate herself, Cleopatra transfers her life to a serpent, her symbolical counterpart in the play. And it is only apt that she should choose a real snake to kill her own snaky self, again in a perfect coincidence of verbal and nonverbal meanings.

The manifold nature of the serpent – its role as a verbal sign, as a presentational object and, to a certain extent, as an active subject – mirrors the multiple facets of Shakespeare's Cleopatra, namely her skills as a refined manipulator through flattery and irony, as a shrewd strategist deploying (possibly) simulation and dissimulation and finally as a director of her own, highly macabre death. At the dramatic level of the text, Shakespeare problematizes the

[60] That these tombs have impressed Shakespeare is even more evident in a play such as *Romeo and Juliet* (Green 2016: 259; Neill in Shakespeare 1994: 123-125). The term *gisant* indicates "a recumbent effigy, frequently idealized" (Green 2016: 252). The *transi* or cadaver tomb is a medieval tradition of burial, which "instead of burying the corpse beneath the ground thrusts it menacingly before the eyes of the living, presaging their own inescapable fate"; these tombs sometimes were "double" in the sense that they "combined a life-sized *gisant* figure […] depicting the deceased as he or she was in life, housed with a life-sized emaciated corpse or putrefying skeleton" (Green 2016: 252).

unreliability of Cleopatra's utterances and actions; at the performative level, he makes her the catalyst of metatheatrical reflections, which further adds to Cleopatra's cryptic nature rather than offering a solution to the audience's doubts: in her performance of suicide she figures both as leading lady and director. However, by conflating the distance between spectators and stage, Shakespeare at least grants the audience the awareness that they have fallen prey to the invincible powers of manipulation of Cleopatra and, ultimately, of theatre itself.

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