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Back from the Dead. An Encounter with Domitius Enobarbus

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This piece was inspired by Massimo Guarascio, Professor of Engineering at Sapienza University of Rome and Director of the IV-V Michelangelo Workshop on "Mediterranean Bridging and Changing: the Role of Students, Schools and Professionals", organized with the support of the Engineering Associations of Mediterranean Countries (13-15 October 2016)[1]. It is a fictional interview with the character of Domitius Enobarbus from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, which was enacted as a performance in the cultural session of the conference, with Guarascio playing Enobarbus as a phantasmatic character, and Rosy Colombo and Alessandro Roccati respectively in their real-life professional roles as Professors of English literature and Egyptian studies.

The script is newly edited by its co-authors and printed here as a contribution to the theme of Shakespeare's Rome, to which the forthcoming no. 4 of *Memoria di Shakespeare. A Journal of Shakespearean Studies* will be devoted, with particular reference to *Antony and Cleopatra*.

[1] The piece was performed at Sapienza University of Rome, October 14th, 2016. The majority of the images accompanying this script were shown in the exhibition "Il Nilo a Pompei. Visioni d'Egitto nel mondo romano" ("The Nile in Pompeii. Visions of Egypt in the Roman World", Turin, 5 March-4 September 2016). Permission to reproduce them here has been sought by Rosy Colombo with the various Museums credited. The remaining images have been reproduced from Wikipedia (Creative Commons license) or the public domain. Rosy Colombo has made every effort to determine copyright of the images and would be grateful if any errors or omissions might be brought to her attention so that they can be rectified.

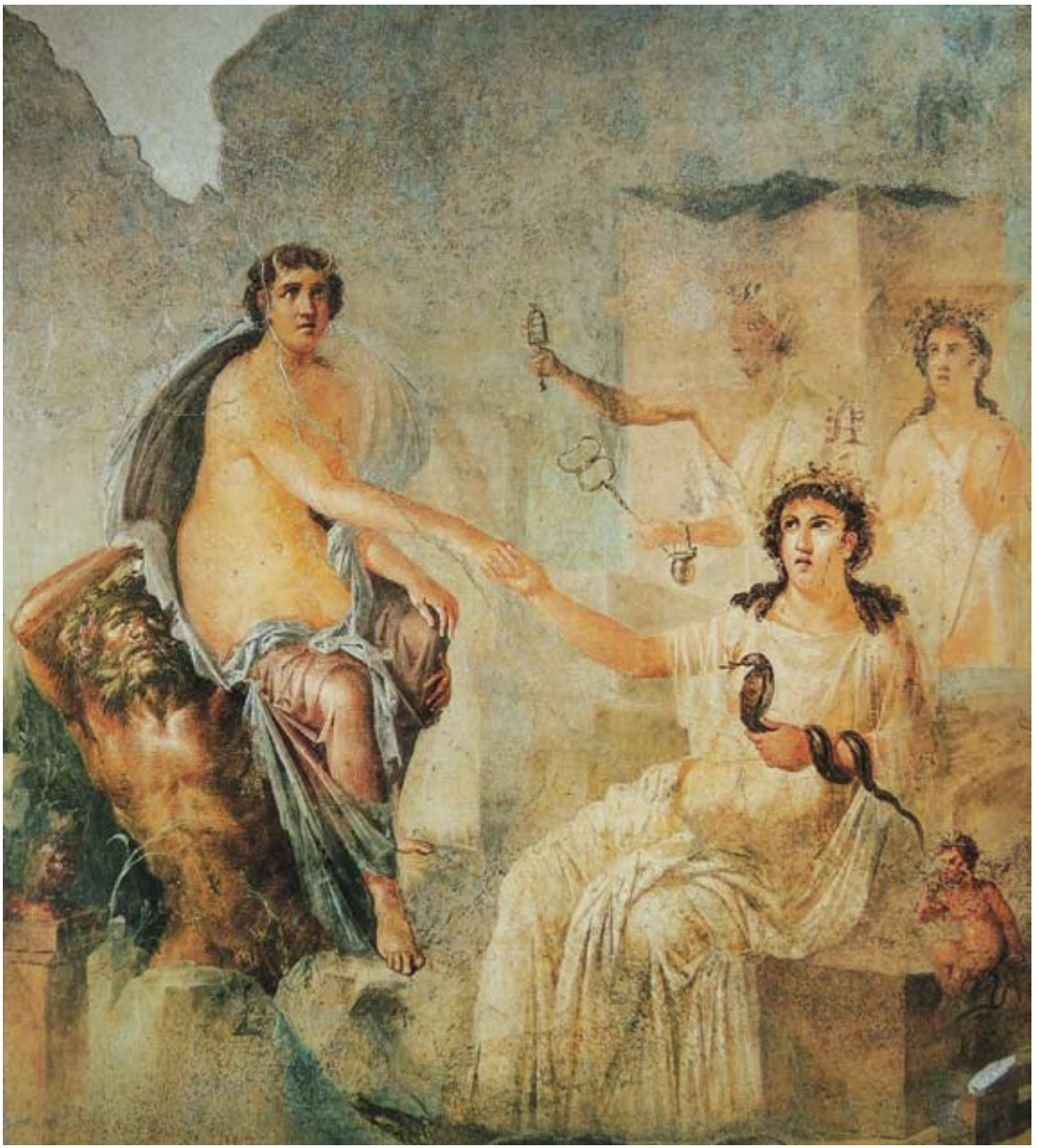

Fig. 1. *Io at Canopus.* Fresco, Tempio di Iside/Pompei.
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Io at Canopus is a fresco from the temple of Isis at Pompeii, first century A.D. The setting is Egypt. It represents the mythical priestess Io, transformed by Hera/Juno into a

heifer (testified by the horns she is forced to wear because of her illicit relationship with Juno's husband, Jupiter/Jove). Io arrives in Egypt to escape Juno's fury, and there she is welcomed by the goddess Isis. Io is shown carried on the shoulders of a man representing the Nile.

The figurative language of the image relies on a blend of ancient Greek and Egyptian icons, such as the serpent on Isis's arm, and the crocodile beneath her feet. The myth was employed by the Greek sovereigns of Egypt, belonging to the Ptolemaic dynasty, to legitimize their power.

Ghost of Enobarbus

My name is Domitius Enobarbus, and I am guilty of an infamous act of treason against my general, the Triumvir Mark Antony, "the triple pillar of the world" (I.i.12)[2]. You've seen me in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, as I die of remorse in Caesar's camp in Alexandria, where I had arrived as a deserter after the battle of Actium, the event that changed the world in 31 B.C. Actium was in fact the scenario of the great Mediterranean tragedy which ended with the Rome of the young, new, Caesar (later Augustus) taking power over the entire Mediterranean basin. It was the last move of a political strategy which had begun with the Phoenician wars in the west coast of Africa, and which culminated with the downfall of Egypt – the definitive sinking of Mark Antony's dream of making Cleopatra "mistress" of "all the East" (I.v.48-9). To me, Enobarbus, Antony's friend and advisor, it meant the collapse of an imaginary bridge linking Rome and Alexandria, ideology and utopia.

An operation of Fate, joining Caesar's political cunning with the lovers' alienation from reality, the battle was to me a shocking sight. Unable to bear it, I chose to desert, thereby sacrificing my honour, the very foundation of a Roman soldier's identity. In other words, I lost my integrity. Hence the strange mode of my death; not by the sword, according to the high classical code of Roman suicide, but from within. Mine was an interior death. It was brought about by shame and melancholy, a disease of the soul, dramatized by Shakespeare as a disgregation of the self, what is today called depression. Mine was a modern kind of suicide. By no means an atonement.

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[2] All quotations from *Antony and Cleopatra* refer to *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, eds Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson, David Scott Kastan, London, Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1998.

I am now here as a spectral revenant, back from the grave (actually a ditch, whose theatrical equivalent is the lower stage of the London Globe), wishing to retrieve some fragments of my shattered identity. I have two archaeologists here to help me dig up my past and my first question is for Rosy Colombo. Can you tell me something of the origin of my character, its hybrid roots?

Rosy Colombo (RC): You are right to say hybrid. Your character is a blend of a historical narrative, Plutarch's *Life of Antony* – written in Greek but committed to the ideology of the Roman Empire – and Shakespeare's dramatic imagination. As a playwright writing for a non-realistic stage, Shakespeare gave you a voice and point of view from which to represent the battle of Actium in words, and in terms of a personal tragedy. You had failed, for all your reasoning and sense of reality, to counteract Antony's irrational decision to fight at sea with Cleopatra at his side, forgetting that his military successes had always been on land. Besides, you knew full well that such a battle would quash the possibility of a cultural exchange between the West and the East. You had conceived the possibility of a dialogue when you enchanted the institutional heart of Rome by reporting the "rare" scene of Cleopatra's performance – her epiphany on the river Cydnus, on her way to meet Mark Antony (II.ii.196-250). Your description reversed the ideological prejudice against the Other which debased the Egyptian queen, translating her into a cheap, lustful gipsy. In celebrating her beauty as a work of art, 'overpicturing' the classical image of Greek and Roman Venus, you defined artistic experience as a ritual of initiation to Otherness.

Ghost: I trust this conversation will make sense of all this.

RC: Somewhat like a Freudian talking cure. One issue is your transformation from a minor historical character, according to a Greek historian integrated in the cultural system of the Roman Empire, to a major *dramatis persona* in the vision of the greatest Elizabethan and Jacobean playwright, at the time of Britain's crucial shift from a nation to an Empire (Shakespeare composed *Antony and Cleopatra* most probably in late 1606). On the one hand, parts of Plutarch's narrative were literally transcribed in *Antony and Cleopatra*, like the scene of her appearance on the river Cydnus (which is theatrical in itself); on the other hand

Shakespeare added your existential journey, which is not incidental, but rather a necessary function of the Mediterranean tragedy that according to Shakespeare was in tune with the epochal transformations brought about by early modernity in the artistic representation of power.

Ghost: The 2016 exhibition "The Nile in Pompeii" in Turin's Egyptian Museum featured an interesting statue of the Roman emperor Domitian in the garb of a Pharaoh. Perhaps Alessandro Roccati would like to explain this cultural engrafting of the symbolic codes of ancient Egypt onto the public image of a Roman Emperor: Domitian is a case in point.

Fig. 2. *Left*, Statue of Cesarion, said to be son of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar. Cairo, Egyptian Museum; *Right*, Statue of Domitian as a Pharaoh, Domitian age (81-96 A.D.). Benevento, Museo del Sannio (reproduced by permission of Provincia di Benevento).

Alessandro Roccati (AR): After the annexation of Egypt to the Roman empire, the ritual supremacy over the entire world embodied by the Egyptian Pharaoh featured the requirements of the new "sole sir o'th' world" (in Cleopatra's words when meeting Caesar after the death of Mark Antony, V.ii.118). A number of Roman emperors wished to look like Pharaohs, not only in the Nile region, where they were the legitimate successors of the former rulers, but even in Rome, in emulation of Alexandria: the capital of the oldest civilization and the very centre of the world. However, Rome did not manage to become the landmark of a world 'sans bound' as Alexandria had been at least at the beginning of its expansion, attracting the most distinguished people from everywhere.

Ghost: But Shakespeare did not approach the history of ancient Egypt looking into archives: he did it through his creative imagination.

RC: One instance of what you are suggesting is Shakespeare's treatment of Cleopatra's beauty. Not a canonical, classical, young beauty; Cleopatra was about forty years old when she met Antony. Yet, as you say, "Age [could] not wither her" (II.ii.245). Furthermore, since every passion became her, her beauty was not static – as for instance that of her rival Octavia, Caesar's beloved sister. At the heart of her beauty was an extraordinary intelligence, enriched by education. Plutarch writes that she was versatile in languages, and hardly ever needed an interpreter. Greek was her favourite language, presumably because of its connection with her ancestors, the Macedonian Greek Ptolemaic dynasty. This was the infinite variety you saw in her, in tune with the variety of the Alexandrian lifestyle.

I wonder, Alessandro, if there is a connection here with the mythical Nefertiti.

AR: One difference, actually, lies in religion. In Cleopatra's time Isis had become the universal goddess for Egyptians and other Mediterranean lands. Egypt's Macedonian rulers used to play the roles of Isis and her husband Osiris, according to the ancient myth extensively narrated by Plutarch. Moreover, Cleopatra VII, Egypt's last queen, was of Greek-Macedonian descent, but conformed to Egyptian habits and endeavoured by all means to preserve her country's independence from the greed of the Romans.

Fig. 3. Nefertiti. Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Neues Museum, Berlin. (By Philip Pikart (Own work) [GFDL (http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html) or CC BY-SA 3.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], via Wikimedia Commons)

About thirteen centuries before her queen Nefertiti, the wife of the rebel pharaoh Akhenaten, played a crucial role in the religious reform, also dubbed as the Amarna Revolution. It is likely that she too was of foreign birth. Her beautiful face was celebrated by the artists of the Amarna period. Both these queens lost their wars, for the Amarna period was deleted from official history as it was considered a dark age by the Egyptians who came after that reign.

After the death of Cleopatra VII, Egypt became a province of the Roman empire, and Rome began to emulate the Egyptian lifestyle.

RC: Unlike other Romans in the play, you understood, Enobarbus, that Antony's time in Alexandria, after Philippi and a number of cam-

paigns in Syria, was not to be considered a typical case of the warrior resting after his labours. It had been so for Caesar and Pompey; but for Antony, Egypt was the place for a new birth, a new beginning; the revelation of a "new heaven, new earth" (I.i.17). A utopia Cleopatra will embrace in staging her end, metaphorically ascending to the sphere of the supernatural by identifying herself with fire, and air. It has been proven that the philosophy of Giordano Bruno, in which the Christian faith merges with Oriental philosophies, is a compelling subtext to such transcendental yearning in Shakespeare[3].

AR: The vision of a new heaven, and a new earth, from the prophecy of St John in Patmos, suggests a link with the language of the Book of Revelation. To this cultural blend Shakespeare added a constant reference to the cult of the Egyptian goddess Isis that has hovered several times in the course of this conversation. Isis is in fact the goddess whom Cleopatra tends to incarnate as a maternal figure, as well as a wife.

Fig. 4. *Left*, Isis Lactans. I c. B.C.- I c. A.D. Photo © Musei Vaticani (all rights reserved); *Right*, Madonna Allattante il Bambino. XVcentury. Private Collection.

[3] This is the argument of Gilberto Sacerdoti's *Nuovo cielo, nuova terra. La rivoluzione copernicana di* Antonio e Cleopatra *di Shakespeare*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1990 (rpt. Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2008).

AR: I would argue that this passage from the Egyptian imaginary to the Christian one is precisely due to the agency of Rome. The Actium event marked the end of the cultural project which Enobarbus had anticipated. But let me say once again that Imperial Rome forged its image as a copy of Alexandria. True, Rome was captivated with Greece; however, not Athens, but Alexandria as a cosmopolitan centre was the blueprint of learning and civilization to be emulated. And yet with a significant difference: in imperial Rome, multiculturalism was strictly managed through political control and censure.

Ghost: You have also argued that the transfer of Egypt's cultural capital to Rome in time would be constitutive of the Mediterranean passage to a Christianity which chose Rome as its centre.

RC: A centre whose legitimacy the Reformation vigorously challenged. This is a decisive reason for Shakespeare's deconstruction of the Renaissance imaginary of ancient Rome as a symbol of universal peace, proudly announced by the younger Caesar at the end of *Antony and Cleopatra*. As a prophecy of the advent of Christian peace, it could only sound ironical when set against the early modern backdrop of a Popish and corrupted Rome, and the Arabic invasion across the Mediterranean sea. In any case, one would have to wait for Freud to recuperate some fragments of an Egyptian memory in the European heritage, in his discussion of the common origin of the three monotheistic religions[4]. Something similar is done artistically by T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, which evokes in the falling towers of Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria the compound origin of western civilization[5].

Ghost: When I lived in Alexandria I was astonished at the absence of gender discrimination in politics. A custom that Rome was not familiar with, at least at the time of the Republic where male authority was dominant, as Shakespeare knew only too well. In Egypt it was different.

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[4] Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, Engl. transl. By Katherine Jones, London, The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Pyschoanalysis, 1939.

[5] T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, London, Faber & Faber, 1963 (V. "What the Thunder Said", ll. 373-76).

AR: Egypt had beautiful women as well as powerful ones but only a few queens are known to have displayed both qualities, at different historical times. The Osirian myth however does show distinct gender roles with regard to power and authority: Osiris was the king, but it was Isis who ensured his miraculous succession after he was killed.

RC: And in Shakespeare's England, of course, a woman's body, that of the Virgin Queen, was the guarantor of the nation's independence and power.
Tell us more, Alessandro, of the silver thread that is woven through the stories (and histories) of Alexandria, Rome and London.

AR: At first, in Alexandria, Egyptians and Greeks mixed their cultures at the end of the Pharaonic era. Thence came the Rosetta stone, which epitomizes the transferences of symbols and icons from Egypt to the West:

Fig. 5. Rosetta Stone. British Museum, London.
(By Hans Hillewaert / CC BY-SA 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/), via Wikimedia Commons)

The recovery of the stone helped us penetrate the mysteries of the ancient writings, thanks to the genius of Champollion, and as we know, it is today in the British Museum, a booty transferred from French to British hands during the Napoleonic wars. Cleopatra's needle was moved onto the Thames from Alexandria, where it had been transferred by Cleopatra from Heliopolis to the Caesareum (Antony's memorial). And spoils from Egypt are also scattered all over Rome – one example above all is the obelisk that Augustus moved to Rome and which is now standing in front of St Peter's.

Fig. 6. *Left*, Cleopatra's Needle, London; *Right*, Obelisk in St Peter's Square, Rome. Library of Congress, Public domain

Ghost: I'd like to go back to Cleopatra. One of the erotic games she used to play in bed with Antony, according to Shakespeare, consisted in putting her "tires and mantles on him / whilst [she] wore his sword Philippan" (II.v.22-23), namely the sword with which he had defeated the army of Brutus and Cassius after the fall of Julius Caesar.

RC: This was Shakespeare's invention, not a detail drawn from Plutarch. At the same time, however, Shakespeare gave Cleopatra a longing for the image of Antony as the epitome of virility. This happens, for instance, when in Act V, after Antony's inglorious death, she tells Dolabella of a dream she had, in which she reconstructs Antony as a mythical, Herculean figure: "His legs bestrid the ocean, his rear'd arm / Crested the World: his voice was propertied / […] when he meant to quail and shake the orb, / He was as rattling thunder" (V.ii.81-85). As if in a trance, she goes about reassembling the scattered fragments of his body and soul, thereby inventing for him a phantasmatic identity.

AR: I think that this may be a re-enactment of the myth of Isis, engaged in salvaging from the waters of the Nile the *disiecta membra* of her husband Osiris, with a view to recreating his lost unity[6]. In my opinion, however, Cleopatra's character is more consistent with her identification with the dual nature of the "serpent of Old Nile" (I.v.26), as Antony used to call her. We know that in ancient Egypt the serpent was venerated as a simultaneous giver of life and death, according to the dual significance of the Nile floods.

Fig. 7. Serpent bracelet. Gold. I century B.C.-I century A.D.
Reproduced by permission of Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

[6] According to the Egyptian myth, after the murder of the god Osiris, a primeval king of Egypt, his wife Isis was able to retrieve the parts of his dismembered body, fashioning a golden phallus for him and bringing him back to life long enough to conceive a son with him.

RC: Let us not forget that the serpentine line as a symbol of infinity was popular in Shakespeare's time as a paradigm of the Baroque aesthetics which replaced the square, sober geometry of classicism in the representation of beauty.

Ghost: My time is up, and I must leave you. For the three of us, this conversation has required a joint exercise of reason and imagination. Proceeding by association, the original drive towards an archaeology of the mind has touched upon the political unconscious of the Mediterranean cultural heritage, in which Egypt stands out as a reservoir of ruins, prefiguring the future destiny of Rome. You have brought to the surface a network of ideologies and utopian projects, false consciousness and creative invention. You have touched upon a stratification of meanings buried in the deep waters of the western imagination, the shadows of a past in which a passage to Egypt has played a major role, both in politics and in imagination. Links have been discovered, knots untied between the take-off of the Roman Empire and the rise of the British – and later North American – control of the oceans, holding the Mediterranean up as a mirror of future events.

RC: Shakespeare's inspiration came from Plutarch's interweaving of Greek and Latin cultures, but filtered by a very popular English translator, Thomas North, himself translating from the French Amyot. It is within this cosmopolitan context that the tragedy of *Antony and Cleopatra* has proven to be a case in point for the study of a cultural *riverrun* along the Nile, the Tiber and the Thames. But it has also been a way to unravel a network of visions of the Other, perceived simultaneously as both a threat and a source of new meaning for the Mediterranean identity. This was the game, with the Otherness of Egypt, and with black Cleopatra, that you, Enobarbus, played, and lost. You didn't live to see the Romanization of Egypt in Cleopatra's 'noble' act, her 'Roman' death[7].

[7] "Our lamp is spent, it's out. Good sirs, take heart. / 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. Come, away" (IV.xv.89-92).

Fig. 8. Achille Glisenti (1848-1906), The Death of Cleopatra.
Oil on canvas, 120x192 cm, 1868. Brescia, Musei Civici di Arte e Storia. Archivio fotografico Musei di Brescia- Fotostudio Rapuzzi