

Antony and Cleopatra: Boundaries and Excess*

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This, from North's translation of Plutarch's *Life of Antonius*:

For they [Antony and Cleopatra] made an order between them, which they called AMIMETOBION (as much as to say, no life comparable and matcheable with it). Later, they invented another word – SYNAPOTHANUMENON (signifying the order and agreement of those that will die together)¹.

* This essay was first published in *Hebrew University Studies in Literature* 15 (1987), pp. 78-104, and later in Tony Tanner, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, foreword by Stephen Heath, Cambridge and London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997 ff., pp. 622-640. Tanner's quotations are from *The Complete Plays of Shakespeare*, Everyman's Library. This abridged version is published by kind permission of Stephen Heath, Literary Executor of Tony Tanner's estate for King's College, Cambridge, UK. Editorial notes have been added throughout the text when clarification has been considered necessary.

¹ Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans [...] Translated out of Greek into French by James Amyot [...] and out of French into English by Thomas North*, London, Printed by Richard Field, 1579, p. 1004.

They invented words. That is, from what was available they put together special terms which would apply to them alone – using language as a repository of possibilities, trying to transcend the limitations of the available formulations, re-rehearsing reality by stretching language in new directions and combinations. Shakespeare gloriously takes the hint. His Antony and Cleopatra seem intent on pre-empting language to establish new words to describe their love. New words, new worlds – this is the linguistic atmosphere of the play; ordinary language must be ‘melted’ (a key word) and reconstituted, so that new propositions and descriptions can be articulated to project and express their emotions. In their speech, everything tends towards hyperbole – i.e. ‘excess, exaggeration’. Rhetorically this is related to *Superlatio*, which a dictionary of rhetorical terms glosses as “exaggerated or extravagant terms used for emphasis and not intended to be understood literally”. Of course, Antony and Cleopatra do not want to be understood ‘literally’ – they do not work, or play, or love, or live, by the ‘letter’. It is precisely the ‘letter’, and all fixed alphabetical restrictions, that they talk, and love, to dissolve, so that, as it were, they can live and speak in a ‘higher’ language of their own inventing. For Antony, to burst his armour and his alphabet are, alike, related modes of energy moving towards transcendence.

In his introductory *Lectures on Philosophy*, Hegel wrote that “alphabetic writing is in itself and for itself the most intelligent”; he also wrote “everything oriental must be excluded from the history of philosophy”. Alphabetic writing is transparent, an instrument of clarity, it maintains the unity of consciousness; the oriental thus becomes an opaque script, another, more iconic, language altogether, another mode of writing and thus of being-in-the-world, which threatens to disturb and disrupt, even destroy, the alphabetic clarity of consciousness. We can apply this opposition to the play. Caesar is nothing if not ‘alphabetic’. He instructs Taurus and his army as he hands out his written orders before the battle of Actium – “Do not exceed / The prescript of this scroll” (III.viii.4-5). He never deviates from exact ‘pre-scriptions’ – the already written – and lives by and from within the orderings of his ‘scroll’. Cleopatra, on the other hand, is quintessentially oriental – in Hegel’s terms: her actions, like her temperament, are impossible to

'read' in any alphabetic way. She is, from Caesar's point of view, illegible; hardly to be 'read' in his Roman language. She is an ultimate opacity – from Rome's point of view – confounding all customary alphabetic descriptions and decodings. She is in no way 'prescribed' or prescribable, and can no more be held within Caesar's 'scroll' than she can be trapped by his plots and policies.

But first, let me turn to the question of armour, the steel second skin of the man, the soldier, the Roman. As so often in Shakespeare, the opening lines set up terms and problems which will reverberate throughout the play. Philo, a Roman soldier with Antony in Egypt, opens:

Nay, but this dotage of our general's
O'erflows the measure.
(I.i.1-2)

The play, unlike any other by Shakespeare, opens with a negative. It thus implies the denial of a previous assertion – perhaps more affirmative – and his speech goes on to negate, or attempt to degrade and belittle, Antony's behaviour since he has been in Egypt. "Overflowing the measure" immediately opposes the flooding Nile of Egypt to the concept of 'measure' – control, constraint, containment – which is the very language of Rome. The contest of the play is to be between overflow (excess) and measure (boundaries). Philo goes on to describe the transformation – or rather, in his terms, the deformation – of Antony the soldier into Antony the "strumpet's fool", the victim of 'lust'. Philo always chooses the diminishing, pejorative word when referring to anything to do with Cleopatra and Egypt, anything which is not connected with Rome, Mars, and the "office and devotion" of the warrior's code. Thus it is that he goes on to recall the great *soldier* Antony, to contrast him with the man who now serves Eros and Venus-Cleopatra. Again, his terms anticipate much that is to follow:

His captain's heart
Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst
The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper
And is become the bellows and the fan
To cool a gypsy's lust.

(I.i.6-10)

In battle, then, Antony could not be confined within his own armour; such was his force and energy that it broke out of his soldier's attire – it burst the buckles. [...] To be sure, he occasionally tries to stay within Roman rules; but in whatever he does-in war, in love – he is driven to burst whatever is 'buckling' him.

In Act IV, Antony is preparing for battle and calls for his armour. The aptly named Eros (as in Plutarch) brings it; but Cleopatra wants to help. She thus becomes, in Antony's words, "the armourer of my heart" as she fastens the buckles and asks – "Is this not buckled well?" Antony:

Rarely, rarely:

He that unbuckles this, till we do please
To daff't for our repose, shall hear a storm.
Thou fumblest, Eros, and my queen's a squire
More tight at this than thou.

(IV.iv.11-15)

Armour – amour: there is no etymological connection, but phonetically the words are close. And what we see here, with Cleopatra buckling Antony's armour, almost while they are still in bed, is an overlaying of amour onto armour, so that the armour is eroticized and sensualized – the *business* of war (often referred to) here subsumed into the more all-embracing game of love. [...]

As he moves towards [...] death, Antony says to Eros:

Sometime we see a cloud that's dragonish,
A vapor sometime like a bear or lion [...]
[...] Thou hast seen these signs:
They are black vesper's pageants [...]
That which is now a horse, even with a thought
The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct
As water is in water.

(IV.xiv.2-11)

"Dis-limn" – that is, un-paint, efface – is Shakespeare's own invention; it is part of the 'reversal' which is happening to Antony, whose role in the 'pageant' (which also meant a mobile play or

stage) is nearly over. He is moving towards 'indistinctness' – he, the man of the greatest 'distinction' in the world: he is being physically 'dis-limned' (which sounds the homophone 'dislimbed'), effaced by Caesar, by nature, by himself (Cleopatra will 'paint' him again after his death, but we will come to that dazzling act of retrieval and recuperation). Antony continues:

My good knave Eros, now thy captain is
 Even such a body: here I am Antony,
 Yet cannot hold this visible shape. . .
 (IV.xiv.12-14)

He is in fact moving towards physical invisibility, because Antony, the name, the individual, the specific and world-famous identity, can no longer 'hold' onto his bodily shape. He is moving out, moving through, moving beyond; melting, but also transcending the final barrier – the body itself. [...] The body is the final boundary.

Boundary; bounty; bound; bond; band – these are words of varying importance in the play, but they all serve to set up a crucial series of echoes, half-echoes, indeed anti-echoes, if one can imagine such a thing. Rome is the place of bonds (Caesar: "I know it for my bond²"); and bounds ("He's bound unto Octavia", the luckless messenger tells Cleopatra); and bands (Caesar says to Octavia – "prove such a wife [...] as my farthest band / Shall pass on thy aproof"). It is also the place of 'hoops' and 'knots' (in relation to the problem of what can bind Caesar and Antony together), and of 'squares', 'rules', and 'measures'. Antony tries to make a return to this Roman world, but no matter what 'bonds' he enters into, no matter how much he intends to try to live 'by the rule', it is, for him, finally not possible. This is not because he is a traitorous man, making and breaking promises for devious purposes. He simply cannot, as we say, be held 'within bounds'. [...] Antony is most remarkable for his 'bounty', with all that that word suggests of generosity, an endless spending and giving of a superabundant nature. In North's Plutarch, this 'liberality' is often referred to – and with admiration, even when Plutarch is criticizing Antony for his riotous feasting and wasteful negligence. Antony, whatever else, is an example of *magnanimitas*.

In the play, this 'bounty' is constantly referred to and made manifest. I shall single out three notable occasions. On the night before the critical battle of Actium, Antony reasserts himself as 'Antony'. "Come, / Let's have one other gaudy night: call to me / All my sad captains; fill our bowls once more", and Cleopatra joins in the spirit of the occasion, reasserting the *role* which in this case is the *reality*, of both of them: "But since my lord / Is Antony again, I will be Cleopatra" (III.xiii.182-7). They are most themselves when playing themselves. They are outplaying history, as I shall suggest later. But we then immediately go over to Caesar's camp and hear Caesar give his instructions on this important night: "And feast the army; we have store to do't, / And they have earned the waste. Poor Antony!" (IV.i.15-16). Then we are back in Cleopatra's palace, and hear Antony saying – "Be bounteous at our meal [...]" (IV.ii.10). In the context and frame of Antony's 'bounty', Caesar's arid, quantifying speech seems like the utterance of a very small soul indeed – the epitome of cynical parsimony, so that 'feast' is translated into 'store', and then further degraded into 'waste'. Here is another absolutely basic opposition in the play, a confrontation and contestation of vocabularies so that what is 'feast' in one, is regarded as 'waste' in the other. Antony gives from bounty; Caesar works from inventories. "Poor Antony!" – yes, from one point of view; from another he is rich Antony, since he gives unthinkingly from his spirit, while Caesar – poor Caesar – distributes carefully from his 'store'. 'Feast' celebrates excess: 'waste' defers to boundaries.

In North's Plutarch (and Shakespeare took almost as much from Plutarch for this play as he did for *Julius Caesar*) there is a little incident during the battle of Actium recorded thus:

Furthermore, he dealt very friendly and courteously with Domitius, and against Cleopatra's mind. For, he being sick of an ague when he went and took a little boat to go to Caesar's camp, Antonius was very sorry for it, but yet he sent after him all his carriage, train, and men; and the same Domitius, as though he gave him to understand that he repented his open treason, he died immediately after².

² Plutarch, *The Lives of Caesar, Brutus, and Antony*, London, Macmillan, 1906, p. 221.

Shakespeare amplifies this in his account of the defection and death of Enobarbus. Enobarbus, a good though cynical soldier, begins to feel that it is foolish to remain loyal to Antony in his visible decline:

Mine honesty and I begin to square.
 The loyalty well held to fools does make
 Our faith mere folly: yet he that can endure
 To follow with allegiance a fall'n lord
 Does conquer him that did his master conquer,
 And earns a place i' th' story.
 (III.xiii.41-6)

But shortly thereafter he leaves Antony and goes over to Caesar. Antony's reaction is immediate. He sends 'gentle adieus, and greetings', and soon a Roman soldier is telling Enobarbus:

Antony
 Hath after thee sent all thy treasure, with
His bounty overplus.
 (IV.vi.20-23: my italics)

Bounty *overplus* – superabundant abundance, excessive excess. This is the mark of Antony. Enobarbus has no ague; but this act of bounty effectively kills him. His reaction:

I am alone the villain of the earth,
 And feel I am so most. O Antony,
 Thou mine of bounty, how wouldst thou have paid
 My better service, when my turpitude
 Thou dost so crown with gold! This blows my heart [...]
 I fight against thee! No, I will go seek
 Some ditch wherein to die: the foul'st best fits
 My latter part of life.
 (IV.vi.30-39)

His last words are:

O, Antony,
 Nobler than my revolt is infamous,
 Forgive me in thine own particular,
 But let the world rank me in register

A master-leaver and a fugitive.
 O, Antony! O, Antony!
 (IV.ix.18-23)

Thus Enobarbus dies in a ditch – the lowest earth – untranscended; unlike Antony and Cleopatra, who move towards fire and air from the mud of the Nile. To be ‘politic’ with Caesar after being loyal to Antony, is a degenerative deformation which cannot be endured. And Enobarbus effectively ‘loses his place in the story’ – he cancels himself, writes himself out of the poetic termination of Antony’s life, annihilates himself in a ditch. And his parting word is – not “Poor Antony!”; but the far more expressive “O, Antony!”. This Antony is the measureless measure of all that Enobarbus has deserted. After such bounty – what forgiveness?

My third reference is to Cleopatra’s imaginative re-creation and recuperation of Antony after his death. It takes place in the presence of Dolabella, and leads to one of the most crucial exchanges in the play. Cleopatra has her own oriental bounty, and she now speaks with an overflowing superabundance of language which makes her final speeches perhaps the most poetically powerful and coruscating in the whole of Shakespeare. Her recreation of Antony concludes:

For his bounty,
 There was no winter in’t: an autumn ’twas
 That grew the more by reaping. His delights
 Were dolphinlike, they show’d 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.
 (V.ii.86-93)

Such a way of speaking, which goes beyond hyperbole into another realm of ‘truth’, is too much for the Roman-practical-empirical Dolabella, who interrupts her – ‘Cleopatra’ –. To which she says:

Think you there was or might be such a man
 As this I dreamt or?

Dolabella is sure – “Gentle madam, no”.

You lie, up to the hearing of the gods.
 But if there be nor ever were one such,
 It's past the size of dreaming; nature wants stuff
 To vie strange forms with fancy, yet t' imagine
 An Antony were nature's piece 'gainst fancy,
 Condemning shadows quite.
 (V.ii.93-100)

Cleopatra's image of Antony out-imagines the imagination, out-dreams dream. [...]

There is a great stress on 'time' in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and it is well to remember that this is a history play. The outcome of the events it dramatized was the so-called 'Augustan peace', during which Christ was born and the pagan Empire – which Virgil called the Empire without end – was established, according to later writers, as a divine preparation for the Christian Empire. Octavius Caesar, himself a pagan, unknowingly laid the way for the True City, so in Christian terms the struggles and battles in the play affect, not merely his society, but all human society, the *orbis terrae* of Augustine. The events of the play are indeed of 'world' importance – world-shattering, world-remaking (the word 'world' occurs at least forty-five times in the play). By the same token, an earlier pagan world is being silenced, extinguished, and history – as the audience would know – is on Caesar's side. He is in time with Time. Antony and Cleopatra are out of time, in more than one sense. Thus, at the beginning, when Antony decides that he must return to Rome, Cleopatra silences his apologies, referring to the time-out-of-time when they were together – "Eternity was in our lips and eyes" – while Antony, thinking Romanly for the moment, refers to "the strong necessity of time". Egypt, in this play, is a timeless present, which is to say an Eternity.

It can hardly escape our attention that the play is full of messengers from the start – two in the first scene, some thirty-five in all, with nearly every scene having a messenger of some kind. The play itself is extremely episodic, with some forty-two scenes (no scene breaks at all in the Folio), which makes for a very rapid sequence of change of place. There are nearly two hundred entrances and exits, all contributing to what Dr Johnson called the

“continual hurry” and “quick succession” of events, which “call the mind forward without intermission”. This can all be interpreted in different ways, but it certainly depicts a world in constant movement, in which time and place move and change so quickly that the whole world seems in a ‘hurry’ and in a state of flux – fluid, melting, re-forming. Messengers and messages bring information from the outside – they are interruptions, irruptions, precipitants of change. History is going on, and on, and at an ever accelerating pace. Yet the remarkable thing is that time seems somehow to stand still in Egypt – both within and without the reach of ‘messages’; both vulnerable to history yet outside it. When Antony is away, Cleopatra simply wants to “sleep out this great gap of time” (I.v.6). (When she first approaches Antony in her ‘barge’, the city goes out to see her, leaving Antony alone “Whistling to th’ air; which, but for vacancy, / Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too, / And made a gap in nature” – II.ii.222-4. It is as if Cleopatra creates ‘gaps’ – gaps in time, gaps in nature.) For Rome, Egypt represents a great waste of time while the ‘business’ of history is going on. The word ‘business’, more often than not, carries pejorative connotations in Shakespeare. It is notable that Caesar interrupts his formulaic (as I hear it), elegiac ‘praise’ of the dead Antony because of – a messenger. “The *business* of this man looks out of him; / We’ll hear him what he says” (V.i.50: my italics). He never completes the speech. Conversely, Cleopatra interrupts history to complete her poetic re-creation of Antony – from which no ‘business’ can distract her. From the Egyptian perspective, history itself is a “gap of time”, and Cleopatra, though growing physically older (“wrinkled deep in time”), seems to linger in Eternity, waiting for Antony to return from the trivial – though world-shattering – distractions of history.

As well as being a history play, *Antony and Cleopatra* contains within it traces of the outlines of a morality play – for by the early Renaissance the ‘moral’ of the story of the illustrious lovers was well established. We can find it in Spenser’s *Fairie Queene*, Book V, Canto VIII:

Nought under heaven so strongly doth allure
The sence of man, and all his minde possesse,
As beauties lovely baite, that doth procure,
Great warriours off their rigour to repress,

And mighty hands forget their manliness [...]
 So also did that great Oetean Knight
 For his loves sake his Lions skin undight:

and

so did warlike Antony neglect
 The worlds whole rule for Cleopatra's sight.
 Such wondrous powre hath womens fair aspect,
 To captive men, and make them all the world reject.

This 'moral' reading is there in Plutarch's version, in which Antony becomes 'effeminate' and made 'subject to a woman's will'. He is particularly critical of Antony's behaviour at the battle of Actium (when he followed the fleeing Cleopatra). "There Antonius showed plainly, that he had not only lost the courage and heart of an Emperor, but also of a valiant man, and that he was not his own man [...] he has so carried away with the vain love of this woman, as if he had been glued unto her, and that she could not have removed without moving of him also"³. In Spenser's terms, Antony 'rejected' the world for the mere love of a woman. Whether he found or made a better world is not, of course, considered. But, while Shakespeare's play does include these historical-morality elements (unquestionably, his glue-like relationship with Cleopatra ruins him as a politician and spoils him as a soldier, and, in worldly terms, she does – as he recognizes – lead him "to the very heart of loss" – IV.xii.29) – it complicates any ethical 'reading' of the story, so there can be no question of seeing it simply as another version of a good soldier losing his empire because of a bad woman. To understand this more clearly, we have to take into account another figure. For, if Octavius Caesar is related to the onward and inexorable movement of History, Antony is related to a god, Hercules.

This relationship is suggested in Plutarch who, however, relates Antony more closely to Bacchus. Shakespeare strengthens the association with Hercules. Hercules was famous for his anger, and so is Antony. As his anger begins to rise, Cleopatra says: "Look,

³ Plutarch, *The Lives of Caesar, Brutus, and Antony*, p. 221.

prithe, Charmian, / How this Herculean Roman does become / The carriage of his chafe" (I.iii.84-5). Reacting in fury to Cleopatra's flight from the battle and what ensues, he cries out:

The shirt of Nessus is upon me—teach me,
Alcides, thou mine ancestor, thy rage.
(IV.xii.44-5)

Plutarch refers to Antony being deserted by a god:

it is said that suddenly they heard a marvellous sweet harmony of sundry sorts of instruments of music [...] as they use in Bacchus feasts [...] Now, such as in reason sought the depth of the interpretation of this wonder, thought it was the god unto whom Antonius bare singular devotion to counterfeit and resemble him, that did forsake them⁴.

Shakespeare takes the scene, and the interpretation, but makes one telling change. Late in the play, some soldiers hear "Music i' th' air" and decide "'Tis the god Hercules, whom Antony loved, / Now leaves him" (IV.iii.15-16). Where his Antony is concerned – despite his manifest taste for wine – Shakespeare wants us to think more of Hercules, less of Bacchus. Hercules was of course *the* hero – hero turned god – *par excellence*. There were many allegories concerning Hercules current by the Middle Ages. One (apparently from the Sophist Prodicus), has Hercules as a young man arriving at a place where the road branches into two paths, one leading up a steep hill, the other into a pleasant glade. At the dividing point, two fair women meet him: one, modest and sober, urges him to take the steep path; the other, seductive if meretricious, uses her arts in an attempt to attract him into the glade. The hero, of course, chooses the steep hill of Virtue over the beckoning glades of Pleasure. There were many medieval and Renaissance depictions of this struggle of Virtue and Pleasure over Hercules (there is a famous Dürer engraving of it – *Der Hercules*), with Pleasure, *hedone*, *voluptas*, sometimes associated with Venus. The implications, for us, are quite clear: if Antony is related to Hercules, Cleopatra is related to

⁴ Plutarch, *The Lives of Caesar, Brutus, and Antony*, p. 236.

Venus. The key difference, of course, is that Hercules – Antony chooses Pleasure, pays heed to the solicitations of Venus – thus inverting the traditional moral of this allegory. According then to the accumulated traditional lore which had grown up around the much metamorphosed and allegorized figure of Hercules, Antony is indeed a version of Hercules, but one who, as it were, decided to take the wrong road – not up the steep hill of (Roman) virtue, but off the track into the (oriental) glades of pleasure.

There are other divinities in the play, and if Hercules deserts Antony, he in turn goes on to play Osiris to Cleopatra's Isis. The union of these divinities assures the fertility of Egypt: in Plutarch's study of the myth (well known in Shakespeare's time), Osiris is the Nile which floods and makes fertile the land – he is form, the seminal principle, and Isis is matter. From their union are bred not only crops, but animals, such as the serpents of the Nile. Typhon the crocodile, born of Nile mud, represents for Plutarch the irrational, bestial part of the soul by which Osiris is deceived and torn to pieces. There are, of course, numerous references to the Nile, its floods, its serpents, and so on, in the play, and Shakespeare clearly has this myth actively in mind. But it is not a stable or fixed incorporation. Cleopatra is Isis but also Antony's "serpent of old Nile", and by a serpent of Nile will she die – a serpent by a serpent "valiantly vanquished", as Antony – Osiris is "a Roman by a Roman valiantly vanquished" (that second Roman is more Antony than Caesar – as Cleopatra says: "Not Caesar's valor hath o'erthrown Antony, / But Antony's hath triumphed on itself" – IV.xv.14-15). The monster-crocodile who destroys Antony is, in this play, Octavius Caesar – though he is hardly seen in those terms. He is a disguised Typhon for Antony and Cleopatra, who are playing at being Osiris and Isis – but, really, he is not in their self-mythologizing act, not in their 'play' at all. I use the word 'play' advisedly and deliberately. Cleopatra is, of course, above all a great actress. She can play with Antony to beguile him; she can play at being Isis, thus anticipating her own move towards transcendence; and she can 'play' at her death, easily outplaying Caesar's crafty political deviousness. In this way, she completely transforms her desolate state, not submitting to the downward turn of Fortune, but inverting it into the occasion of her own triumph of the imagination:

My desolation does begin to make
 A better life. 'Tis paltry to be Caesar:
 Not being Fortune, he's but Fortune's knave,
 A minister of her will [...]
 (V.ii.1-4)

Cleopatra will be her *own* Fortune – a triumph of the 'will'.

She is aware that Caesar will display her in Rome, and that her life with Antony will be 'staged' in a degraded form, in keeping with that tendency of Roman rhetoric to devalue and translate downwards the life associated with Egypt:

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.216-21)

(Which, of course, exactly describes what is going on in the Elizabethan theatre at that moment, with some boy 'squeaking' Cleopatra. This is not Nabokovian self-reflexivity. Rather, it is effectively as if the drama is so incandescent that it is scorning its own resources, shedding the very medium which has served to put its poetry into flight. It is as though 'representation' is scorching itself away to reveal the thing itself—an electrifying moment of astonishing histrionic audacity and magic). So, Cleopatra puts on her own play, on her own stage, with her own costume, speeches, and gestures:

Now, Charmian!
 Show me, my women, like a queen: go fetch
 My best attires. I am again for Cydnus,
 To meet Mark Antony. Sirrah Iras, go [...]
 And when thou hast done this chare, I'll give thee leave
 To play till doomsday. – Bring our crown and all.
 (V.ii.227-32)

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.
 (V.ii.238-41)

She is moving beyond the body, beyond time, beyond the whole world of transience and decay, beyond her own planet the moon, with all that it implies of tidal periodicity. The clown enters with his figs, which contain the serpent she will use for her suicide (at the beginning, Charmian says "I love long life better than figs" – I.ii.32 – by the end this, like so much else, is reversed: Cleopatra likes figs better than long life). We move to her final self-apotheosis, played with great dignity and ceremony, at which Cleopatra is at once her own directress and her own priestess:

Give me my robe, put on my crown, I have
 Immortal longings in me [...]
 [...] Husband, I come:
 Now to that name my courage prove my title!
 I am fire, and air; my other elements
 I give to baser life [...]
 (V.ii.280-90)

Out of the earth, mud, dung, water associated with the Nile and its fertility, she has distilled an essence composed only of the higher elements, air and fire. She is 'marble' for the duration of the performance; she is also, like Antony, 'melting', dissolving, but melting into a higher atmosphere. She gives a farewell kiss to Iras who falls down dead – perhaps from poison, perhaps from grief – and Cleopatra comments:

Dost thou lie still?
 If thus thou vanishest, thou tell'st the world
 It is not worth leave-taking.
 (V.ii.296-8)

To the snake she says:

O, couldst thou speak,

That I might hear thee call great Caesar ass
 Unpolicied!
 (V.ii.306-8)

She has seen through Caesar's tricks and stratagems – "He words me, girls, he words me, that I should not/Be noble to myself" (V.ii.191-2); she knows, too, that he uses language instrumentally, merely for devious political ends. And when Proculeus refers to Caesar's 'bounty', she knows that it is but a pitiful and transparent travesty of the real bounty of Antony. In her superbly performed death, we see the triumph of the 'oriental' imagination over the 'alphabetic' utilitarianism of Caesar. The world will indeed be his, and another kind of Empire inaugurated; but from the perspective of Cleopatra, and *just for the duration of the play*, it seems a world "not worth leave-taking". So her last words are an incomplete question: "What should I stay" – as she passes out of language, body, world, altogether. There is no *staying* her now. Charmian completes her question with her own final speech:

In this vile world? So, fare thee well.
 Now boast thee, death, in thy possession lies
 A lass unparalleled. Downy windows, close;
 And golden Phoebus never be beheld
 Of eyes again so royal! Your crown's awry;
 I'll mend it, and then play–
 (V.ii.314-19)

Thus Cleopatra, and her girls, play their way out of the reach of history, with an intensity of self-sustaining, self-validating poetry which does indeed eclipse the policies and purposes of Caesar. (There are some recent readings which see Antony and Cleopatra as failed politicians who turn to aesthetics to gloss over their mistakes and cheer themselves up with poetry. I can imagine such a play, but this one is not it). Cleopatra was 'confined' in her monument, a prisoner of Caesar's force – apparently secure within the boundaries of his soldiers and his 'scroll'. It is by the unforgettable excess and bounty/beauty of her last 'Act' that she triumphs over all that would confine her, and turns death into 'play', *the* play that will take her into Eternity.

Let me return to the opposition between feast and waste. Feast derives from *feſta* – holiday – and in one ſenſe, Antony and Cleopatra turn life in Egypt into a perpetual holiday. ‘Waste’ is more interesting. Juſt as ‘dirt’ has been defined as “matter out of place”, ſo the idea of ‘waste’ preſuppoſes a boundary or claſſification mark which enables one to draw a diſtinction between what is neceſſary, valuable, uſable in ſome way, and what lies outside theſe categories – ‘waste’. Antony, we may ſay, recognizes no ſuch boundary. Indeed, he ‘wastes’ himſelf, in the ſenſe that he is endlessly prodigal of all he has and does not count the coſt. From Antony’s point of view, all life in Egypt can be ſeen as a feaſt; in Caſar’s eyes – the Roman perſpective – it is all ‘waste’. From the etymology of the word (*uacare*, to be empty or vacant; *uanus*, hollow, vain; *uauſtus*, deſolated, deſert, vaſt; up to Old Engliſh *weſte* – ſee Eric Partridge’s *Origins*), we can ſay that there is a connection between vaſtneſs, vacancy, vanity, and waſte. Antony is inhabiting a realm of vaſtneſs, vanity, vacancy – the ‘great gap’ named by Cleopatra (Caſar, indeed, refers to Antony’s ‘vacancy’). From Caſar’s point of view, and thoſe who ſee with the Roman eye, Antony is indeed ‘empty’ while Caſar is referred to as “the full-eſt man”. Thus Enobarbus, commenting on Antony’s challenge to Caſar to meet him in ſingle battle: “that he ſhould dream, / Knowing all meaſures, the full Caſar will / Answer his emptineſs!” Caſar is, from one point of view, *full* – full of hiſtory, of Fortune, of time. Antony is ‘empty’ – committed to vacancy, vanity, waſte. The queſtion implicitly poſed is whether he and Cleopatra, and their way of life, are not ‘full’ of ſomething quite outside of Caſar’s diſcourſe and his meaſurements, ſomething which makes *him* the empty man. Caſar is full of politics, empty of poetry: Antony and Cleopatra reach a point where they are empty of politics, but full of poetry. Which is the real ‘vacancy’? It depends where you are ſtanding, how you are looking. But there is nothing ‘vaſt’ about Caſar: even if he conquers the whole world, everything is done with ‘meaſure’ and ‘temper’ (temperance). If Antony and Cleopatra melt and diſſolve, it is into a ‘vaſtneſs’ which is the neceſſary ſpace for their exceeding, their exceſs – “beyond the ſize of dreaming”. In this play, Shakespeare compels a complete revaluation of ‘waste’. Hiſtorically, it was *not* paltry to be Caſar, certainly not this Caſar, who is inſured of, and will

ensure, a 'temperate' imperial future, during which time Christ would be born. This Caesar certainly has his place in the story of history. But in this play, his conquest is registered as a gradual diminishment as he – alphabetically – takes over the Orient, but in doing so merely imposes Roman 'prescriptions' on a vast world of pagan fecundity, spilled plenty, and an oriental magnificence which transforms 'waste' into 'bounty', and makes Caesar seem like the 'merchant' he is, a calculating Machiavel—an ass unpolicied.

Boundaries are, of course, of central importance for civilization. For Vico, in *The New Science*, civilized man is precisely one who creates and guards 'confines' – "for it was necessary to set up boundaries to the field in order to put a stop to the infamous promiscuity of things in the bestial state. On these boundaries were to be fixed the confines first of families, then of gentes or houses, later of peoples, and finally of nations"⁵. There is much in Shakespeare which honours and defends the importance of recognizing the need for boundaries. But in this play, writing against the recorded, inexorable grain and movement of history, Shakespeare makes us re-value what might have been lost in the triumph of Caesar:

O, see, my women,
 The crown o' th' earth doth melt. My lord!
 O, withered is the garland of the war,
 The soldier's pole is fall'n: young boys and girls
 Are level now with men. The odds is gone,
 And there is nothing left remarkable
 Beneath the visiting moon.
 (IV.xv.62-8)

This is 'waste'? Rather, the fecundity, plenitude and bounty associated with Egypt, and Antony in Egypt, have fed into and nourished Cleopatra's speech, until she is speaking a kind of language of pure poetry about which alphabetic man can have

⁵ Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. and intr. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fish, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1984 (third edition), p. 363.

nothing to say. A whole pagan age is over; the future belongs to Caesar—and Christ. But confronted with this kind of transcendent poetry, which is indeed all ‘excess’, that future seems merely trivial, temporal, temperate. “The road of excess leads to the Palace of Wisdom”, wrote Blake. In this play, the poetry of excess leads to the unbounded, unboundaried, spaces of infinity. Saving leads to earthly empire: squandering opens an avenue to Eternity. All air and fire – and poetry. Bounty overplus.