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“She did make defect perfection”—The Perfection of the Female Monster: Shakespeare’s Cleopatra and the Querelle des Femmes

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Article abstract

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"She did make defect perfection"— The Perfection of the Female Monster: Shakespeare's Cleopatra and the *Querelle des Femmes*

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*"She did make defect perfection" (*Antony and Cleopatra *2.2.242): by this formula, Enobarbus sums up the essence of Cleopatra's inimitable charm. Shakespeare's Cleopatra is a study of women and women: in other words, Shakespeare's Cleopatra is less fiction than an investigation of the other sex. "Was will das Weib?" asked Freud (if we are to believe Marie Bonaparte's testimony), thus admitting that the great question psychoanalysis has been unable to answer is the enigma of feminine desire. Shakespeare's Cleopatra represents this enigma, which takes the form of a perfection resulting from a series of paradoxes: beauty and maturity, cunning and folly, fidelity and betrayal, jealousy and indifference, majesty and debauchery, expense and economy, audacity and fragility, truth and lies. Cleopatra's perfection is the sum of all possible paradoxes. What is the point of this dizzying interplay of paradoxes? What is the resulting perfection?*

*« She did make defect perfection » (*Antoine et Cléopâtre *2.2.242) : par cette formule, Énobarbe synthétise l'essence de l'inimitable charme de Cléopâtre. La Cléopâtre shakespearienne est une véritable étude de femme et de la femme : autrement dit, la Cléopâtre de Shakespeare relève moins de la fiction que de l'enquête sur l'autre sexe. « Was will das Weib? » se demandait Freud (si l'on en croit le témoignage de Marie Bonaparte), en admettant ainsi que la grande question auquelle la psychanalyse n'a pas su répondre est l'énigme du désir féminin. La Cléopâtre de Shakespeare représente cette énigme qui prend la forme d'une perfection résultante d'une série de paradoxes : beauté et âge mûr, ruse et déraison, fidélité et trahison, jalousie et indifférence, majesté et débauche, dépense et économie, audace et fragilité, vérité et mensonge. La perfection de Cléopâtre est la somme de tous les paradoxes possibles. À quoi vise cet étourdissant jeu de paradoxes ? Qu'est-ce que la perfection qui en résulte ?*

> The great question that has never been answered and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is "What does a woman want?"
>
> — Sigmund Freud[1]

A "blank" in nature: the metaphysical woman

It is impossible not to focus on Cleopatra when dealing with the age-old *querelle* on the perfection of women and the difference between the sexes,

1. According to Ernest Jones, this is what Freud said as he was conversing with Marie Bonaparte. See Jones, *Life and Work*, 459.

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which began with Christine de Pizan's criticism of the *Roman de la Rose* and lasted until Jacques Lacan's *Séminaire XX* in the 1970s.[2] By Cleopatra, I mean Shakespeare's Cleopatra. Indeed, the dramatic text of *Antony and Cleopatra* is entirely built on the motif of war between man and woman (and so are *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*).[3] Moreover, Cleopatra is more than simply a dramatic character: in the context of the extraordinary human comedy present in Shakespeare's plays, she embodies a veritable *étude de femme* (to paraphrase Balzac)—that is to say, a study of the role a woman plays in her relationship with the world, with her own life experiences, and with the other sex. As will become clear later on, in his characterization of Cleopatra, Shakespeare also focuses on the special relation between women and language and on the female use of such a powerful tool.

It is certainly significant that, in 1975, Hélène Cixous defined Shakespeare's Cleopatra as the "perfect woman" in that she represents the free and liberated hysteric, the Intractable, the triumphant Untameable.[4] Cleopatra is Shakespeare's remarkable experiment in what can be defined as the female Other—an experiment that takes the form of pure hypothesis. In a manner of speaking, Cleopatra is indeed an enigma: What does a woman think, what does she want? "Was will das Weib?" wondered Freud (according to Marie Bonaparte's testimony, afterwards corroborated by Ernest Jones), thus alluding to the enigmatic nature of the female sex while at the same time exposing the inadequacy of psychoanalysis to understand and define it. Shakespeare's Cleopatra doubtlessly opens up questions as to what a woman is.

In his *Séminaire XX*, delivered between 1972 and 1973, Jacques Lacan openly discussed the enigmatic status of women: the enigma—impossible to solve—lies in the way women enjoy pleasure, in that they enjoy it beyond the

2. Today, queer criticism seems to have dismissed the problem of sexual difference as an "old tool." I personally disagree with this idea and firmly believe that the notion of difference is not only the basis of feminist philosophical discourse but of philosophical discourse in general. Queer fluidity and lack of differentiation do not seem to me to be an achievement or a progress towards greater individual and collective freedom.

3. On the war of the sexes in the comedies and in some of Shakespeare's tragedies, see Fusini, *Maestre d'amore*. On this issue, I refer also to my analysis, Stella, *Il romanzo della Regina*.

4. Cixous and Clément, *La jeune née*.

signifier (beyond language). How is that possible, if the Subject is only defined through Language?

> C'est peut-être ça qui doit nous faire entrevoir ce qu'il en est de l'Autre : cette jouissance qu'on éprouve et dont on ne sait rien, mais est-ce que c'est pas ça qui nous met sur la voie de l'ex-sistence ? Et pourquoi ne pas interpréter une face de l'Autre, une face de Dieu […] puisque c'était de ça, par là que j'ai abordé l'affaire tout à l'heure […] une face de Dieu comme supportée par la jouissance féminine, hein.[5]

That structural feature of female *jouissance*, says Lacan, has often been displayed in mysticism, especially during the Counter-Reformation, when mannerism and baroque art offered enlightening visual representations of female pleasure, such as Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. What has been defined as *Amor Dei* by the theological tradition, and especially the ecstatic experience of *Amor Dei*, rests on the transcendence (of language) that women access as they experience pleasure. Women are one of the faces of God, *une face de Dieu*. The feminine is imbued with metaphysical energy.

The word *metaphysical* should be understood here not so much as the act of transcending the physical and corporeal but rather as the act, carried out by corporeal beings, of transcending meaning. Shakespeare's poetic language is deeply influenced by that metaphysical rift between experience and the signifier (as is evident in the *Sonnets*, in *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Julius Caesar*, among the other tragedies, and, of course, in *Antony and Cleopatra*), and so also is the language of those poets after Shakespeare who were fittingly called the "metaphysical poets" by scholars from Samuel Johnson to T. S. Eliot. The latter argued that the language of the metaphysical poets is based on the dissociation of perception and intellect (the famous "dissociation of sensibility"), and that, as a result, words often have to do with the ineffable.[6]

Enobarbus's description of Cleopatra's arrival by water at the place where she met Antony aims at expressing that ineffability, that *vacuum* produced by Cleopatra's exceeding abundance. The two main rhetorical figures employed by Enobarbus are the oxymoron and the hyperbole, which are strongly linked.

5. Lacan, *Le Séminaire XX*, 71.

6. Eliot, "Metaphysical Poets."

The queen arrives on a flaming throne that burns on the water (the glittering gold and silver barge sailing on the river Cydnus). As for Cleopatra herself, she is beyond description ("For her own person, / It beggared all description"): she even surpasses those pictorial representations of Venus in which the power of imagination outdoes nature itself ("O'erpicturing that Venus where we see / The fancy outwork nature").[7] Cleopatra sets a new record, as if her body were even superior to the superiority of art over nature: one paradox follows another. All attention is focused on her: the crowd flocks to see her. Even the air would have gone to see her, leaving a gap in nature, were it not for the fact that it would have created a vacuum ("th'air, which but for vacancy / Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too / And made a gap in nature"; 2.2.226–28). The abstract image of the "gap in nature" needs no further comment: it emerges like a mystic epiphany, the epiphany of an *adynaton*. The cause of all these portentous phenomena is Cleopatra's body, the erotic body par excellence. Just like Venus in Lucretius's *De rerum natura*, this body immediately elicits *libido* and *voluptas*, that is to say *Sexualtrieb*. There is no doubt about it: from that flaming throne on which Cleopatra is led in triumph there spreads a strange and invisible perfume ("A strange and invisible perfume / Hits the sense of the adjacent wharfs"; 2.2.221–23), which strikes and awakens the senses of the adjacent shores; the winds are "love-sick" for the sails of the barge she sits in

7. All quotations from *Antony and Cleopatra* are from the Arden Shakespeare edition edited by John Wilders. Text references are to act, scene, and line of this edition. The full passage quoted here reads:

ENOBARBUS

I will tell you. The barge she sat in like a burnished throne
Burned 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 beggared all description: she did lie
In her pavilion—cloth-of-gold, of tissue—
O'erpicturing that Venus where we see
The fancy outwork nature. On each side her
Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
With divers-colored fans, whose wind did seem
To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
And what they undid did. (2.2.202–15)

(2.2.203–4); the water is in love with the oars that beat and cut through it ("The water which they [the oars] beat to follow faster, / As amorous of their strokes"; 2.2.204–7). Air, Water, Earth—Cleopatra is the Fire that ignites the other three elements. Scholars have suggested that the barge in which Cleopatra sails is a metaphor for the cosmos, or, even better, for the Copernican cosmos.[8] That is certainly possible, and the radical changes in the collective consciousness brought about by the progress of modern science may indeed account for the "metaphysical thrill" that runs through Shakespeare's poetry. The astronomical metaphor, though, is not isolated, nor is it an end in itself. Cleopatra is the Sun, the centre, of that astral ship/chariot, and from that centre she radiates her energy, which is pure pleasure. While the entire universe—water, earth, air—desires her and moves, she is pleased and sits still, as if she were the centre of a solar system. She imposes her rhythm, her movement, her will on the entire world: Antony invites her to his banquet, but she has him attend hers, thus "purs[ing] up his heart" (2.2.197).

Cleopatra's perfection, though, cannot be identified with the *summum bonum* described by the Western ontological and theological tradition. Her perfection, her "fullness," are instead the fullness and perfection of imperfection. In this regard, Enobarbus narrates a rather bizarre anecdote on the queen's private life:

> ENOBARBUS
>
> I saw her once
> Hop forty paces through the public street,
> And having lost her breath, she spoke and panted,
> That she did make defect perfection,
> And breathless pour breath forth.
> […]
> 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. (2.2.239–42)

8. See Sacerdoti, *Nuovo cielo, nuova terra*.

The anecdote describes one of the many jokes and pranks that Cleopatra likes to play with Antony. The two of them love to blend in with the crowd, disguise as commoners, and frequent taverns, sometimes getting into trouble. Cleopatra is here portrayed in the act of hopping across a street in Alexandria, and she probably did so as result of some challenge or bet with Antony. The comic episode then becomes the pretext for discussing the nature of that unparalleled woman: although she is out of breath after jumping in the streets, she is still able to talk. She talks and pants and breathes in spite of being short of breath. "She made defect perfection," says Enobarbus. The oxymoronic wordplay on "defect/perfection" is evident, but its deeper meaning is perhaps not immediately obvious. In order to fully grasp it, we must go back to the lines uttered by Agrippa just before Enobarbus's account of the aforementioned anecdote. Agrippa and Maecenas listen to Enobarbus in amazement as he describes the arrival of Venus-like Cleopatra on the Cydnus and the astonishing effects of that divine epiphany. As if he were trying to deflate the portentous tone of Enobarbus's story, Agrippa exclaims: "Royal wench! / She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed. / He ploughed her, and she cropped" (2.2.236–38). He belittles Cleopatra's charm by suggesting that it only has to do with sex and with her cunning political plan to deprive the Roman dictator of an heir. By telling his bizarre story, though, Enobarbus indirectly refutes Agrippa's statement. *Ce n'est pas une affaire de foutre*—it is not merely a matter of luring a great man to "lay his sword to bed."

Cleopatra's charm—her power—is entirely different: she is able to transform (her own) faults into perfection, "she made defect perfection." But what fault, what defect is being alluded to? Is it the defect of women? Is it *le manque de phallus* (the lack of a phallus)? Indeed, Agrippa and Maecenas undoubtedly think that women are marked by the lack of a phallus (and hence their main objective is to cunningly take possession of it for their own ends); and yet, answers Enobarbus, this lack actually turns into *fullness* and *completeness* in the figure of Cleopatra. Enobarbus then adds that the "vilest things become themselves in her," that "age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her *infinite variety*," and that "other women cloy the appetites they feed, but she makes hungry where most she satisfies." In other words, Cleopatra's body is imbued with supernatural, transcendental, and metaphysical energy: she is invulnerable to time and decay in that she is inexhaustible ("infinite variety").

Like the legendary philosopher's stone (the *lapis philosophorum*),[9] she refines the vilest things and brings them to perfection and to the fulfilment of their essence. Being a woman, Cleopatra is not free from the aforementioned lack: on the contrary, she brings it to perfection and enjoys it.

Should the notion of *manque féminin* not then be discussed in terms quite different from those traditionally used when interpreting it from the usual male perspective? Should we not say that there is a lack *in* the phallus rather than speaking of a lack *of* the phallus? Does the figure of Cleopatra (and of the Woman) not evoke that question? That question conjures a perturbing image of the female body in the Imaginary. Those phobic paths of the Imaginary will now be discussed before going back to the original problem.

The phobic image: the monstrous beauty of the snake-fairy, from the signifier to the sign

The poisonous virgin

> Most beloved sone kynge Alexandre, trust not in women, nor in theyr werkes, nor servyces, and company not with them. And yf necessyte were that thou must have company of a woman, do so that thou mayst knowe that she is true to the, and holsome of her bodye. For whan thy persone is betwene the armes of a woman, thou arte as a Jewell put, and restynge in the handes of a marchaunt, that careth not to whome it is solde. And beynge betwene her handes, is the poyson of thy welfare, and also the destruccyon of thy body. Beware therfore dere sone, of suche women, for they be venymous and deedly. For it is no newe thynge to knowe that by theyr venym many men have dyed. Thou knowest well that many kynges have forthered and shortened theyr lyves and have dyed by poyson. […] And thynke on dere sone that whan thou was in the partyes of Ynde, many people made to the grete presentes and fayre. Amonge the whiche was sente a fayre mayden whiche in her chyldheed had be nourysshed

9. For alchemical allusions in *Antony and Cleopatra*, see Abraham, "Alchemical Reference"; "'Lovers and the Tomb'"; Park, "Discandying Cleopatra." It is worth noting that the alchemical tradition had handed down the fragments of a dialogue between Cleopatra and other alchemists entitled Διάλογος φιλοσόφων καὶ Κλεοπάτρας (A dialogue of the philosophers and Cleopatra), according to the list of works mentioned in *πίναξ* of the Marcianum (frag. 2r) (see Berthelot and Ruelle, *Collections*).

> with venym of serpentes, werby her nature was converted in to the nature of serpentes. And than yf I had not wysely beholden her and by my artes and wyt knowen her, bycause that contynually, and without shamefastnesse ever she loked in the faces of the people, I perceyved that with ones bytynge she wolde have put a man to deth as sythen thou hast seen the experyence before the. And yf I had not knowen her nature, at the fyrst tyme that thou had medled with the sayd mayden thou haddest ben deed without remedy.[10]

These words appear in the chapter entitled "How a kynge ought to kepe his body" in the 1528 English version of the *Secretum secretorum*, prepared by the writer and editor Robert Copland; the book is a *speculum principis* in the form of a long letter from Aristotle to Alexander the Great, which contains moral, political, and medical advice for kings. It was incredibly popular throughout the Middle Ages and also in the early modern period. Aristotle warns Alexander to fear the poisonous body of women. To lie in a woman's arms is to expose one's own health and physical well-being to poisoning and, hence, to destruction, in that women are poisonous and deadly by nature, just like some plants and animals. This obsession with women's poison (their poisoned gaze, poisoned breath, poisoned bodily humours, which contaminate and intoxicate men) is then embodied in a story. Aristotle reminds Alexander of the danger he escaped in India, where someone who wanted to kill him sent him as a gift a beautiful maid who had been fed snake venom when she was a child and had thus taken on the inner nature of the snake: she was a snake in the shape and body of a woman.

The story (which stemmed from Indian narrative traditions prior to the Common Era, which then survived through Arab mediation) circulated widely thanks to the numerous translations in modern languages, and a significant and darker rewriting of it was produced, which is reported in the *Tesoro versificato*.[11] The queen of Sizire, a great sorceress and soothsayer, knows that Olympias will give birth to the man who will oust her: Alexander. She thus decides to destroy him by striking him where he is most vulnerable—that is, by taking advantage of his great lust. Enormous snakes that lay gigantic eggs live in those regions of the East. By using her magic arts, the queen finds the nest of

10. *Secretum secretorum*, ed. Manzalaoui, 56.

11. D'Ancona, "Il tesoro."

a female snake who has just laid eggs and, when the beast moves away, places a newborn girl, whom she has stolen from her human mother, inside the egg. Then she hides and waits for the snake to return. When the snake returns to its nest, it broods its eggs, among which is the one that contains the baby girl. The girl is kept warm by the snake and nourished by its bodily substances until her egg hatches, and then she is fed by the snake with the other hatchlings. When the snake's offspring have grown enough, the snake abandons them. The queen goes to fetch the girl and brings her to her palace. The girl is poisonous and, lacking language, she hisses like a snake: anyone who comes into contact with her drops dead. The queen locks her in a cage and re-educates her, feeding her with bread and human food, getting her used to wearing clothes, and teaching her to speak. The girl grows up to be beautiful; her beauty is unparalleled and irresistible. When Alexander reaches those regions, the queen sends him the girl as a gift and, being very lustful, he immediately falls for her. He would have immediately lain with her if Aristotle had not recognised her true and secret nature, the nature of the snake, from her appearance, her eyes, her beauty, and her elegance. Sexual intercourse with her would have been lethal, for the man's body would have immediately been poisoned by her. Aristotle thus orders that dittany juice, which is fatal for snakes, be poured all around her in a circle, and the girl immediately begins to screech and hiss like a snake. She raises her body and writhes, and then she suffocates and dies within the impenetrable circle of poison.

The story is designed to strike deep chords in the Imaginary: it delves into the corporeal and undermines the boundaries between the human and the bestial, which are blurred by a repulsive metamorphosis. It also distorts the ideas of maternity, pregnancy, nourishment, and maternal care, which are all perverted into nightmarish scenes. Lastly, it presents sexual intercourse as a cause of death and fusion with monstrosity. The female body as a whole—that is to say, the body of women as mothers and lovers, as objects of desire and of reproduction—is rendered taboo and demonized. From an anthropological point of view, the story evokes the atavistic fear of being devoured and digested by the body of a terrible predator. This imaginary scene opens up within a precise semiotic horizon, namely that of the opposition between the female body and the male body, or, in other words, the difference between the sexes. Indeed, the story begins with the power struggle between a man and a woman, between Alexander and the Eastern queen, between the man's military power supported

by Aristotle's wisdom and the appalling magic of the queen-sorceress. The numerous stories that focus on the figure of the woman-snake[12] have ancient and cultic origins—just think of the many snake goddesses belonging to the most diverse religious traditions—and are widespread across vast areas from India to Japan, from the Near East to Africa, Greece, and Europe. But it is not necessary here to delve into the territory of the comparative anthropology of religion.[13] A more relevant question of method in this context would be the following: Are the snake images that demonize female nature and the female body merely the product of a misogynistic culture and ideology, or are they rather the symptom of a more complex cluster of meaning concerning the relationship between the male and the female?

The amorous snake in its boudoir

Cleopatra is in her room with her maids and her loyal eunuch Mardian. Antony is in Rome, where he has been drawn by the difficult political situation. The queen is sunk in erotic melancholy and she longs nostalgically for her "man of men" (as she calls Antony). This scene (act 1, scene 5) may well be read as if it were an extract of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, whose third part is indeed entitled *Love Melancholy*. The mind of the melancholic conjures up ghosts and chimeras; it becomes the realm of *imaginatio* and *phantasia*.[14] Indeed, Cleopatra alludes to serpentine hisses, sorcerous metamorphoses, and poisonous medicinal plants:

CLEOPATRA
Charmian!
CHARMIAN
Madam?

12. See Hertz, "Die Sage vom Giftmädchen."

13. For an analysis of this figure from an anthropological, historical, and religious perspective, see Donà, *La fata serpente*; for a cultural and political analysis, see Giallongo, *La donna serpente*. On the figure of the *pucelle venimeuse* (the venomous woman) in the literature of the Romance languages and its connection with some of the most important female characters of the *roman*, see Caraffi, "Velenose bellezze." On the snake goddesses of the ancient Mediterranean world and the tragic queens of Greek drama, see Beltrametti, "Immagini della donna."

14. On this matter, see Starobinski, *L'encre de la mélancolie*.

CLEOPATRA
Ha, ha! Give me mandragora to drink
CHARMIAN
Why, madam?
CLEOPATRA
That I might sleep out this great gap of time
My Antony is away.
CHARMIAN
You think of him too much. (1.5.1–6)

At the beginning of this scene, Cleopatra asks for a powerful sedative, the mandrake, so as to be able to sleep while Antony is away.[15] In the *Anatomy of Melancholy*,[16] the mandrake is indeed prescribed in various preparations—essential oil, pillow-shaped bags to be placed under the patient's head, a root decoction—to help against insomnia ("waking"), which "is a symptome that much crucifices melancholy men," who are tormented by fears, worries, suffering, and dryness of the brain.[17] Cleopatra then turns to Mardian, the court singer, but instead of asking him to sing (music is the "food" of melancholic lovers par excellence, as is stated by Cleopatra herself: "Give me some music, music, moody food / Of us that trade in love"; 2.5.1–2),[18] she asks him whether, emasculated as he is, he too has sexual impulses ("affections"). Mardian's answer is undoubtedly affirmative: "Yet have I fierce affections and think / What Venus did with Mars" (1.5.18–19). The melancholy of love cannot be cured by powerful drugs … and not even by castration! Cleopatra then surrenders herself to the "poisons" of rumination and erotic longing (*nimia cogitatio*):

CLEOPATRA
O, Charmian,
Where think'st thou he is now? Stands he, or sits he?

15. The mandrake is also known to have aphrodisiac properties.

16. As is well known, Shakespeare could not have read Burton's work, which was only completed in 1621 and published in 1651. However, Burton clearly drew from a vast medical and folk tradition that was widely diffused long before his work.

17. Burton, *L'anatomia*, 1506–11.

18. Compare Orsino's words in *Twelfth Night*: "If music be the food of love, play on; / Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting, / The appetite may sicken and so die" (1.1.1–3).

> Or does he walk? Or is he on his horse?
> O happy horse, to bear the weight of Antony!
> Do bravely, horse, for wot'st thou whom thou mov'st?
> The demi-Atlas of this Earth, the arm
> And burgonet of men. He's speaking now,
> Or murmuring, "Where's my serpent of old Nile?"
> For so he calls me. Now I feed myself
> With most delicious poison. Think on me
> That am with Phoebus' amorous pinches black,
> And wrinkled deep in time? Broad-fronted Caesar,
> When thou wast here above the ground, I was
> A morsel for a monarch. And great Pompey
> Would stand and make his eyes grow in my brow;
> There would he anchor his aspect, and die
> With looking on his life. (1.5.19–35)

Where might Antony be? Is he standing or sitting? Is he walking or is he riding his horse? Happy is that horse that bears his weight! It should be proud to know who it is carrying. The demi-Atlas of the Earth, the hand and burgonet of men… or is he speaking? Or is he whispering "where's my serpent of old Nile?" For that is how he calls her. She then wishes to feed herself with the most delicious poison. Is he thinking of her, who is black with Phoebus's pinches and furrowed by the wrinkles of time? Shakespeare's dramatic text is very subtle here: Cleopatra is not fantasizing out loud; her speech is not rambling nonsense but rather an *operation*. Like a sorceress or a soothsayer who sees the future in reflective surfaces,[19] she evokes images and conjures up ghosts: she describes what she is seeing in her mind as if she were looking into a mirror or a crystal. She evokes the image of her beloved, looks at him, and has that image utter her own words, as if she were trying to influence her beloved's thoughts from a distance: "Think of me, think of me who am black with Phoebus's pinches and furrowed by the wrinkles of time… where is my serpent of old Nile?" The image that Cleopatra sees reflected in the clear mirror of her mind is that of an old wrinkled lady, blackened by the fire of lust (indeed, there is evidently an obscene double meaning in her comments on Antony's horse): for a moment,

19. On witchcraft in *Antony and Cleopatra*, see Stella, "Tradimento gitano."

the face of an old witch who makes herself beautiful with a spell so as to charm her beloved shows through that of the beautiful queen Cleopatra.

The magical tone of that soliloquy is even more evident for those who know the jargon of alchemical transmutation: the phrase "me that am with Phoebus' amorous pinches black" echoes the biblical passage "*nigra sum sed formosa*" from the *Song of Songs*, which is the symbol of prime matter, the base substance transformed into gold by alchemists. The appellative "great medicine," used by Cleopatra to refer to Antony, is also an alchemical term: great medicine is indeed a synonym of *lapis*. Cleopatra's use of her erotic magic to evoke the image of Antony is interrupted by Alexas, who has been sent by Antony himself to bring her as a gift "the treasure of an oyster," the most beautiful pearl of the East (which is another symbol of transformation): "How much art thou unlike Mark Antony! / Yet, coming from him, that great medicine hath / with his tinct guilded thee" (1.5.37–40). Witchcraft is thus evoked by allusions to pearls and gold obtained from base matter, drugs extracted from medicinal plants, charming and erotically enticing words, and a mysterious and obscure, beautiful woman blackened by Eros and wrinkled by time. The poet sows a field of signs rather than words—signs that do not "signify" but rather mimic or remind of corporeal movements, of sinuous and elusive movements along a serpentine path: "Where's my serpent of old Nile?" That is the fundamental image: Cleopatra, the snake, is the protagonist of the scene; she stands in her "nest," enjoying the exquisite and lethal poison of the melancholy of love.

In the land of the crocodile

Other than being the home of magic, Egypt is also the land of snakes par excellence. On board Pompey's ship at Capo Miseno, a lavish banquet takes place, which ends in a wild, orgiastic dance aimed at celebrating the renewed (although deceiving and short-lived) alliance between the three greatest men on earth: Octavian, Mark Antony, and Lepidus. Lepidus, who was already drunk before the banquet began, and Antony, who is tipsy but still composed and sarcastic, have a paradoxical conversation on agricultural practices and the fauna of Egypt.

ANTONY

(*To Caesar*)
Thus do they, sir: they take the flow o' the Nile
By certain scales i' the pyramid; they know,
By the height, the lowness, or the mean, if dearth
Or foison follow: 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

LEPIDUS

You've strange serpents there.

ANTONY

Ay, Lepidus

LEPIDUS

Your serpent of Egypt is bred now of your mud by the operation of your sun: so is your crocodile.

ANTONY

They are so.
[…]

LEPIDUS

Nay, certainly, I have heard the Ptolemies' pyramises are very goodly things; without contradiction, I have heard that.
[…]
What manner o' thing is your crocodile?

ANTONY

It is shaped, sir, like itself; and it is as broad as it hath breadth: it is just so high as it is, and moves with its own organs: it lives by that which nourisheth it; and the elements once out of it, it transmigrates.

LEPIDUS

What color is it of?

ANTONY

Of it own color too.

LEPIDUS

'Tis a strange serpent

ANTONY

'Tis so. And the tears of it are wet. (2.7.17–52)

Egypt is indeed a strange country: the soil does not need to be ploughed; the sowers wait for the Nile to flood, scatter the seeds in the silt, and then come back for the harvest. "You've strange serpents there," says Lepidus, with the rude and mocking tone of a drunkard. "Your serpent of Egypt is bred now of your mud by the operation of your sun: so is your crocodile […] What manner o' thing is your crocodile?" he continues. Antony explains to Lepidus (while probably sniggering at him) that the Egyptian crocodile is shaped like itself, is as tall as it is, moves on its own limbs, lives by what it eats, and, once its food has left its body, it "transmigrates." And its tears are wet! "'Tis a strange serpent!" answers Lepidus. Antony is clearly making fun of him, and his joke once again parodies the jargon of alchemy and the language of Renaissance *hieroglyphica Aegyptiaca*.

The mud of the Nile was a popular image of liquid black prime matter, the action of the sun upon it was a metaphor for transforming fire, and the crocodile is the equivalent of the basilisk or the *cocatrix*, zoomorphic manifestations of the philosopher's stone.[20] And yet, beyond the parody and mockery (not to mention the deliberately imprecise and comic use of alchemical jargon), a powerful imagery is evoked. The snake or dragon (the crocodile) of the Nile is a wonder of nature, a *monstrum naturale*, whose mystery is contained in Antony's tautological riddle.[21] It is an indigenous beast, a *genius loci*, born and bred on the very soil of that wonderful country covered by mud and water, warmed by the sun, and lit by the moon at night. Egypt, which is identified with Cleopatra, "the serpent of old Nile" (Cleopatra *is* Egypt), is described as the enormous womb of a snake, which swallows and then regurgitates life, thus regenerating it by way of magic. The crocodile *transmigrates*, it overcomes death. Egypt, though, is also the land of poisons. In this scene, the poison (*venenum*) is the wine (*vinum*) that is copiously drunk at the banquet and provokes a wild excitement leading to an orgiastic dance and general drunkenness. VINUM VENENUM… VENUS: the famous pseudo-etymological pun,[22] which is even more meaningful when translated in English (Venus-Venom), has roots in ancient cults and links the word *venenum* to a love potion. The power of the

20. See Abraham, "Alchemical Reference."

21. On Shakespeare's possible sources for the image of the crocodile, see Lewis, "Romans, Egyptians, and Crocodiles."

22. Schilling, *La religion*.

poison of lust is enhanced by drunkenness, and we should bear in mind that Cleopatra significantly appeared to Antony for the first time as an intoxicating and Venus-like goddess.

Cleopatra and Saint Teresa: the snake bite

Cleopatra dies—*transmigrates*—because of a snake bite. The "serpent of old Nile" dies by poisoning itself with the venom from the bite—or perhaps the kiss?—of an asp. In other words, she is killed by one like herself. How should this suicide be interpreted?

The betrayal at the Battle of Actium has already taken place. In one of the many fights between the two lovers after the battle, Antony resentfully portrays Cleopatra as follows:

ANTONY
You were half blasted ere I knew you. Ha!
Have I my pillow left unpressed in Rome,
Forborne the getting of a lawful race,
And by a gem of women, to be abused
By one that looks on feeders?
CLEOPATRA
Good my Lord—
ANTONY
You have been a boggler ever.
But when we in our viciousness grow hard—
Oh, misery on't!—the wise gods seel our eyes,
In our own filth drop our clear judgments, make us
Adore our errors, laugh at's while we strut
To our confusion.
CLEOPATRA
O, is't come to this?
ANTONY
I found you as a morsel cold upon
Dead Caesar's trencher; nay, you were a fragment
Of Gneius Pompey's, besides what hotter hours,
Unregistered in vulgar fame, you have

> Luxuriously picked out. For I am sure,
> Though you can guess what temperance should be,
> You know not what it is. (3.13.110–27)

Antony attacks her, saying that she was already a wreck before he met her: she was a cold morsel left over by Caesar and by Pompey before him, not to mention the hottest hours she spent with them, which are not recorded in the chronicles of popular fame. "Though you can guess what temperance should be, / You know not what it is," says Antony bitterly. He also accuses her of being "a boggler," which does not mean so much that she is a "weathercock" as that she is someone who "gropes her way forward" and, therefore, someone who tries everything, tastes everything, and "allows everyone to taste her" (to draw once again on the metaphor of the morsel). She gropes around as blindly as a hooded falcon who moves inside its cage among its own excrements (to echo a simile used by Antony himself).[23] Cleopatra is hungry, insatiable, and she gives in to lust repeatedly, groping in the darkness of her own impulses: she is a voracious beast who acts upon its predatory instincts (indeed, the falcon is a bird of prey, and the snake and the crocodile are predators). What is the nature of such voracity? Where is its essence to be found?

Antony's words of hatred are followed by Enobarbus's words of adoration and admiration. Enobarbus is the one who utters the most laudatory descriptions of Cleopatra. Antony decides to leave Egypt and return to Rome, using the news that his wife Fulvia is dead as an excuse. Enobarbus warns him:

> ENOBARBUS
> Why, then, we kill all our women: we see how mortal an unkindness is to them; if they suffer our departure, death's the word.
> ANTONY
> I must be gone.
> ENOBARBUS
> Under a compelling occasion, let women die; it were pity to cast them away for nothing; though, between them and a great cause, they should be esteemed nothing. Cleopatra, catching but the least noise of this, dies instantly; I have seen her die twenty times upon

23. On the simile of the hooded falcon, see Henn, "Images," 120–22.

> far poorer moment: I do think there is mettle in death, which commits some loving act upon her, she hath such a celerity in dying. (1.2.149–51)

Enobarbus claims that this is how men kill their women. They kill them by treating them as if they were "nothing" compared to what men consider to be "a great cause." Women are nothing, their sex is nothing: the title of a famous comedy written by Shakespeare reads "*Much Ado About Nothing*," where "nothing" alludes to women and to the anatomy of their sex organs. On the contrary, the male sex is "a great cause," as are politics, power, and war. And yet, women die *for* that "nothing" and *of* that "nothing" with which they are identified. Enobarbus says of Cleopatra, the woman par excellence (just as Antony is the man par excellence): "I have seen her die twenty times upon far poorer moment [than the departure of Antony]: I do think there is mettle in death, which commits some loving act upon her, she hath such a celerity in dying." Enobarbus is clearly punning on the verb "to die," which means both to pass from physical life and to have an orgasm (this is a typically Shakespearean pun).[24] In other words, he is saying that Cleopatra, *the* Woman, is all about pleasure. How can experiencing sexual pleasure and dying be identified, though? Does it have to do with the old description of orgasm as "the little death"?[25] Is that really it?

The Clown walks into Cleopatra's chambers carrying a basket of figs. "Hast thou the pretty worm / Of Nilus there, / That kills and pains not?" she asks (5.2.241–43). "Truly I have him," answers the Clown, and then he utters lines full of sexual innuendo. However, he does not do so merely for the sake of a joke: his humour reveals deep and uncomfortable truths. When Cleopatra asks him if he knows of someone who was killed by the snake, he answers that he does indeed: many men and women died because of it.

24. David Bevington, the editor of New Cambridge Shakespeare, comments: "The added bawdy suggestion of achieving sexual consummation is reinforced by Enobarbus's repeatedly playing upon the idea in this speech, and especially by the image of death as committing 'some loving act upon her.' In this erotic sense, Cleopatra 'dies' swiftly and often. The wordplay continues in Enobarbus's jest about her celerity in dying." Bevington, *Antony and Cleopatra*, 101n.

25. As is well known, that expression was formulated by Georges Bataille in his *L'érotisme*.

CLOWN

> I heard of one of them no longer than yesterday, a very honest woman—but something given to lie, as a woman should not do but in the way of honesty—how she died of the biting of it, what pain she felt. Truly, she makes a very good report o'th'worm; but he that will believe all that they say, shall never be sav'd by half that they do. But this is most falliable, the worm's an odd worm. (5.2.249–57)

A woman, in particular, died of its bite the previous day—an honest woman, although slightly too prone to lying down,[26] which is something that a woman should only do for reasons of honesty. People were talking of how she went into ecstasy (died) and what pain she felt from it.[27] The woman gave a very good report on the snake, even though those who believe everything women say will not be saved by half of what they do. That is a peculiar snake: it always performs well![28] The Clown then wishes Cleopatra a good time with the snake ("I wish all joy of the worm"; 5.2.259), and leaves. Before leaving, however, the Clown hesitates and offers the queen a piece of advice: "Give it nothing, I pray you, for it is not worth the feeding" (5.2.268–69). "Will it eat me?" Cleopatra answers, amused. "You must not think I am so simple, but I know the devil himself will not eat a woman," retorts the Clown (5.2.271–72).

Something inexplicable and disturbing then happens. Having dismissed the Clown, Cleopatra asks her maids to dress her in her royal robes and gives them one last kiss before killing herself with the snake. The faithful Iras, though, drops dead when the queen kisses her. How is that possible? "Have I the aspic in my lips?" wonders Cleopatra (5.2.292) and then adds, "The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch / Which hurts and is desired" (5.2.294–95). The mythical and fairy-tale character of the *pucelle venimeuse* (the venomous woman) resurfaces here. Cleopatra's kiss *is* the snake's bite. The rite is finally performed:

CLEOPATRA

> Come, thou mortal wretch
> With thy sharp teeth this knot intrinsicate

26. *To lie* means both "to tell a lie" and "to lie with someone." I have here decided to emphasize the sexual meaning of the verb.

27. *To die* means once again "to stop existing" and "to have an orgasm."

28. "Falliable" is a malapropism for "infallible."

Of life at once untie. Poor venomous fool,
Be angry, and dispatch. O, couldst thou speak,
That I might hear thee call great Caesar ass
Unpolicied!
CHARMIAN
O eastern star!
CLEOPATRA
Peace, peace!
Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,
That sucks the nurse asleep?
CHARMIAN
O, break! O, break!
CLEOPATRA
As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle—
O Antony!—Nay, I will take thee too.
(*Applying another asp to her arm*)
What should I stay? (5.2.302–11)

Cleopatra puts an asp to her breast, talking to it in a condescending tone, as if it were an inept lover. "Mortal wretch," she calls it, "poor venomous fool, / Be angry and dispatch." She then silences Charmian's sobs and protests: "Peace, peace! / Dost thou not see my baby at my breast, / That sucks the nurse asleep? […] As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle— / O Antony!" At the memory of her beloved, she takes another asp and puts it on her arm, saying: "Nay, I will take thee too. / What should I stay?" "What should I stay?" wonders Cleopatra, and those are her last words. Why should she not die experiencing supreme pleasure?

Is that not one of the most erotic and uncanny scenes in literature? And yet, where do eroticism and the uncanny lie? Cleopatra gives herself pleasure with the snake, she performs an autoerotic gesture that invades her body but does not involve the female sex-organ in that it does not produce an orgasm but rather ecstasy, *ek-stasis*. Pleasure is generated—and flows like poison—by a fantasy of nutrition and breastfeeding.[29] The Clown had already evoked

29. Which is, as one can easily see, a fantasy of motherhood. On the figure of Cleopatra as "mother of the world" (in the manner of the Plutarchean Isis), see Aldelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, 166–92. See also Kuriyama, "Mother of the World."

an image of feeding: "Give it nothing […] for it is not worth the feeding," he warned her. "Will it eat me?" answered Cleopatra. That fantasy now comes true before the audience's eyes. Cleopatra suckles the snake, she feeds him on her own self and enjoys that sweet suction, that exchange of fluids, that mixing of milk, blood, and poison. How can this not remind us of the story of the baby brooded and fed by her snake stepmother and then re-educated to eat human food by the queen-sorceress, so as to be transformed into a beautiful, deadly, and irresistible object of desire? In that horror fairy tale, as in this scene in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the woman-snake is a "heterotopia" of the female body, of its powers and its Otherness. Cleopatra experiences the most peculiar kind of female pleasure—one which is unknown to males and which is not produced by sex but rather by the pure enjoyment of an elusive, infinite, and inexhaustible corporeality, which Shakespeare describes (through Enobarbus) as *infinite variety*. Antony, who loves that *infinite variety*, without fully grasping its essence, calls it "insatiability" and "hunger," thus assuming the moralistic and conformist tone of those who fail to understand. Cleopatra is certainly insatiable, so much so that one asp is not enough for her. When she thinks of Antony, she takes another one: she does not want to stop feeling pleasure. She is thirsty for infinity, she wants more and more.

There is no sexual intercourse: the lack in the phallus and female perfection

Metamorphosis, such as the mixture of woman and snake, always implies an emphasis on corporeality. Corporeality is both the *revers* (reverse) and the (*sous-*)*sol* (subsoil), if not the *terroir* (natural milieu), of language. This principle was discovered and illustrated by Freud in his studies on hysteria and in his first important case study on obsessional neurosis ("Rat Man"). On the one hand, language can be used consciously to categorize, order, represent, communicate, and judge; on the other hand, there is another kind of language, in which the psychological and bodily activities of the speaker emerge ("ça parle," as Lacan would say)—a language that has to do mainly with the speaker's bodily and instinctual part, and which only surfaces in the form of allusive and fragmentary signs without producing meaning. In that language, a word is always "a word and something else," *mot-pont* (*Wortbrücke*), *mot-symptôme*, and, ultimately, a *mot-signe*. Cleopatra's language is exactly like that: it is a

combination of signs in which the verbal element is absorbed by the non-verbal one, only to re-emerge as a cipher or a hieroglyph. In a memorable passage (which is a remarkable example of the semiological method *avant la lettre*), Algernon Swinburne discusses the relationship between sign, meaning, and words by commenting on some drawings by Michelangelo,[30] namely women's heads characterized by the same type of serpentine lines (Michelangelo has indeed been recognized by mannerist art critics, and especially by Giovan Paolo Lomazzo, as the inventor of this peculiar kind of feature).[31] Swinburne mentions the example par excellence of this "serpentine" style, the *Cleopatra* on display at the Buonarroti Palace, which was drawn by Michelangelo as a gift for Tommaso Cavalieri:

> There is a drawing in the furthest room at the Buonarroti Palace which recalls and almost reproduces the design of these three. Here also the electric hair, which looks as though it would hiss and glitter with sparks if once touched, is wound up to a tuft with serpentine plaits and involutions; all that remains of it unbound falls in one curl, shaping itself into a snake's likeness as it unwinds, right against a living snake held to the breast and throat. This is rightly registered for a study of Cleopatra; *but notice has not yet been accorded to the subtle and sublime idea which transforms her death by the aspic's bite into a meeting of serpents which recognise and embrace, an encounter between the woman and the worm of Nile, almost as though this match for death were a monstrous love-match, or such a mystic marriage as that painted in the loveliest passage of "Salammbô,"between the maiden body and the scaly coils of the serpent and the priestess alike made sacred to the moon*; so closely do the snake and the queen of snakes caress and cling. Of this idea Shakespeare also had a vague and great glimpse when he made Anthony murmur, "Where is my serpent of old Nile?" mixing a foretaste of her death with the full sweet savour of her supple and amorous "pride of life."[32]

30. The historical and material circumstances in which Swinburne wrote "Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence" have been traced and discussed by Stefano Evangelista. See Evangelista, "Swinburne's Galleries."

31. On Lomazzo and the serpentine line, see Praz, *Mnemosyne*. On the serpentine line as the "soul" of beauty in art, see William Hogarth's *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753), and Winckelmann's famous pages on the *Laocoön* in *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1764).

32. Swinburne, "Notes on Designs," 371; emphasis added.

In this passage, whose writing mimics the S-shaped form of the serpentine line through the syntactic arrangement and the phonetic features of the sentences,[33] Swinburne draws attention to the fact that the fusion between Cleopatra's body and the body of a snake works as a sign: the undulating movement of the snake, which is incessantly repeated, visually and materially represents "the full sweet savour of her [Cleopatra's] supple and amorous 'pride of life.'" What is that "supple and amorous pride of life" if not Cleopatra's never-ending pursuit of pleasure? That very pursuit of pleasure that Enobarbus calls "infinite variety."

On the one hand, Cleopatra is a serpent-like monster; on the other hand, she is the paragon of her sex, so much so that she is likened to a remarkable work of art:

> ANTONY
> She is cunning past man's thought
> ENOBARBUS
> Alack, sir, no, her passions are made of nothing but the finest part of pure love. 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; if it be, she makes a shower of rain as well as Jove.
> ANTONY
> Would I had never seen her!
> ENOBARBUS
> O, sir, you had then left unseen a wonderful piece of work, which not to have been blest withal would have discredited your travel. (1.2.152–58)

"She is cunning past man's thought," complains Antony. "That's not true!" answers Enobarbus. Her passions are made of pure love. Cleopatra does not sigh or shed tears, and her "winds and waters" are "storms and tempests" that no almanac can report. There is no cunning nor treachery in her. When Antony continues his indictment of the queen exclaiming, "Would I had never seen her!" Enobarbus answers that, had he never seen her, he would never have seen "a wonderful piece of work." Cleopatra is indeed a *masterpiece*. She is a

33. For a stylistic analysis of the passage, see Østermark-Iohansen, "Swinburne's Serpentine Delights."

true masterpiece of nature that goes beyond nature itself. She is a metaphysical paradox, as has also been pointed out above. But where lies the *punctum* of such paradoxical perfection?

Lacan's axiom that between a man and a woman "il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel" is well known.[34] In other words, it is not in any way possible for them to have sexual intercourse at the level of structure (we will later see what that means). They never really meet each other, as Proust prophesied in the epigraph to *Sodome et Gomorrhe*: "La femme aura Gomorrhe et l'homme aura Sodome." The entire dramatic structure of *Antony and Cleopatra* is built on the constant chase between the man, Antony, and the woman, Cleopatra, who never reach each other. Cleopatra is always the one who leads the game, but that does not mean that she is not trying to reach Antony. Nonetheless, the *co-itus* between them (the word is to be interpreted literally and not metaphorically) never takes place. The rhythm of Shakespeare's play is in fact based on the lack of synchronization caused by delays or anticipations, in other words, on *contretemps*. It is here impossible to analyze the structure of the play in detail, but three crucial moments in this sequence of delays and anticipations can be identified.

Two of them are the betrayals in battle, the first being that of Actium, narrated in act 3, scene 10 by Enobarbus and Scarus. Scarus says that when the outcome of the battle was still uncertain and Antony and Cleopatra even seemed to have a slight advantage over Octavian, she, "the breeze upon her, like a cow in June, hoists sails and flies" (3.10.14–15). There is no explanation for her incomprehensible, wild, and bizarre behaviour. When Antony meets Cleopatra after her retreat, the queen is in tears and asks him to forgive her "fearful sails" and adds in justification: "I little thought you would have followed" (3.11.51–53). The question as to why she has deserted him remains unanswered. The same situation occurs in act 4, scene 12. Antony's fleet surrenders and he reads Cleopatra's retreat as a further and final betrayal on her part: he now wants her dead, he calls her "witch" (4.12.47), "triple-turned whore," and "foul Egyptian" (4.12.11–15), and he wishes her to be dragged to Rome by Octavian and displayed like a monster in a circus ("most monster-like be shown") or as the shame and stain of her sex ("like the greatest spot of all thy sex"; 4.12.35–36). Cleopatra reacts by running to take refuge in her own mausoleum.

34. Lacan, "Radiophonie," 413. The axiom was then repeatedly borrowed by Lacan until his *Séminaire XX*.

The third crucial instance of lack of synchronization follows. The queen sends word to Antony that she has killed herself, calling his name to see how he reacts (4.13.1–10). Believing her to be dead, Antony tries to end his own life by throwing himself on his sword. He does not die immediately, however, but is mortally wounded. Right at this moment, another messenger arrives from Cleopatra and tells Antony that Cleopatra is not dead and that she told him otherwise to escape his anger, which is unjustified in that she has never betrayed him (4.14.120–30). Yet the audience might think that even if it were true that she did not betray him, she then told him a lie that is truly deadly, although involuntarily so. Antony, who is about to die, thus asks to be carried to the mausoleum to be reunited with his true love. Cleopatra, though, is barricaded in her mausoleum and refuses to go out to give her lover the last kiss he asks of her: "I dare not, dear. / Dear my lord, pardon. I dare not / Lest I be taken" (4.15.22–24). She says that she is afraid of being captured by Octavian. She chooses her own safety even when faced with Antony's death. Is it worth being taken prisoner by Octavian to give one last kiss to her "man of men?"

The scene then becomes slightly surreal, even "Beckettian," one might say: if she does not want to go down to meet him, he will be carried to her, pulled up with ropes to reach the high window out of which Cleopatra is leaning. Cleopatra and her women thus pull Antony up so that the two lovers can kiss one last time. During that tiring and challenging activity—"Here's sport indeed! How heavy weighs my lord!" exclaims Cleopatra (4.15.33–35)—the idea of copulation emerges once again. "O Quick, or I am gone," "I'm dying, Egypt, dying," Antony urges (4.15.32, 43), remembering that the verb "to die" means both to stop being alive and to have an orgasm. Cleopatra answers: "O come, come, come / And welcome, welcome! Die, when thou hast lived; / Quicken with kissing" (4.15.37–39). The audience must have chuckled and perhaps shed tears of emotion at the same time. This is a bizarre scene; it represents an act of coitus which does not involve "organs" and which is aped in mid-air by two acrobats who are desperately trying to reach each other. In the end, though, they fail to do so: Cleopatra dies alone. Men and women never meet each other, as has been stated above.

This bizarre scene reveals much about Cleopatra's previous betrayals on the battlefield. Did she really betray Antony? She may not have betrayed him, but she certainly *missed* something. She missed the meeting with Antony: she suddenly left him and retreated from the Battle at Actium. She then tried to

escape Antony's anger by hiding in the mausoleum and feigning her own death instead of advocating for her innocence, thus causing the death of her lover. Lastly, she misses her last meeting with her dying lover. Cleopatra, the Woman, is prone to fleeing: she constantly misses her several *rendez-vous* with her man. She avoids them and disappears. The woman puts the *manqué* between herself and the man: she disarms him and fails to recognize him, if what is to be recognized is the phallus. The phallus is here to be understood as a symbol, a signifier, an emblem of language.[35]

Speaking of disarming men, it is impossible to forget the extraordinary passage in which Cleopatra amusedly tells her women of that time in which she got Antony drunk and then put him in her royal robe and her crown while she wore the sword he used at Philippi: "I drunk him to his bed / Then put my tires and mantles on him, whilst / I wore his sword Philippan" (2.5.21–23). That is clearly not a *cross-dressing* scene, nor one of queer exchange: it does not represent a metamorphosis nor does it imply indifference to difference. On the contrary, it is a denial of the signifier in the affirmation of difference. The phallus or the sword does not represent the encounter of man and woman: the signifier fails, it appears to lack meaning, whereas another sign, borrowed from another language—the language of the Other, the language of the Body: a small asp, a small poisonous animal—can be infallible. There is lack *in* the phallus: that is why the woman, Cleopatra, disappears in a snake-like motion and makes herself unavailable beyond her own pleasure. It is exactly in that unavailability to others ("defect") that her disconcerting (monstrous?) "perfection" lies: "she did make defect perfection."

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35. On this issue, see Stella, "Meta-Physical Wound."

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