

“The Knot Intrinsic”: From Dichotomy to Dialectic in *Antony and Cleopatra*

by

Mariah Robbins

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I would like to thank Bob Bell for his ideas, his continuous support,  
and most of all, for his friendship.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my Dad.  
Without his help, I could not have finished it.

For a long time, the polarity of the Egyptian and Roman spheres in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* has been a reliable and valuable means of perceiving the play's action and evaluating its characters. The dichotomy offers a structuring principle that the plot's ambiguity of motives and meanings refuses to provide. John Danby calls it "the trick of using the contraries," adding somewhat dismissively that such a dichotomous theme is "relatively an easy way of organizing the universe." The idea of a straightforward opposition between Egypt and Rome dominated critical discourse until the last quarter of the twentieth century: "No matter how we regard the play," writes George Lyman Kittredge in his introduction to an edition published in 1966, "we must recognize that in it are mirrored two directly contrasting visions of life and conceptions of value: those of Egypt as opposed to those of Rome—the sensual and wasteful opulence of the East opposed to the cold, bare efficiency of the West. Egypt in this play stands for passion and human weakness, Rome for duty and self-denial: the world of the senses pitted against the world of reason and a fixed morality."<sup>2</sup>

This persistent critical concept of binary oppositions has more recently been complicated by the growing recognition of the ambiguity that surrounds the divide and blurs the distinctions between the categories: "The play *may* simplify itself into these national or racial or cultural dichotomies, and *at first glance it seems easy* to draw up a list," A. R. Braunmuller writes in a recent introduction to *Antony and Cleopatra*. "Thus, *according to the Romans and some Egyptians some of the time*, Rome represents honor

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<sup>1</sup> John F. Danby, "A Shakespearean Adjustment," in *New Casebooks Antony and Cleopatra*, edited by John Drakakis (London: Macmillan, 1994), 33-55.

<sup>2</sup> George Lyman Kittredge, ed., *The Kittredge Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra* (Waltham: Blaisdell Publishing Company, 1966), introduction.

and duty while Egypt is a place of distracting sensual pleasure" (my italics).<sup>3</sup> Redefining the terms, Terence Hawkes became the first to associate Egypt with the feminine and Rome with the masculine: "If Egypt emphasizes the body, one level of language, one sort of 'love,' and the concomitant womanly powers of Cleopatra, Rome is a place of words, another level of language, another kind of love, and of self-confident 'manly' prowess," he argues.<sup>4</sup> Following the publication of Hawkes' essay in 1975, feminist critics wasted no time in thoroughly revamping the literature concerning the duality, finding a multilayered and fertile ambiguity in the play's portrayal of gender oppositions. Juliet Dusinberre points out the modern audience's implicit entanglement with conceptions of male and female in a play interested in highlighting and deconstructing those conceptions: "In a theatre where Cleopatra is played by a woman, that original boy actor's performance is complicated beyond measure by notions of the masculine and the feminine in circulation amongst a disparate and fragmented audience."<sup>5</sup>

Despite the qualifications of recent critics, many readers still locate the play's divide along the reason/passion faultline, and most critics see the split as an opportunity to find certainty in this highly illogical play. The dichotomization of *Antony* and *Cleopatra*'s world provides an efficient structure for understanding, which may explain why many readers, audiences, and critics have clung for so long to the idea of the divided spheres; without this foundation, attempts to apply conventional logic or morality founder. Why is it, then, that this play defies complete understanding? While Hamlet,

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<sup>3</sup> A. R. Braunmuller, ed., *The Pelican Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra*, (New York: Penguin Group, 1999), introduction.

<sup>4</sup> Terence Hawkes, "'King Lear' and 'Antony and Cleopatra': The Language of Love," in *New Casebooks Antony and Cleopatra*, edited by John Drakakis (London: Macmillan, 1994), 101-125.

<sup>5</sup> Juliet Dusinberre, "Squeaking Cleopatras: Gender and Performance in *Antony and Cleopatra*," in *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance*, edited by James C. Bulman (London: Routledge, 1996), 46-67.

Macbeth, King Lear, and Othello all exhibit a distinct murkiness, in these other tragedies "we are usually aware of a few central facts; and we usually have our moral bearings," Janet Adelman contends.<sup>6</sup> In *Antony and Cleopatra*, however, "almost every major action ... is in some degree inexplicable."<sup>7</sup>

Much like Enobarbus, we are denied our deep-seated desire to rationalize an intrinsically confusing situation. In the ensuing search for any shred of certainty on which to base our understanding, we might turn, like the lovers themselves, to a belief in reconciliation or synthesis, ignoring the play's inconsistencies and holding out hope for the peaceful coexistence of Egypt and Rome, feminine and masculine. Or we might, instead, cast our lot with Octavius, maintaining a stubborn belief in the essentialism of the categories and accepting the inevitability of continual explosive conflict. We might imagine Antony, in death, reaching a brilliant epiphany, an illumination that reveals the expanded dimensions of the all-encompassing feminine perspective and the possibilities of ideal mutuality and compatibility. Or perhaps we expect Cleopatra, through her suicide, to emblemize the dazzling multidimensionality and inclusive multiplicity of the Egyptian worldview. We might cherish hope that both protagonists die realizing the value of the other's viewpoint, or even that they ascend, in death, to a transcendent world of harmony above the mess of bifurcated reality. As a means of overcoming the play's ultimate contradictions, any of these approaches might plausibly be argued, and none of them are entirely incorrect; but they all require a certain amount of deliberate 'looking the other way' and scanting inconsistencies.

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<sup>6</sup> Janet Adelman, *The Common Liar: An Essay on Antony and Cleopatra* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 14.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

Since Shaltespeare's motives and purposes are never more than implicit, we can only speculate why he so purposefully and systematically deprives us of logic and undermines our beliefs. Surely we are encouraged to look beyond the rigid, static categories that define the Rome/Egypt dichotomy, to glimpse a world of softened, mutable gender constructions and belief systems—a complex dialectical reality where traditional logic, morality, and norms cease to apply.

In its most basic sense, dialectic, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, means "the existence or working of opposing forces, tendencies, etc."<sup>8</sup> It is almost impossible, however, to ignore the term's expanded, Hegelian implications. In the Hegelian sense a dialectic, as a process, is the overcoming of the contradiction between thesis and antithesis by means of synthesis; then, "the synthesis in turn becomes contradicted, and the process repeats itself until final perfection is reached."<sup>9</sup> Hegel's definition, while useful, implies an achievable sort of peace, or transcendence, that may be reached through continued syntheses; in *Antony and Cleopatra*, however, there is no such reconciliation, no final synthesis. Shakespeare's vision reveals a "knot intricate / Of life": a world of infinite possibility, where the viewpoints we had previously assumed to be bifurcated coexist, interweave, collide, and rebound, even penetrating the divide between life and death (V.ii.303-4).<sup>10</sup> His vision encompasses the complications and contradictions of the play, and holds them in a vast, non-hierarchical space, where they retain their irresolvable nature. Any action may contain elements of the feminine and the

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<sup>8</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "dialectic."

<sup>9</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, s.v. "dialectic."

<sup>10</sup> John Wilders, ed., *The Arden Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra*, (London: Routledge, 1995). All play references from this edition.

masculine. No viewpoint holds more importance than another; nor do they exist in rigid, immutable compartments, separate and sterile."

Who better to introduce the "infinite variety" of this world than the spectacularly theatrical, paradoxical, enigmatic, exuberant, and contradictory Cleopatra (II.ii.246)? Her vibrancy and variety of character precipitate the audience's expanded recognition of the "knot intricate."<sup>12</sup> Only Cleopatra, with all her fascinating flaws, has the sheer strength of character to catalyze such a realization, and Shakespeare has left her the last act of the play for precisely this purpose. Though Octavius, the historical victor, is left standing, what remains with us is the vivid, unsettling image of Cleopatra, resplendently attended by her waiting women.

Cleopatra's death is the last and the most disconcerting in a series of events and images designed to displace our beliefs—and to displace them to such an extent that, in our search for a new method of understanding, we glimpse the "intricate" possibilities of a dialectical, rather than a dichotomous, perception. At strategic points throughout the play, Shakespeare includes popular-festive imagery of the carnivalesque and many instances of grotesque symbolism, often connected with Cleopatra, her body, and the Egyptian land. Mikhail Bakhtin's study of the carnivalesque, though primarily concerned

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<sup>11</sup> The nearest articulation of this argument is Danby's 1952 essay "A Shakespearean Adjustment." The first critic to find the meaning of the play in its dialectic and its disjunction rather than in some final unity, Danby writes, "The word 'dialectic,' of course, is unfortunately post-Hegelian. The thing we wish to point to, however, in using the word, is Shakespearean. In *Antony and Cleopatra* Shakespeare needs the *opposites that merge, unite, and fall apart*. They enable him to handle the reality he is writing about" (my italics). He goes on to argue, however, that Shakespeare's great 'trickery' in the play consists of giving us a universe that is made up *only* of the World (Caesar) and the Flesh (Cleopatra), and concludes, "There is no suggestion that the dichotomy is resolvable, unless we are willing to take the delusions of either party as a resolution." Danby, 33-55.

<sup>12</sup> A.C. Bradley believed that Cleopatra was in the same category of character as Hamlet and Falstaff. "They are inexhaustible," he wrote. "You feel that, if they were alive and you spent your whole life with them, their infinite variety could never be staled by custom; they would continue every day to surprise, perplex, and delight you. Shakespeare has bestowed on each of them, though they differ so much, his own originality, his own genius." A. C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1923), 299.

with the writings of Rabelais, illuminates the imagery of *Antony* and Cleopatra invaluablely. These festivals, according to Bakhtin, had an overwhelming influence on every part of Renaissance culture: "The Renaissance is, so to speak, a direct 'carnivalization' of human consciousness, philosophy, and literature," he writes.<sup>13</sup> By applying this Bakhtinian lens to an analysis of *Antony* and Cleopatra, this reading will consider the carnivalesque as a defiance of static hierarchical codes, with special attention given to grotesque bodily imagery as an instrument of social and structural destabilization.<sup>14</sup> "Carnival (and we repeat that we use this word in the broadest sense) ... liberate[d] human consciousness and permit[ted] a new outlook," Bakhtin writes.<sup>15</sup> The earliest audiences of *Antony* and Cleopatra would have surely been receptive to the underlying sense of disquiet, of struggle against political and religious authority, of purposeful unbalancing—however subtle—that carnivalesque and grotesque symbolism implied. It is crucial to take these implications into account when analyzing the play.

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<sup>13</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, trans. Helene Iswolsky, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1968), 273.

<sup>14</sup> David Wiles' essay on the carnivalesque in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* points out several possible pitfalls of a strictly Bakhtinian analysis of any Shakespeare play: he writes first that Bakhtin's tendency is "to lump all festivals together ... encourag[ing] us to see popular culture and the carnival grotesque as a more uniform entity than it is"; second, that the aristocracy often manipulated carnival rites for their own benefit, creating a false ideology of 'authentic Englishness'; and third, that Bakhtin neglects "chronological minutiae" in favor of large-scale epochal changes, thereby overlooking important daily-life symbolism that appears in the carnivalesque. Wiles also argues that any Bakhtinian reading of one of Shakespeare's plays extracts the text "from its historical context of performance, and define[s] it as a self-contained and complete entity." Because my reading of *Antony and Cleopatra* uses a general Bakhtinian analysis in conjunction with an exploration of various other philosophical and Shakespearean concepts (in a larger attempt to demonstrate that previous notions of the play's Egypt-Rome dichotomy have been inflexible, passive, and creatively somewhat barren), rather than focusing solely on a detailed, carnival-based reading of Cleopatra, the difficulties that Wiles mentions have much less bearing on this argument. David Wiles, "The Carnivalesque in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," in *Shakespeare and Carnival: After Bakhtin*, ed. Ronald Knowles (London: Macmillan: 1998), 61-82.

<sup>15</sup> Bakhtin, 274.

Opposing the popular-festive stance is the oppressive mindset that Bakhtin calls "the old authority," which bears a striking resemblance to the stiff, compartmentalized hierarchy that Octavius attempts to maintain:

The old authority and truth pretend to be absolute, to have an extemporal importance. Therefore, their representatives (the agelasts) are gloomily serious. They cannot and do not wish to laugh; they strut majestically, consider their foes the enemies of eternal truth, and threaten them with eternal punishment. They do not see themselves in the mirror of time, do not perceive their own origin, limitations, and end; they do not realize their own ridiculous faces or the comic nature of their pretensions to eternity and immutability.<sup>16</sup>

"Gloomily serious," declining both wine and laughter, Octavius refuses to partake in the revels on Pompey's galley; when he considers the prospect of parading Cleopatra through the streets of Rome, he declares the captured queen's spectacle "eternal in our triumph" (V.i.66). Perhaps most noticeably, he does not seem able to recognize his "origin, limitations, and end": he almost refuses to acknowledge that both Julius Caesar and the elder Pompey, paramount figures in his own past, were also Cleopatra's lovers.

Of all Octavius's traits, keeping the boundary between Roman and Egyptian value systems rigid and conspicuous — in fact, creating an Egyptian value system that will contrast sharply with his idea of the Roman world—is one of his foremost concerns. He maintains a distinct 'Self' and 'Other' between the West and the East, the masculine and the feminine, and this distinction proves not only highly beneficial but also remarkably successful. The construction of an ideal Roman masculinity is one of Octavius's triumphs: the Rome that he has created—or rather, maintained and intensified—has a strict set of values associated with duty, decorum, temperance, and constancy of character. Their society is ruled by certain expectations of linear time and cause and

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<sup>16</sup> Bakhtin, 212.

effect. Structure and order are paramount in the Octavian ideology. An individual's place in the Roman hierarchy depends upon his adherence to these 'masculine' values.

In the first speech of the play, Philo emphasizes the importance of commensurability between cause and effect, and the danger of overabundant passion: "This dotage of our general's / *O'er-ows the measure*" (I.i.1-2). As Antony later describes to Lepidus, the Egyptian way of life depends on the overflowing of the river:

The higher Nilus swells,  
The more it promises; as it ebbs, the seedsman  
Upon the slime and ooze scatters his grain,  
And shortly comes to harvest (II.vii.20-23).

But such an image seems alien to the Romans, and Philo's comment suggests an overflowing of emotion associated with the treacherous Egyptian land. Already, the dichotomy is being carefully built: the Egyptian temperament tends to excess, the Roman temperament to careful measure. In Rome, one must follow decorum and adhere to expectations, as when Philo observes that Antony "comes too short of that great property / Which still should go with Antony" (I.i.59-60). It is important to note, as well, Philo's emphasis on 'seeing'—

*Look* where they come:  
Take but good note, and you shall *see* in him  
The triple pillar of the world transformed  
Into a strumpet's fool. *Behold* and *see* (10-13)

—as the Roman culture places its emphasis on visible, empirical proof. Throughout the play, the Romans will urge each other to 'see,' 'look,' and 'behold.' Philippa Berry, whose invaluable book *Shakespeare's Feminine Endings* delves into the murky territory of feminine death in the tragedies, refers to this preoccupation with visual perception as "ocularcentrism," and stresses its dominion over Western thought, adding that it is only

over the course of the last century that this assumption has begun to be questioned, and the implicit dangers of the impersonal scientific gaze explored.<sup>17</sup> Octavius embodies this strict reliance on sight as the route to knowledge; his first line in the play is "You may see, Eepidus, and henceforth know, / It is not Caesar's natural vice to hate / Our great competitor" (I.iv.1-3). Cleopatra immediately challenges this privileging of sight. Antony, addressing her as he prepares to leave Egypt ("Our Italy / Shines o'er with civil swords," I.iii.45-6), demonstrates his skill at understanding character and motivation within political and military contexts, or, in other words, 'sounding out' or 'mapping' people. He runs into a very solid barrier when he tries to 'map' Cleopatra, however. He expects the queen to be as rational as he, stating Fulvia's death as the reason she should "safe" his going. After her initial shock, Cleopatra quickly twists his reasoning against him, simultaneously emphasizing his sight-bound logic:

O most false love!  
Where be the sacred vials thou shouldst fill  
With sorrowful water? Now I see, I see,  
In Fulvia's death how mine received shall be (63-6).

Ironically, she knows that Antony, who in this scene has abruptly assumed all of the most stringent characteristics of Roman stoicism, would never allow himself to appear distraught over Fulvia's death. In a characteristically Cleocentric tactic, she uses his very Roman-ness against him, and at the same time highlights this trait for the audience by bringing the division of Antony's character into sharper focus. Antony finds himself outdone yet again, his attempt to anticipate the Egyptian queen as he would 'read' another soldier having failed miserably. In *Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed*, Peter Stallybrass relates the Renaissance conviction that held it to be a man's duty to

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<sup>17</sup> Philippa Berry, *Shakespeare's Feminine Endings: Disfiguring Death in the Tragedies* (London: Routledge, 1999).

impose such territories on women, citing several portraits of Elizabeth I in which she is portrayed either standing on a map of England or with her body *as* a map of England.<sup>18</sup> Though Cleopatra is often identified with Egypt, she lends herself to no such territorial 'charting,' presenting herself instead as a rapid flipbook of different traits, impossible to pin down.

In our first glimpse of Rome, Octavius strides onto the stage marvelling that  
Antony

is not more manlike  
Than Cleopatra, nor the queen of Ptolemy  
More womanly than he (5-7).

One might visualize a pinched, self-righteous expression on Octavius's face as he utters this, and the disgust with which Lepidus would respond. This statement disturbs the Romans' sense of propriety for several reasons: it implies uncertainty and ambiguity, a mutability of character, and, worst of all, a loss of male identity through attraction to a female—a fate that seems to terrify and fascinate the Romans, as they spend a remarkable number of lines discussing this female-incited diffusion of character. Worse still, this breach of masculinity has occurred not just to anyone, but to Antony, the idealized and near-mythical soldier, the epitome of manhood. But Octavius, for all his indignant shock, always recognizes an opportunity to secure the Romans' perception of Egypt's profligate sinfulness.

From Alexandria  
This is the news: he fishes, drinks, and wastes  
The lamps of night in revel ...  
hardly gave audience, or  
Vouchsaf'd to think he had partners. You shall find there

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<sup>18</sup> Peter Stallybrass, "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed," in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 123-144.

A man who is the abstract of all faults  
That all men follow (3-10).

Though it is Antony Octavius censures, his criticism emphasizes the Egyptians' alternative lifestyle, and he quite deliberately chooses images that contrast with qualities demanded in Rome. In fact, the 'new,' Egyptian Antony, according to Octavius, is the complete contrary of the man he once was. He declares that this change turns the world upside-down: his shameful behavior, Octavius says, is

to be chid –  
As we rate boys who, being mature in knowledge  
Pawn their experience to their present pleasure  
And so rebel to judgment (30-33).

It is already apparent that Octavius is a masterful rhetorician, dull though he may seem, coming on the heels of the fireworks between Antony and Cleopatra. He quickly and expertly crafts an extremely naturalistic dichotomy between the two countries. In the essay *Fatherly Authority: The Politics of Stuart Family Images*, Jonathan Goldberg analyzes a series of family portraits from the reign of James I, investigating the creation of a legitimate patriarchal claim to the throne through the ideological constructs of the family image. The upkeep of the patriarchy, he writes, "depends upon the erection of controlling differences, male/female, parent/child, husband/wife. The sleight of hand that ideology performs is to render these categories obvious and natural, to deny, thereby, their production."<sup>19</sup> Octavius's "controlling differences" function in much the same way, and, as he goes on to reminisce about his former idealization of Antony, his speech works beautifully to juxtapose the heroic Roman ideal against the man who now "give[s] a kingdom for a mirth" (18):

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<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Goldberg, "Fatherly Authority: The Politics of Stuart Family Images," in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 3-32.

When thou once  
Was beaten from Modena, where thou slew'st  
Hirtius and Pansa, consuls, at thy heel  
Did famine follow, whom thou fought'st against,  
Though daintily brought up, with patience more  
Than savages could suffer. Thou didst drink  
The stale of horses and the gilded puddle  
Which beasts would cough at. Thy palate then did deign  
The roughest berry on the rudest hedge.  
Yea, like the stag when snow the pasture sheets,  
The barks of trees thou browsed. On the Alps  
It is reported thou didst eat strange flesh,  
Which some did die to look upon. And all this –  
It wounds thine honor that I speak it now –  
Was borne so like a soldier that thy cheek  
So much as lanked not (57-72).

The speech outlines the utmost limits of masculinity; the prevailing ideal is one of extreme stoicism in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles; where ordinary men would break down, Antony "so much as lanked not." His character, in other words, remained sturdily fixed even when challenged by the very worst situations. But Shakespeare subtly undermines Octavius's dichotomization, complicating the masculine/feminine, temperance/excess, Rome/Egypt categories; for, as Adelman points out, "Bursting the buckles of one's breast and drinking the stale of horses are hardly the marks of a temperate man."<sup>20</sup> Not only do his lines tell us that Antony's character has long defied compartmentalizing, but Octavius is also revealing that, despite his tendency to view the world as a strict division between passionate feminine and rational masculine influences, he actually admired the man who mixed excess with military temperance.

Though he has become the object of Roman scorn, Antony is no less a product of this masculinity-obsessed sphere than is Octavius. Making up his mind to leave Egypt, his repeated use of the word must—"These strong Egyptian fetters I must break," "I must

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<sup>20</sup> Adelman, 131.

from this enchanting queen break off," "I must with haste from hence," and "I must be gone" —reveals the cultural value the Romans place on firm adherence to a decision (I.ii.122,135,139,143). Alternatively, his overzealous insistence might also point to an incipient insecurity about the strength of his own character in the face of the battering it is receiving from Cleopatra.

Act Two, in its depiction of the confrontation between Antony and Octavius, and then Antony, Octavius, and Pompey, further illuminates our perception of the Roman world and its values. In the debate between Lepidus and Enobarbus, Enobarbus's wider, more open-ended thought processes sharply delineate Lepidus's Roman viewpoint.

Lep. Good Enobarbus, 'tis a worthy deed,  
And shall become you well, to entreat your captain  
To soft and gentle speech.  
Eno. I shall entreat him  
To answer like himself. ...  
Lep. 'Tis not a time  
For private stomaching.  
Eno. Every time  
Serves for the matter that is then born in't (II.ii.1-10).

Lepidus's insistence that "soft and gentle speech" — rationality, restraint, anything but passion — will 'become' both Antony and Enobarbus clearly indicates that the Romans believe in feigning level-headedness even if they do not necessarily *feel* that way; similarly, he believes business should always take precedence over emotion.

Lep. But small to greater matters must give way.  
Eno. Not if the small come first.  
Lep. Your speech is passion;  
But pray you stir no embers up (11-13).

Enobarbus, as we shall later see, attempts to bridge the gap between the reason/emotion divide — which the Romans have firmly applied to themselves and the Egyptians — by

using a kind of blunt, military logic: "Not if the small come first." But to Lepidus, even this common sense is a perversion of his culture's belief in propriety and decorum.

With the entrance of Octavius and Antony, the conversation turns to business, and soon to hostility. In this scene, the dichotomy — the careful, cold quarrels of the Romans, versus what we have seen of Cleopatra's fiery displeasure — is pronounced. The language is pointed, business-like, and almost devoid of the images and metaphors that thickly populate the rest of the play. The emphasis is on causality (a very linear causality): one is offended because of a certain action; this action is rationalized by the other; he in turn brings up his own grievances, and so on. The scene abounds with typically Roman words and phrases like concern, intent, business, learning, reports, authority, cause, judgment, necessity, policy, oath, honor, knowledge, honesty, greatness, power, truth, motive, and noble. Because this is such a divergence from Cleopatra's twisting, manifold, multi-layered arguing tactics, it is not difficult to see why many critics and readers, believing that Shakespeare's vivid depiction of the differences between Egypt and Rome indicated qualities inherent to the two cultures, conceived the play as a debate or dialogue.

To prompt his audience beyond the Rome/Egypt, masculine/feminine dichotomy, and to encourage us to recognize and explore the implications of its construction, Shakespeare dramatizes several instances that thoroughly complicate the notion of strict, static binaries. Antony's passionate, intemperate nature, for instance, makes it obvious that the emotionless restraint displayed by Octavius, Agrippa, and Maecenas is hardly a biological masculine trait. The other crucial repudiation of Octavius's immutable hierarchy is aptly described by Linda Bamber:

When Antony returns to Rome, it is gone; the world in which physical courage and manly purpose prevail has been replaced by a

world of drinlung, matchmalting, speechifying, and deal-making. Roman honor, after Antony's time in Egypt, has become as elusive and dubious an ideal as Egyptian love. What it *has been* we may gather from Caesar's description of Antony before Egypt, on campaign.<sup>21</sup>

While Octavius continues to construct the rigid oppositional categories that hold Egypt firmly on its proper side of the divide, he fails to realize, or perhaps ignores, that even Rome is in the process of becoming. 'Becoming,' according to Bakhtin, is a progression directly antithetical to the "old authority." He discusses Pico della Mirandola's *Oratio de hominis dignitate*:

Pico asserted in his speech that man is superior to all beings, including the celestial spirits, because he is not only being but also becoming. He is outside all hierarchies, for a hierarchy can determine only that which represents stable, immovable, and unchangeable being, not free becoming.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, Shakespeare's complications are characteristically subtle, especially as they are often overshadowed—purposefully—by Octavius's strident promotion of the Rome-as-Self/Egypt-as-Other dichotomy.

The characteristics associated with the Egyptians in *Antony and Cleopatra* are created not only by the Romans but also by Cleopatra herself. She is a born actress, not to mention a skilled director, playwright, poet, and rhetorician; and on top of all this, her 'play' is constantly changing, depending on her audience, her desire, and her necessity. Thus it is safe to assume that our perception of the Egyptian queen is *almost* always exactly what she wants it to be. The most breath-taking example of her dexterity in crafting a public image is her arrival on the barge to meet Mark Antony, a scene we witness only as told by Enobarbus: but he has so far proven a reliable source, and

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<sup>21</sup> Linda Bamber, *Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982), 48.

<sup>22</sup> Bakhtin, 364.

furthermore we are able to observe the effect of the speech on Agrippa and Maecenas, whose reactions prove invaluable to our sense of Cleopatra's effect on the Romans. To them, her sexuality and the opulence of her surroundings suggest a dangerous hedonism. Octavius uses these qualities against her, attempting to present her as the 'Other,' but Cleopatra is equally slurred at creating her own persona: she emphasizes her sexuality and the luxury of Egypt because she knows they are both threatening, and thereby ensures that she retains a certain amount of power over the Romans.

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 lovesick 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. For her own person,  
It beggar'd all description. She did lie  
In her pavilion, cloth-of-gold of tissue,  
O'erpicturing that Venus where we see  
The fancy outwork nature (201-211).

This meeting is as calculated as being carried in a carpet to Julius Caesar. The images are sumptuous, the sense of artificial construct almost palpable. We can only imagine the effect it had upon Antony: Enobarbus says he was "barbered ten times o'er" (234). As he continues his description of the Egyptian queen, the threat posed by her power and her sexuality becomes increasingly evident:

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale  
Her infinite variety. Other women cloy  
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry  
Where most she satisfies. For vilest things  
Become themselves in her, that the holy priests  
Bless her when she is riggish (245-50).

As we will see in Act Five, Cleopatra's nature lends itself to paradoxes, and paradoxes, unsurprisingly, make the Romans nervous, deconstructing their sense of absolute

boundaries. The disconcerting lines have much the same effect on the audience, but Agrippa and Maecenas choose to downplay Cleopatra's power, reducing her ingenuity to a lewd metaphor of male domination: "Royal wench! / She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed. / He plough'd her, and she cropp'd" (236-38).

Though some critics have dismissed Cleopatra as easily as the Romans do (I would argue, however, that both parties could hardly fail to feel a lingering unease in doing so), the fact that Enobarbus's description fails to mesh exactly with what we have seen so far of her personality further undermines our declining confidence in our own powers of judgment.<sup>23</sup> Adelman considers this uncertainty crucial to our experience: "We listen to a series of reports and judgments which are neither true nor false, or are both together, until even the concepts of truth and falsity lose their meanings," she writes.<sup>24</sup> At this point in the play, our inability to determine what is true and false, right and wrong, still leaves us grasping for some way to understand the actions of the characters. The dichotomy endorsed by Octavius—and, to a certain extent, by generations of critics—provides just such a method of comprehension: perhaps one reason for its enduring popularity.

Enobarbus's astonishing speech highlights not only the queen's limitless capacity for theatricality and her flamboyant exoticism, but also one of her more indefinable qualities: an amazing, threatening ability to elude masculine perception. Though his description paints a spectacular picture of her surroundings, of Cleopatra herself, Enobarbus is conspicuously reticent, saying only that she "beggared all description"

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<sup>23</sup> Shaw called Cleopatra a "typical wanton"; William Hazlitt labeled her "voluptuous, ostentatious, conscious, boastful of her charms, haughty, tyrannical, fickle"; and Samuel Johnson declared, "The long and short of it is, the woman's a whore!"

<sup>24</sup> Adelman, 39.

(II.ii.208). As Berry points out, the queen is encircled by "cloth of gold of tissue," but Enobarbus leaves Cleopatra, the "center of this highly contrived image of sunny radiance," dark and unseen. Including this instance in her chapter entitled "Disclosing the Feminine Eye," Berry suggests that Cleopatra can be aligned with the dark pupil at the center of the eye, citing as evidence Plutarch's description of Egypt: "They call Egypt, since it is mostly black, Khemia, like the black part of the eye." She concludes that Enobarbus's speech "conceals as much as it reveals, by directing our attention precisely towards those aspects of experience which elude absolute comprehension."<sup>25</sup> The link Berry sees between Cleopatra and the dilated pupil illuminates the queen's affinity with the principles of the grotesque body. Though Bakhtin writes that the eyes are usually the feature least associated with the grotesque face (the comic images focus more on the nose, mouth, and ears, as "that which protrudes from the body"), he adds that attention is given to anything that leads "beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths."<sup>26</sup> The dark abyss of Cleopatra-as-pupil, at the same time devouring and all-encompassing, leads us, as we seek her elusive 'essence,' into a dangerously uncharted territory: she evades our 'ocularcentric'—and, as Berry argues, colonialist—desire to 'discover' and 'map' her, at the same time entrapping us in the darkness. In this respect, we have much in common with Antony. Cleopatra's evasive abilities clearly unsettle the Romans—hence Enobarbus's unusual inarticulateness concerning her appearance—but the true threat of the grotesque 'black hole,' to those who fear its connection with the cosmic, is the fact that it can, as Bakhtin writes, "fill the entire universe"; Agrippa and Maecenas, if they sense the bodily connection to the universe at

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<sup>25</sup> Berry, 87.

<sup>26</sup> Bakhtin, 318.

all, are only subconsciously aware of it.<sup>27</sup> The image is meant for the audience, another instance where our certainty — the expectations, beliefs, and powers of judgment we bring to the play—is gradually eroded.

The continual, understated connections drawn between Cleopatra's body and the festival's grotesque body are effective and disconcerting, but Shakespeare also injects carnival imagery into the play's depictions of Egypt, both of the court and of the land itself. The Egyptian court is so unlike any other Shakespearean royal setting that J. L. Simmons compares it to Falstaff's tavern:

The worlds of Egypt and Rome are analogous to the tavern and court of Henry IV, Venice and Belmont in *The Merchant of Venice*, and the forest and court of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. ... In Egypt, as in Falstaff's tavern, the sanctions and restrictions of society have been overturned into one endless holiday spirit ... As in the Saturnalia, this idleness is an open defiance of the worldly world with its unquestionable business, its rigid conventions and values.<sup>28</sup>

Although most analysis of Shakespearean carnivalesque features Falstaff and Hamlet, rarely Cleopatra, Bakhtin's description of the popular marketplace sounds remarkably similar to the Egyptian court:

The marketplace of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was a world in itself, a world which was one; all "performances" in this area, from loud cursing to organized show, had something in common and were imbued with the same atmosphere of freedom, frankness, and familiarity.<sup>29</sup>

What could be more 'free, frank, and familiar' than the jesting of Iras, Charmian, and Alexas as they jostle each other around the soothsayer? Of course, not everything in the Egyptian court is straightforward, frank, or familiar: Cleopatra's constant performances,

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<sup>27</sup> Bakhtin, 318.

<sup>28</sup> J. L. Simmons, *Shakespeare's Pagan World: The Roman Tragedies* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1974), 151.

<sup>29</sup> Bakhtin, 153.

our suspicion that the lovers may not be completely honest with each other, and the queen's abuse of the truth-bearing messenger suggest otherwise. But the comparison helps characterize Shakespeare's Egypt. Bakhtin goes on: "Such elements of familiar speech as profanities, oaths, and curses were fully legalized in the marketplace and were easily adopted by all festive genres, even Church drama."<sup>30</sup> This surprising statement brings to mind Enobarbus's comment about the queen: "For vilest things / Become themselves in her, that the holy priests / Bless her when she is riggish" (II.ii.248-250). Her entire court represents a revolt against static authority and rigid hierarchies.

The Egyptian land itself displays noticeably grotesque qualities. Bakhtin writes that "mountains and abysses [are] the relief of the grotesque body," and a speech of Cleopatra's emphasizes this geography of protrusions and orifices:

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 pyramids* my gibbet  
And hang me up in chains! (V.ii.56-61).<sup>31</sup>

The Egyptian earth not only shares in Cleopatra's grotesque qualities, but, at times, the land also seems—or at least we have the sense that some of the characters, both Roman and Egyptian, are waiting for it—to come alive. Lepidus drunkenly declares, "Your serpent of Egypt is bred, now, of your mud by the operation of your sun; so is your crocodile" (II.vii.26-7).

Though Cleopatra's carnivalesque properties seem to be innate, there is no question that many of the other traits traditionally aligned with the Egyptian/feminine sphere—"sensual and wasteful opulence," if we remember Kittredge—are not essential,

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<sup>30</sup> Bakhtin, 153.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 318.

but are, rather, imagined and constructed by the Romans and by Cleopatra herself. Shakespeare, subtly exposing the artificiality of the Rome/Egypt dichotomy, makes any simplistic approach to the interaction of the spheres impossible; has made it impossible, in fact, to consider the interaction a dichotomy at all. Any true properties of the Romans and the Egyptians resist tidy categorization: the qualities of *Antony* and *Cleopatra's* characters frequently clash, but often complement each other; overlap, and yet individualize. Why, then, have generations upon generations of critics relied on a dichotomous reading to understand the play? Another answer may lie in Shakespeare's conspicuous omission of conventional footholds for judgment and logic.

Throughout *Antony* and *Cleopatra*, attempts to judge or apply logic to actions or characters are continually foiled. In this sense, the audience is in the same position as Enobarbus. Certain critics show a strange contempt for this crucial character. Linda Woodbridge calls him "a boor," ham-fisted and insensitive, and argues that Cleopatra "understands [Antony] better than Enobarbus does." Perhaps most perplexing of all, she declares him "a spokesman for Roman values ... along with Scarus, Philo, Octavius, and others."<sup>32</sup> Janet Adelman more sensibly calls him a character "mixed in composition," like Antony, but proclaims this division of character "disastrous": "[He] is unable to commit himself to either measure or overflow."<sup>33</sup> Adelman's diagnosis is correct in some respects; Enobarbus, torn between Roman and Egyptian, finds his attempt to bridge the two cultures a dismal failure. He can almost be considered the personification of the dialectic: he represents the desire for a state beyond dichotomy, but also the impossibility

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<sup>32</sup> Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womanhood, 1540-1620* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 294.

<sup>33</sup> Adelman, 130-131.

of an ultimate synthesis. Me embodies the dialectic, but he cannot know it, and this is the source, and the pity, of his downfall.

Enobarbus's desire to synthesize the two worlds comes from his need for rationality: though he fully recognizes the clash of the different viewpoints, he sees no reason why they must remain forever sparring in a rigidly constructed dichotomy. His bridge for this opposition is plain sense and sound judgment, which he believes can be applied to everything: Antony, Cleopatra, their relationship, the Romans, the Egyptians. His first major scene with Antony shows him sturdily pragmatic—a value most would probably call Roman—but also strangely sympathetic to Cleopatra's passion. As in the scene with Lepidus, he argues, half-sarcastically and half-seriously, that emotions cannot be ignored or overruled: "We cannot call her winds and waters sighs and tears; they are greater storms and tempests than almanacs can report. This cannot be cunning in her..." (I.ii.154-57). His responses to Antony are light-hearted but sensible, plain-spoken and sympathetic at the same time. His first attempt to bring logic to the arena precipitates his first rebuff from Antony. The pattern will continue. He is almost always right, and yet his judgment goes ignored by both Antony and Cleopatra. Because he respects emotion, he is aware perhaps even before Antony that the general will leave Octavia and return to his "Egyptian dish," ruining his fragile reconciliation with Octavius (II.vi.128). Because he knows the time for reason, as well, he realizes that Cleopatra's presence in the wars will distract Antony. For much of the play Enobarbus maintains his solid judgment, attempting to persuade the protagonists rationally, hoping good sense will save them both. After their return to Egypt, his certainty starts to waver.

Cleo. I will be even with thee, doubt it not.

Eno. But why, why, why?

Cleo. Thou hast forspoke my being in these wars,  
 And sayst it is not fit.

Eno. Well, is it, is it? ...  
 Your presence needs must puzzle Antony,  
 Take from his heart, take from his brain, from's time  
 What should not then be spared. He is already  
 Traduced for levity; and 'tis said in Rome  
 That Photinus, an eunuch, and your maids  
 Manage this war.

Cleo. Sink Rome, and their tongues rot  
 That speak against us! A charge we bear i' th' war,  
 And as the president of my kingdom will  
 Appear there for a man. Speak not against it,  
 I will not stay behind (III.vii.1-19).

Giving up on the queen, he attempts to dissuade Antony; when Antony inexplicably replies, "By sea, by sea," Enobarbus, confounded, appeals to good judgment: "Most worthy sir, you therein ... / ... quite forgo / The way which promises assurance, and / Give yourself up merely to chance and hazard / From firm security (40-48). "I'll fight by sea," Antony insists (48).

At this point the audience feels as confounded as Enobarbus. The scene, the circumstances, and the actions of the protagonists demand a judgment ("...why, why, why?"). Even Antony forces us to question the situation: "Is it not strange, Canidius ...?" and "Can he be there in person? 'Tis impossible; / Strange ..." (20, 56-7). And yet our confusion grows even as we are forced to pass judgment, because, as Adelman points out, "we cannot judge what we do not know."<sup>34</sup> Why does Antony insist on fighting at sea? Enobarbus, his closest companion and advisor, is utterly baffled. Demanding judgment and then frustrating our ability to judge is quite common in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Adelman argues.

In *Antony and Cleopatra* ... both the presentation of character and the dramatic structure work to frustrate our reasonable desire for

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<sup>34</sup> Adelman, 15.

certainty. ... From Cleopatra's "If it be love indeed, tell me how much" to the First Guardsman's "Is this well done?" questions of motive, of value, and of the truth of emotions are insistently raised.<sup>35</sup>

While neither Enobarbus nor Octavius recognizes the dialectic between Egypt and Rome, what sets them apart is that Enobarbus believes reason will close the divide, Octavius that reason will widen it—since, to him, reason and passion are mutually exclusive. Both are mistaken, but Enobarbus for more reasons than Octavius anticipates: Antony and Cleopatra's relationship eludes any reasonable judgment (including ours), and neither character submits to good, sound advice. Above all, Shakespeare dramatizes a world to which *sense* does not apply. Enobarbus cannot judge it; nor can we. Shakespeare depicts, robustly and compellingly, both Egypt and Rome, Cleopatra and Octavius. Harold Bloom believes that although Shakespeare keeps his own opinions hidden, "the contrast among the perpetual intensity of Cleopatra, the dying music of Antony, and the grumpy efficiency of Octavius Caesar can lead us to a probable surmise on the poet's preferences."<sup>36</sup> Bloom's observation is apt, but it is also possible that Shakespeare refrains from 'choosing sides' because he knows there are no *sides*: the two worlds are entangled in a complex dialectic that, because of its very nature, defies partiality. Though Shakespeare discredits Octavius, in so doing he gives neither credit nor credence to Cleopatra; she is the catalyst for, not the embodiment of, his new dialectical reality.

Just as our increasing realization of Cleopatra's affiliation with the grotesque leads us to question our own empiricism—our ability to 'see' and 'know' the queen—Enobarbus' confusion causes him to question his capacity to see the truth and to apply

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<sup>35</sup> Adelman, 22.

<sup>36</sup> Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998).

reason. He, too, connects this breakdown with a failure of *sight*: returning from the sea battle at Actium, he declares, "To see't mine eyes are blasted" (III.x.4). Upon hearing Scarus's rendition of the disaster, he agrees,

That I beheld.  
Mine eyes did sicken at the sight, and could not  
Endure a further view (16-18).

Shaken by his inability to judge his longtime friend and general — by his inability to judge the world itself — he is almost literally *blinded* by the loss of reason.

Berry's observations on the symbolism of "grotesquely staring eyes" can also be applied to Enobarbus:

Insofar as these grotesquely staring eyes are implicitly 'dilated,' it seems that they are figuratively compelled by tragedy to begin that painful seeing in the dark which it demands. For not only do these tragedies trope tragic suffering as a grotesque visual excess which threatens to *destroy the reason as well as darken the sight*; these plays also make explicit appeals to us, often from the very beginning of their actions, to *look with a difference* (my italics).<sup>37</sup>

*Antony and Cleopatra* has certainly been urging us to 'look with a difference'; in Philo's first speech alone there were two references to sight (Antony's eyes, which "glowed like plated Mars," and the "view" of a "tawny front") and four exhortations to employ our own eyes: 'look,' 'see,' 'behold and see.' Our eyes, like Enobarbus's, will be 'blasted' by the sight of countless inexplicable, contradictory actions: who is telling the truth and who is not? What are our feelings for the protagonists? What is 'right' and 'wrong' in this play, or have our ethical categories become useless? Like Enobarbus, our reason "sits in the wind" against us (III.x.37).

Soon after deserting Antony, Enobarbus's heart breaks — because of his guilt and his pain, but also because his method of understanding the world has fallen apart. Earlier

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<sup>37</sup> Berry, 72-101.

he had foreshadowed his own end; when Cleopatra, knowing he alone will be truthful to her, asks him who was to blame at Actium, he tells her plainly: "Antony only." "What shall we do, Enobarbus?" she asks. "Think, and die," he replies (III.xiii.1-3).

If Enobarbus's 'blasted' eyes have been figuratively blinded by the betrayal of his judgment and his reason, then Antony's death scene surely 'blasts' our eyes in the same manner. Hours before he kills himself, Antony speaks of the dissolution of his sense of self, caused by his failure to synthesize the Roman and the Egyptian in him. Shamed as a soldier, and as a Roman, by his defeat, believing he was led to ruin by his love for the Egyptian queen and his susceptibility to her Eastern instincts, he feels "indistinct / As water is in water" (IV.xiv.10-11). Antony, though, has always been a mix of the spheres; this is not the reason for his suicide. His attempt to synthesize the competing beliefs, without recognizing the inevitable mix, clash, and rebound that characterizes their interplay, leads to his doom. His suicide is a reversion to inbred values of honor and duty—"A Roman by a Roman / Valiantly vanquished"—a return to the longed-for stability of an established hierarchical world (IV.xv.59-60). He, no more than Enobarbus, can comprehend the dialectic.

Shakespeare uses Antony's death scene as another opportunity to unsettle his audience, investing it with a certain amount of dark, terrible humor—Antony's awkward "How, not dead? Not dead?"—and, of course, Cleopatra's bizarre behavior: her jokes ("Here's sport indeed!") and her selfish interruptions.

Ant. I am dying, Egypt, dying.  
Give me some wine, and let me speak a little.  
Cleo. No, let *me* speak ... (43-5, my italics).

But Cleopatra's transformation of her lover's death into a show—one with a little humor, valiant dying words, and an impressive mourning speech for herself—does not diminish her grief over his death. She is an actress: this is how she experiences her emotions and how she deals with loss. The effect is no less disconcerting.

Even Octavius seems temporarily unbalanced by the news of Antony's death. Momentarily deprived of a 'purpose,' in this instant he catches a glimpse of the multidimensionality of life and the ambiguity of emotion:

The breaking of so great a thing should make  
A greater crack. The round world  
Should have shook lions into civil streets  
And citizens to their dens. The death of Antony  
Is not a single doom, in the name lay  
A moiety of the world (V.i.14-9).

Like Cleopatra, who laments that the "odds is gone," he expects the laws of nature to buckle under the weight of Antony's death (IV.xv.68). By declaring Antony's death "not a single doom" but something that will affect half the world, he seems almost to admit the universality and inevitability of death—beliefs that are, if not exclusively carnivalesque, certainly unusual for an adherent of the "old authority." But his language stresses his own individuality, conflicting, as usual, with the principles of the grotesque, which Julia Kristeva calls "the undoer of narcissism":

I must perforce  
Have shown to thee such a declining day  
Or look on thine; we could not stall together  
In the whole world (V.i.37-40).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Kristeva, Julia, *Polylogue* (Paris, Seuil, 1977), quoted in Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 64.

He remains firmly entrenched in the beliefs of the "old authority." The fleeting glimpse of a realm outside his rigid imperialism vanishes as quickly as it came, as an Egyptian messenger enters, reminding Octavius of his new purpose: bringing Cleopatra to Rome.

By capturing and displaying the queen, Octavius hopes to exert his power over the public image of the Rome/Egypt dichotomy. As Cleopatra imagines, probably quite accurately,

The quick comedians  
Extemporally will stage us and present  
Our Alexandrian revels; Antony  
Shall be brought drunken forth; and I shall see  
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness  
I' th' posture of a whore (V.ii.215-20).

Even as Octavius's attempts to control her grow more determined, the intensification of the grotesque imagery surrounding Cleopatra signifies an increasing defiance of authority. Octavius is not the only one denied control: in Act Five, the play flouts the audience's efforts to organize or categorize, suggesting a scope beyond what we expected, one that, appropriately enough, "o'erflows the measure." One of Shakespeare's methods of defying classification is the recurrent elevation of the play's events — which, until now, have been all-too-human — to a cosmic level, something his other tragedies avoided. Danby considers this a decline from *King Lear* or *Mucbeth*: "The theme of Rome and Egypt," he writes, "is simpler than the theme of 'Nature,' the trick of using the contraries ... relatively an easy way of organizing the universe."<sup>39</sup> The "theme of Rome and Egypt," however, is infinitely more complicated than Danby admits. Adelman counters that modern audiences are probably more interested in the realistic, earthbound scope of Shakespeare's other tragedies, rather than in the dizzyingly cosmic

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<sup>39</sup> Danby, 49.

*Antony and Cleopatra*, because we have lost interest in any meaningful analogy between microcosm and macrocosm, human and divine. It was common in the Renaissance, she notes, for humans to portray themselves as mythical gods: Elizabeth was often painted as Diana; newlywed couples frequently posed for portraits as Venus and Mars. Adelman urges us to imagine the immense energy and power of these analogies: "There is a habit of mind more generous than ours," she writes, "which sees things as larger than they 'really' are, and to that habit of mind, the analogy of Antony and Cleopatra with Mars and Venus ... would not necessarily seem ludicrous."<sup>40</sup>

Cleopatra ends Act Four with her decision to emulate Antony's end:

We'll bury him, and then what's brave, what's noble,  
Let's do't after the high Roman fashion  
And make death proud to take us. ...  
Ah, women, women! Come, we have no friend  
But resolution and the briefest end (IV.xv.90-95).

Her language dramatizes an interesting tension between artificiality and sincerity: she associates the 'honor' of a suicide with Rome, indicating that actions innately brave and noble are Roman; but she says she will take her life "after the high Roman fashion," which hints at an artifice in Roman values. No matter how one approaches death in this play, nothing — no values, no motives — can be taken for granted. Act Five achieves a similar effect, destabilizing our beliefs and exploiting all the uncertainty that has gathered in our minds. Cleopatra's behavior fluctuates wildly, from eagerness to despair, deception to honesty, hyperbole to disarming frankness. The queen has always been theatrical, always unpredictable and inconstant, but her speeches have never seemed so paradoxical, though the resolve that underlies her words lends her a compelling gravity.

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<sup>40</sup> Adelman, 97.

At the same time, the intensifying grotesque imagery underscores the impossibility of pinning her down.

Awaking from her swoon after Antony's death, Cleopatra opens her eyes, regards her waiting women, and calmly declares herself

No more but e'en a woman, and commanded  
By such poor passion as the maid that milks  
And does the meanest chares (IV.xv.77-9).

Identifying herself for the first time as a woman—at the end of a play in which she has been called a 'gypsy,' a 'strumpet,' a 'wrangling queen,' an 'enchanted queen,' a 'wonderful piece of work,' 'idleness itself,' 'the queen of Ptolemy,' a 'mirth,' a 'slave,' the 'serpent of old Nile,' a 'morsel for a monarch,' 'sovereign of Egypt,' 'great Egypt,' 'mistress,' 'madam,' 'salt Cleopatra,' 'Egypt's widow,' 'a most triumphant lady,' 'rare Egyptian,' 'royal wench,' 'Egyptian dish,' 'dread queen,' 'yon ribaudred nag of Egypt,' a 'boggler,' a 'morsel,' the 'terrene moon,' 'dame,' a 'great fairy,' the 'day o' th' world,' a 'nightingale,' a 'girl,' a 'foul Egyptian,' a 'triple-turned whore,' the 'false soul of Egypt,' a 'grave charm,' a 'spell,' and a 'witch'—Cleopatra encourages the audience to regard her with sympathy. But though she relinquishes her most recognizable traits—fickleness, inconstancy, mutability—

And it is great  
To do that thing that ends all other deeds,  
Which shackles accidents and bolts up change (V.ii.4-6)

—it is, as ever, hard to determine what she truly believes. The eloquent lies she gives Proculeius—"I hourly learn / A doctrine of obedience"<sup>n</sup>—followed by her hurried, foiled attempt to stab herself, exacerbate our confusion and perplexity (30-31). The 'brave,' 'noble' suicide of which she spoke becomes a struggle with a knife and a wretched

attempt at a "death ... that rids our dogs of languish" (40-41). And yet just a short while later, she kneels to Octavius, calling him "my master and my lord" (115). Octavius's lies are heavy-handed and conspicuous. Ever an adherent of the "old authority," his statements are stiffly formal, tinged with a threatening permanence:

The record of what injuries you did us,  
Though written in our flesh, we shall remember  
As things but done by chance (117-19).

Cleopatra, on the other hand, remains opaque, and the episode with Seleucus can easily be read either as outwitting Octavius or being 'hoist on her own petard.' Her truly astonishing exchange is with Dolabella, to whom she relates her 'dream' of Antony:

His face was as the heavens, and therein stuck  
A sun and moon, which kept their course and lighted  
The little O, th' earth. ...  
His legs bestrid the ocean; his reared arm  
Crested the world; his voice was propertyed  
As all the tuned spheres, and that to friends;  
But when he meant to quail and shake the orb,  
He was as rattling thunder. For his bounty,  
There was no winter in't: an Antony it was  
That grew the more by reaping. His delights  
Were dolphinlike, they showed his back above  
The element they lived in. In his livery  
Walked crowns and crownets; realms and islands were  
As plates dropped from his pocket (78-90).

Cleopatra, always prone to exaggeration, outdoes herself here. What do we make of this description, so much more purely magnificent than the Antony we knew? In the Renaissance, there were many uses for this type of grandiloquent language. It was often used in the pulpit; Cleopatra's speech is vaguely reminiscent of Biblical passages describing prodigious events. It was also the language of patronage, often employed in the exaggerated dedications that accompanied poetry collections. The use of such

hyperbolic language suggested, in short, the possibility of deception; in the *Arte of English Poesie*, George Puttenham warns of such devices:

As figures be the instruments of ornament in every language, so be they also in a sorte abuses or rather trespasses in speech, because they passe the ordinary limits of common utterance, and be occupied of simplicitie to a cevtaine doublenesse, whereby our talke is the more guilefull and abusing... (my italics)<sup>41</sup>

Shakespeare's language does have a double purpose here: to test our belief just as Cleopatra tests Dolabella's. Why does he choose paradox and hyperbole, rhetorical devices that seem to emphasize their unbelievability, to do so? In 1593, Henry Peacham, listing poetical terms, defined paradox this way:

Paradoxon, is a forme of speech by which the Orator affirmeth some thing to be true, by saying he would not have beleevved it, or that it is so straunge, so great, or so wonderfull, that it may appeare to be incredible.<sup>42</sup>

Thus Shakespeare leads us to the impossible, guides us through doubt, and finally compels our faith: faith in the existence of a complex, dialectical world we may never before have considered. It is at this point in the play where, if we have faith, Shakespeare begins to reveal the extent of his vision, the reason he has been continually undermining our logic and our reasoning.

And there has indeed been a reason. We enter the world of *Antony* and Cleopatra with a firm belief in our powers of judgment, expecting immutable facts on which to base our logic, and carrying preconceptions that aid our construction of a quick, solid hierarchy. Shakespeare initially seems to confirm our expectations, showing us a taunting and theatrical Cleopatra, an Antony "barbered ten times o'er," and a Roman

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<sup>41</sup> George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge, 1936), 226, quoted in Adelman, 113.

<sup>42</sup> Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence* (1593), ed. William G. Crane (Gainesville, Fla., 1954), 112, quoted in Adelman, 113.

populace horrified at his behavior. Then the play begins to attack our preconceptions, subtly but systematically, exempting nothing, deconstructing deeply-held beliefs in right and wrong, truth and falsity. By the beginning of Act Five, having completely lost our bearings, we react with a new instinctive skepticism to anything that seems certain or immutable. In this position of utmost tension and vulnerability, the emotional and mental state of the audience might accurately be described by Freud's sense of the term uncanny.

"The Freudian definition of *Unheimlichkeit*," Berry writes,

...encompasses any moment when meaning has proceeded so far in the direction of ambivalence that it effectively coincides with its opposite, in a disturbing collapse of semantic differences.<sup>43</sup>

At this crucial point, Cleopatra stages her suicide. Berry calls Shakespeare's uncanny portrayals of death a intentional exploitation of the uncertainty his contemporaries may have felt about death's meaning, in a time of religious and intellectual crisis. Certainly Cleopatra's death demonstrates the futility of conventional thought patterns. What logic can be used to explicate this scene? Nothing about her suicide can be predicted or analyzed using traditional, dichotomous notions of masculine and feminine, Western and Eastern, or life and death. Upon Octavius's exit, Cleopatra tells her waiting women grimly, "He words me, girls, he words me, that I should not / Be noble to myself" (190-191). Her extraordinary use of *word* as a verb points to the innate deceptive qualities of language, a crucial concept throughout Act Five.

Iras's remark — "Finish, good lady; the bright day is done, / And we are for the dark"<sup>H</sup>—connects Cleopatra's death with impenetrable darkness (through which we cannot see): not a particularly novel association, even in the play itself (Antony's "The long day's task is done, / And we must sleep," IV.xiv.35-6), but the comment is significant in

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<sup>43</sup> Berry, 6.

its subtle suggestion that life be viewed as a diurnal cycle, marked by the dawning and setting of the sun (V.ii.192-3). Not only does it align Cleopatra's life with the cosmic, but it also implies another dawn, an infinite cycle, death and birth intimately connected. Just as one day is born from the death of its predecessor, in the carnival spirit, "the life of one body is born from the death of the preceding, older one," Bakhtin writes, "in the endless chain of bodily life."<sup>44</sup>

Cleopatra's desire to be shown "like a queen," as if she is "again for Cydnus, / To meet Mark Antony," reminds us of the exquisite spectacle she staged, the driving force of which was her overwhelming sexuality (226-8). But even as she conjures images of her infinite desirability, a guard announces the arrival of the clown, and Cleopatra exclaims:

My resolution's placed, and I have *nothing*  
Of *woman* in me. Now from head to foot  
I am marble-constant; now the fleeting moon  
No planet is of mine (237-240, my italics).

At the end of Act Four she was "no more but e'en a woman"; she has just told us she wants to be shown as the epitome of female sexuality. Why, then, does she proclaim that she has "nothing" of woman in her? There may be a pun involved with the word *nothing*; in the Renaissance, it often referred to female genitalia, so she may be simultaneously relinquishing and confirming her femininity. Even if she speaks without sexual subtext, she is still frustratingly paradoxical, and in either case, she emphasizes her own liminality, dramatizing her position on the cusp of life and death: "no more but e'en a woman," and "nothing of woman." Even Cleopatra's "resolution" and "marble-constan[cy]" are built on paradoxical stilts. She approaches her suicide supposedly free

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<sup>44</sup> Bakhtin, 322.

of the inconstancies, contradictions, and theatricalities that have characterized her for the entire play, but she brings them along unwittingly.

The clown is similarly disconcerting, an odd mixture of bawdy humor and surprising pertinence; as Cleopatra observes, "What poor an instrument / May do a noble deed!" (235-6). This ironic combination echoes the Rabelaisian doctor, who unites the *scatophagus*, a figure who "devours excrement in ancient comedies," with the noble Hippocratic physician. The doctor's (and the clown's) divided character indicates that he is involved with the body that is "becoming," or passing from one state to another. He is "a participant and witness of the struggle between life and death ... complex, universal, and ambivalent." <sup>45</sup> As the presence of grotesque imagery grows more noticeable, the liminality of the characters and their actions becomes similarly more evident. As a result, Cleopatra and the play become more difficult to define and to understand; neither Octavius nor we have any hope of constructing Goldberg's "controlling differences." Even as she appropriates conventional titles—

Husband, I come!  
Now to that name my courage prove my title!

—she contradicts herself, slipping through our fingers:

I am fire and air; my other elements  
I give to baser life (286-89).

The fatal kiss she gives to Iras continues the pattern of eroticizing death: "If thou and nature can so gently part, / The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch / Which hurts and is desired" (293-5). It also draws attention to their mouths, especially Cleopatra's: "Have I the asp in my lips?" (292). The mouth, according to Bakhtin, is the defining feature of the grotesque body: "The grotesque face," he writes, "is actually reduced to a gaping

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<sup>45</sup> Bakhtin, 179.

mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss."<sup>46</sup> The orifice allows a transgression of the limits between the body and the surrounding world, or between two bodies, to be transgressed. Such is the case with Cleopatra's kiss, through which she 'transmits' her death-potency to Iras. Berry argues that the "uncanny liminality of erotic desire" has a flip-sided or "Janus-aspect," being a "portal of both life and death." Cleopatra's kiss, she muses, seems to be a "benign solvent of the boundaries between human and natural worlds."<sup>47</sup>

Bakhtin stresses that the important features of the grotesque body are those that protrude, extend, bulge, or gape; that the grotesque focuses heavily on the lower stratum, especially the bowels and the phallus; and that the body is often in the act of eating, drinking, defecating, copulating, or swallowing. Cleopatra's death, then, might be more aptly called a presentation of the gently grotesque. "If they had swallowed poison, 'twould appear / By external swelling," Octavius notes; interestingly, his description sounds more like the truly grotesque than what appears before him: "but she looks like sleep, / As she would catch another Antony / In her strong toil of grace" (344-347). The beauty surrounding Cleopatra's death—the soft eroticism, the kiss, the suckling, her cry for peace, her last "As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle –" —almost prevents a grotesque reading (310). But as a catalyst of Shakespeare's expanded, complex world, Cleopatra is unquestionably a symbol of change, and he does not shrink from depicting her as a grotesque form. Claspings the serpent to her breast, she punctures herself with an instrument from the outside world, creating a living (and dying) link between her body and the natural universe. The asp's teeth—enlarged, as a snake's fangs would be—are

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<sup>46</sup> Bakhtin, 317.

<sup>47</sup> Berry, 50.

suggestively phallic, and its poison streams into her body via new orifices. As the grotesque body is never 'closed,' Cleopatra dies, appropriately, in the middle of a sentence, open-mouthed. The mouth becomes a threshold that allows her spirit to escape beyond the body's limited space; at the same time, the open orifice leads into the body's depths. Cleopatra becomes what Bakhtin calls "the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception."<sup>48</sup> She strengthens this link as she suckles the asp, holding it to her breast in a disturbing, fascinating perversion of the Virgin Mary with the infant Jesus.

Peace, peace!  
Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,  
That sucks the nurse asleep? (307-9).

The serpent is also an unmistakable allusion to Satan in the Garden of Eden. As Berry explains, "The dying pagan queen is momentarily both the first and the second Eve, while Eve's serpentine tempter is problematically fused with the savior of mankind."<sup>49</sup>

*Problematic* seems an understated description of the effect of these lines on Renaissance and modern audiences alike; here Shakespeare unsettles perhaps the only part of our belief system hitherto untouched. Erotic overtones mix with religious themes; pagan references ("O Eastern star!") are followed immediately by Christian allusions (307).

Only a character with the vitality and "infinite variety" of Cleopatra can bear the weight of such myriad images, themes, allusions, metaphors, and paradoxes; but then again, she has been giving us her own vivid metaphors, contradictions, and theatrical images throughout the whole play.

At the end of *Antony and Cleopatra*, the audience is left with Octavius, inflated and overly formal as usual, as the personification of a new age: imperial Rome. In some

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<sup>48</sup> Bakhtin, 318.

<sup>49</sup> Berry, 6.

ways his survival is not a disappointment, for as A. C. Bradley remarked almost one hundred years ago, "It is better for the world's sake, and not less for their own, that [the lovers] should fail and die."<sup>50</sup> But while it is Octavius who remains alive, speaking, moving about the stage, *his* 'vision' is not necessarily the victorious one. His world moves forward; the lovers are buried, their aspirations left behind. But in terms of emotional impact, Cleopatra's death is without question the enduring heart of the play: not because we despise Octavius; not because we feel overwhelming grief at the death of the queen; not because we believe the lovers have transcended bitter reality. Act Five, and Cleopatra's death in particular, are emotionally arresting because, even when the immediate passion of the scene has faded, a distinct discomfort remains. I would argue that this unease is produced by the nearly palpable tension between the chilliness of the "old authority" and the tempestuous bodily presence of the grotesque. Octavius, a fixture of the closed, classical movement, is mired in the language of propriety:

High events as these  
Strike those that make them, and their story is  
No less in pity than his glory which  
Brought them to be lamented. ...  
Come, Dolabella, see  
High order in this solemnity (359-365).

At the other extreme is the 'leaking' body of Cleopatra, open-mouthed and punctured by multiple snake bites, transgressing its own boundaries, a kind of portal between worlds: "one body offers its death, the other its birth, but they are merged in a two-bodied image," Bakhtin writes.<sup>51</sup> This "double body" is the amazing result of the grotesque glory — paradoxical, disturbing, beautiful — of Cleopatra's death. As the curtain falls, we are hardly pondering the rise of imperial Rome; instead, we are reliving Cleopatra's

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<sup>50</sup> Bradley, 304.

<sup>51</sup> Bakhtin, 322.

magnificent and disquieting last words. We picture her body, somehow still arrestingly ablaze even after death, displayed in her monument, surrounded by her waiting-women.

The final competing images mirror, to some extent, the dichotomy figured throughout the play: the fluid mutability of the Eastern, feminine world versus the rigid, linear hierarchy of the Western, masculine world. Our lingering unease — the sense that nothing in Act Five fits together in the way we expected, that even with Cleopatra's death the opposition has not stilled — suggests that a dialectic is operating instead. The complex reality that Shakespeare offers is a world of infinite possibility, and though the lovers are dead, the viewpoints we might once have assumed to be bifurcated are still coexisting, interweaving, colliding, and rebounding. The irresolvable ambiguity of the play's ending indicates the folly of attempting to categorize the dialectic at all: we are left with Octavius but we remember Cleopatra; we are shown the possibilities of an open-ended world but we know imperial Rome is the victor. Rather than trying to fit the play's ending into any sort of pattern, what we take away with us is the very impossibility of doing so: Shakespeare has been using the interplay of these worlds to create a *larger* world, one that does not resolve its contradictions or explain its paradoxes, nor lets its contraries sit in sterile, opposing camps. Bakhtin writes that the new ideas of the Renaissance, popularized and supported by carnivalesque culture, "brought together that which was divided, effacing false boundaries, contributing to the transfer of all to one horizontal plane of the becoming of the cosmos in time."<sup>52</sup> The state of the dialectic in *Antony and Cleopatra* operates in a similar fashion; the "transfer of all to one horizontal plane" refers not to synthesis, but to coexistence.

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<sup>52</sup> Bakhtin, 365.

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Criticism of *Antony and Cleopatra* has been structured for centuries around what Danby calls "the trick of using the contraries." For the most part, the play does nothing to refute this reading. Octavius stridently promotes his "controlling differences"; Cleopatra gains a threatening power by defining herself and her country against 'Roman' values; Antony reverts, at the moment of his death, to the most stringent expectations of masculinity; and even Enobarbus contributes to the opposition with his extravagant descriptions of life in Egypt. Only on the subtlest of levels does the play undermine the naturalism of these qualities, thereby calling the dichotomy into question.

While the essentialism of the contraries is undercut, Shakespeare simultaneously unbalances our preconceptions and powers of judgment. Disconcerted, unsure of our own logic, we are ready to accept a new method of understanding by the time Cleopatra stages her deeply unsettling suicide; and the reality Shakespeare offers is dialectical rather than dichotomous — a reality in which the complex interactions between characters can be distinguished only by their resistance to categorization.

It is, finally, impossible to determine what Shakespeare wanted to show audiences of *Antony and Cleopatra*. He remains enigmatic, his motives hidden, his mind obscured. "Everything and Nothing," Borges's meditation on the life of Shakespeare, begins with this very premise:

There was no one in him: behind his face (which even through the bad paintings of those times resembles no other) and his words, which were copious, fantastic and stormy, there was only a bit of coldness, a dream dreamt by no one.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, trans. Donald A. Yates, James E. Irby, John M. Fein, and Eliot Weinberger, *Everything and Nothing* (New York: New Directions, 1999), 76.

Whether dichotomous or dialectical, any reading of *Antony and Cleopatra* has at its heart only one certainty: it can never attempt to simplify Shakespeare's mysteries, even if this acknowledgment means sacrificing a complete understanding of his work.

History adds that before or after dying he found himself in the presence of God and told Him: "I who have been so many men in vain want to be one and myself." The voice of the Lord answered from a whirlwind: "Neither am I anyone; I have dreamt the world as you dreamt your work, my Shakespeare, and among the forms in my dream are you, who like myself are many and no one."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Borges, 77-8.

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