Mapping Antony and Cleopatra
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Cleopatra's 'Roman' Death

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Compared to the Oriental glamour and erotic drive of Cleopatra's performance of her own death, the solemnity with which she proclaims her decision to take her life – "And then what's brave, what's noble, / Let's do't after the high Roman fashion" (IV.xv.86-87)[1] – sounds paradoxical and perhaps even ironical[2]. Her plan to end her life with a view to cheating Octavius of his triumphal project of exhibiting her in Rome as a captive is surprisingly announced in terms of a symbolic negotiation with a seminal paradigm in the cultural code of ancient Rome, according to which the act of suicide is the hallmark of the hero's integrity and identity. Although Antony 'unmakes' his martial self by asking Eros to remove his armour, he still consigns the memory of his death to the

1 All quotations in this essay are from William Shakespeare, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, ed. Michael Neill, The Oxford Shakespeare, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008 (1st edition 1994), with the sole exception of replacing the Folio spelling of 'Anthony', adopted by Neill, with 'Antony', as used by Nicholas Rowe (*The Works of William Shakespear* [sic], *Revis'd and Corrected*, 1709, six volumes essentially based on the Fourth Folio edition, 1685) and later editors, including Samuel Johnson (*The Plays of William Shakespeare*, 1765).

2 On Cleopatra's (Falstaff like) sweeping vitality merging with a consummate deconstructive irony see Harold Bloom, "*Antony and Cleopatra*", in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, New York, Riverhead Books, 1998, pp. 546-77; followed by Harold Bloom, *Cleopatra: I Am Fire and Air*, New York, Scribner, 2017.

image of "A Roman, by a Roman / Valiantly vanquished" (IV.xvi.59-60); but Cleopatra's 'monumental death' in her Egyptian Mausoleum in Alexandria[3] takes the form of a negotiation between paradigms that are constitutive of Western and Eastern cultures respectively, thereby challenging their ideological (and political) incompatibility explored in the play, until the final blow up at Actium[4]. A challenge that culminates in the transferral of her constitutive 'gypsy' mobility to the assumption of a self-made myth of stony firmness – "I am marble constant; now the fleeting moon / No planet is of mine" (V.ii.239-40) – is also a swerve that expands to encompass the entire play, creating a bridge between the shifting quality – and vanity – of performance and the permanent status which only art can attain, transcending the agency of time and discarding the material circumstances of 'baser life'.

It is within such an 'aesthetic of dying' that this paper tackles Shakespeare's inquiry into the category of suicide as the hallmark of a heroic identity and a generator of meaning. In *Julius Caesar* (1599), for example, which may be considered as a primary source for the later tragedy (1606/7)[5], in spite of their differences in terms of words and actions, both Cassius and Brutus, in accordance with the stoic code of Cato and Seneca, share the *virtus* of an honourable death. Actually, gender makes a difference in the case of Portia, since her feminine suicide, however compelling, is kept off stage, doomed to invisibility like the rest of her life. It is only reported, an

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3 Michael Neill, "*Finis coronat opus*: The Monumental Ending of *Anthony and Cleopatra*", in *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1997, rpt. 2005, pp. 305-27. I am indebted to this seminal study, particularly with regard to the play's themes of theatricality and metatheatricality.

4 See the "Editorial" to this issue. At an ontological level, in my view the classic study on this ideological dichotomy is Tony Tanner, "*Antony and Cleopatra*: Boundaries and Excess", *Hebrew University Studies in Literature*, 15 (1987), pp. 78-104; later in *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, Cambridge, Mass.-London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010, pp. 622-39. For this reason, I have chosen to partly reprint it in this issue.

5 Both in the thematic sense and as a sequel in the chronology of Shakespeare's compositions. See Neill, "Introduction" to *Anthony and Cleopatra*, p. 7, and, in this issue, Agostino Lombardo, *A Tragedy of Memory*. Robert S. Miola (*Shakespeare's Rome*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983) probes the link between the Roman plays, owing to his interpretation of 'Rome' as the plays' central protagonist.

event far off and interiorized in the act of swallowing fire; not recorded as a deed of phallic symbolism – with a sword penetrating the body (like Lucrece's knife) – but as a purifying ritual. Catastrophe is the prerogative of Brutus; the ultimate meaning of the tragic form of *Julius Caesar* is inscribed in his suicide. In contrast, suicide in *Antony and Cleopatra* as the canonical act conferring meaning to life undergoes a profound crisis.

In *Antony and Cleopatra* the act of suicide is played out in a repetitive pattern, obsessive to the extent of appearing six times in the course of the last two acts. Domitius Enobarbus initiates the sequence, followed by Eros; then, in a crescendo, comes Antony, handing the torch over to three female characters: Cleopatra and her maids, who in a minor key share her destiny in the guise of physical contagion ("Have I the aspic in my lips? Dost fall?" is her comment at Iras' dying after receiving her last fulfilment kiss, V.ii.290-91). To the list we must also add the erotic deaths relished by Cleopatra in a crescendo of pleasure, wittily commented by Enobarbus – "I have seen her die twenty times […] she has such a celerity in dying" (I.ii.140-43)[6] – as well as her frequent pretence at fainting, culminating in the mock suicide designed to be reported to Antony:

> Mardian, go tell him I have slain myself;
> Say that the last I spoke was 'Antony',
> And word it, prithee, piteously. (IV.xiv.7-9)

This scene of life-taking, however, contrived originally as a script to appease Antony's rage towards her after the Actium debacle, in fact triggers his decision to take his own life in turn.

The dynamic sequence initially follows a horizontal line, consistent with the play's constitutive elements of earth and water, the

[6] There is an interesting connection between Cleopatra's celerity in achieving an orgasm and her craving haste to die in her last performance, quickly dismissing the clown ("Well, get thee gone, farewell", V.ii.277) and urging her assistant to help: "Yare, yare, good Iras, quick – methinks I hear / Antony call; I see him rouse himself" (V.ii.282-83). A similar haste connotes the quick rhythm of her famous last speech ("Give me my robe, put on my crown […]. So, have you done?", V.ii.278-89).

symbols of the structural polarity of the play and of the two main characters. The first relates to Antony's exceptional physicality coherent with the pagan myth of his ancestor Hercules[7]. The second is linked to Cleopatra's drifting of forms, a 'melting' which is in keeping with the recurrent image of the Nile as archetype of the Heraclitean ceaseless mutability of things, but also of the natural agent of mediation between death and life:

> The higher Nilus swells,
> The more it promises: as it ebbs, the seedsman
> Upon the slime and ooze scatters his grain,
> And shortly comes to harvest. (II.vii.22-23)[8]

This offers a double perspective of death and rebirth, along with the paradigm of metaphysical transmutation of death into a new beginning, that *Antony and Cleopatra* shares with some of Shakespeare's canonical late plays.

In accordance with a reversal of paradigms Shakespeare had tested out in *King Lear* just a year previously (1605), in the last two acts of *Antony and Cleopatra* the line takes a vertical turn, with a rupture in the upward direction, and a further breaking of the rules of dramatic construction with regard to the climactic and anti-climactic hierarchy in the traditional performance of dying. As with *King Lear*, a grotesque ending comes first: the "miserable change" of Antony's agony[9], consisting of his large body being hauled up with chains or ropes (an echo of Cleopatra's favourite sport – fishing – seasoned with wit)[10] to reach the queen, upstage, in her

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7 See, in this issue, Maria Valentini's "*Antony and Cleopatra* and the Uses of Mythology".

8 For 'melting' as a keyword of the play see Tanner's essay in this issue and Agostino Lombardo, "Le immagini dell'acqua", in *Il fuoco e l'aria. Quattro studi su* Antonio e Cleopatra, Roma, Bulzoni, 1995, pp. 41-67. As to Cleopatra's transmutation into a higher life in an aesthetic sense through the performance of taking her life, and the ensuing reification of her suicide into a thing of beauty, see my argument below.

9 "The miserable change now at my end" (IV.xvi.53).

10 "CLEOPATRA: Give me mine angle, we'll to th'river; there, / My music playing far off, I will betray / Tawny-fine fishes, my bended hook shall pierce / Their slimy jaws; and as I draw them up, / I'll think them every one an Antony, / And say 'Ah,ha! You're caught'. CHARMIAN: 'Twas merry when / you wagered on

Mausoleum: "Here's sport indeed! How heavy weighs my lord!" (IV.xvi.34). Only later does Cleopatra's sublime claim for lightness come, through a holy transcendence of her mortal remains: "I am fire and air – my other elements / I give to baser life" (V.ii.288-89). The vertical tension inscribed in the soaring, skyward movement of free elements into an infinite cosmos may have a Neoplatonic connotation[11], while the longing for a split of body and soul is prophetic of the Christian code of dying.

In this way, the rhetorical pattern of the suicidal strain mimics the figure of a cross, with the desire of, and for, Cleopatra at the top. Cleopatra's death wish – "The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch / That hurts, and is desired" (V.ii.294-95) – is reconciled with other visions of dying besides her 'Roman' challenge to Rome to prevent her from the humiliation of being shown on a Roman stage in a bawdy play for the entertainment of a gross audience:

> 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)

This scenario is not only at odds with her aristocratic greatness, but also with both the private and public memory of her having been welcome in her "salad days" (I.v.73) among such powerful leaders of the Roman establishment as Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great:

> Broad-fronted Caesar,

your angling, when your diver / Did hang a salt fish on his hook which he / With fervency drew" (II.v.10-18).

[11] On Shakespeare's familiarity with Neoplatonic thought as well as with the hermetic Oriental tradition through the philosophy of Giordano Bruno, see Gilberto Sacerdoti's challenging study, *Nuovo cielo, nuova terra. La rivoluzione copernicana di* Antonio e Cleopatra *di Shakespeare*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1990. See also, on "the esotericism of the 'Egyptian' mystery restored", Richard Wilson, "Your Crown's Awry: The Visual Turn in *Antony and Cleopatra*", in *Free Will: Art and Power on Shakespeare's Stage*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2013, pp. 310-370: 351. On the play's double ending see Neill, "*Finis coronat opus*", p. 323, quoting Anne Barton, *"Nature's Piece against Fancy": The Divided Catastrophe of* Antony and Cleopatra, London, Bedford College, 1973.

> 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. (I.v.28-34)[12]

Yet in the change awaiting her, the taking of her own life figures as a ritual sacrifice, inscribed in the foundational myth of imperial Rome as an avatar of Christianity. The latter, prefigured in the famous quotation from the book of Revelation at the beginning of the play (the "new heaven, new earth" which it is Cleopatra's lot to "find", I.i.17), is repeatedly referenced by means of allusions to Christ's nativity and passion. It is testified by Cleopatra's blending an erotic fantasy of the worm suckling at her breast with a maternal fantasy of nursing one's own baby – "Dost thou not see my baby at my breast, / That sucks the nurse asleep?" (V.ii.308-9) – by the analogy between her rage at the news of Antony being married to Octavia and Herod's wrath – "Herod of Jewry dare not look upon you, / But when you are well pleased" (III.iii.3-4) – and by Antony's 'last supper', when he parts from his fellow soldiers before his final ordeal in Alexandria: "I look on you / As one that takes his leave" (IV.ii.28-29). An uncanny allusion occurs, however, in Octavius Caesar's statement after his victory at Actium: "The time of universal peace is near" (IV.vi.4), sounding like a prophecy of a chronological as well as cultural continuity between the empire of Rome and the universal kingdom of the Christian Catholic Church.

The price of this alleged providential continuity is paid for by the "pair so famous" on the altar of the Mausoleum: here, Cleopatra celebrates the sacrifice of the erotic through its transubstantiation into aesthetic value. The bodies of the lovers are buried in the darkness of a monument that treasures the mystery of their absolute love as well as its utter impossibility, offering the image of

[12] There are several references in the play to Cleopatra's affairs with powerful Romans before her fatal encounter with Antony. For instance: "Did I, Charmian, / Ever love Caesar so?" (I.v.66-67); and "Your Caesar's father oft, / When he hath mused of taking kingdoms in, / Bestowed his lips on that unworthy place [Cleopatra's hand] / As it rained kisses" (III.xiii.81-84). For the "vulgar fame" in Rome, attached to Julius Caesar's affair with "a certain queen carried to him in a mattress", see II.vi.71.

a perfection never to be achieved, except in a dream-like representation:

> I dreamt there was an Emperor Antony –
> O, such another sleep, that I might see
> But such another man! (V.ii.76-78)

and in a marriage dirge: "Husband, I come! / Now to that name my courage prove my title!" (V.ii.286-87).

Cleopatra imagines her final performance "to meet Mark Antony" as a repetition of the show she had put on for their first meeting: "I am again for Cydnus, / To meet Mark Antony" (V.ii.228-29). It is inscribed into an aesthetic liturgy based on the metamorphosis of life into art, a testimony to Shakespeare's familiarity with Ovid. As with Romeo and Juliet's crucified love posthumously celebrated in the forms of golden statues, Cleopatra's stirring beauty will achieve immortality if and when transformed by death into a harmless picture for the benefit of powerful political and religious institutions:

> [S]he looks like sleep,
> As she would catch another Antony
> In her strong toil of grace. (V.ii.344-46)[13]

Only so far as she undergoes a process of reification into a beautiful form will she be remembered, first in Rome, then in early modern London[14], her fate being that of a commodity and even a cliché, an object fit for aesthetic consumption as well as suited to the needs of imperial Roman propaganda:

> [T]heir story is
> No less in pity than his glory which
> Brought them to be lamented. (V.ii.359-61)

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13 Cf. Silvano Sabbadini's compelling introduction to his translation of *Romeo and Juliet* (Milano, Garzanti, 1991, pp. XLV-XLVI). See also Ramie Targoff's essay in this issue, highlighting the analogy between the two plays with regard to the issue of the lovers' death.

14 See Keir Elam's essay in this issue.

I am indebted to a number of critics, from Tony Tanner and Agostino Lombardo to Michael Neill, for the idea that the theatricality involved in the erotic and political issues of suicide is a most compelling motif of the play, an issue *per se*. Tony Tanner, for instance, rightly claims that Cleopatra is authentic only when performing. For my part, I would like to draw attention to Agostino Lombardo's emphasis on the invisibility of Cleopatra's body no less than her emotions at the Cydnus water pageant:

> The picture lacks a 'portrait' of Cleopatra. We see Cupids, Nereids, their gestures and colours in the same way as the colours and the strokes of the oars; but we do not see, do not distinguish Cleopatra's features. Enobarbus was unable to draw her face[15].

Compared with the event which marked the beginning of their story, the parting and greeting paradigm re-enacted at the end[16] lends itself to a change with regard to performance practice. Priority is now given to the mature self-consciousness of the performer, caught in the process of acting out a fatal event of her past (I'll return to this later). If in the Cydnus watery pageant Cleopatra might be said to endorse Diderot's paradox of the actor about the dissociation of persona from impersonator – assumed by the neoclassical canon as the basic paradigm of theatrical performance – in the representation of her suicide, the two states, "love-as-an emotion" and "love-as-a performance" become inextricable[17]. Person and persona, form and matter are reconciled in the tragic episode of self-dramatization that overcomes the prescribed classical boundaries, giving way to the abrupt interruption of both life and discourse in a mutual climax: "Why should I stay –" (V.ii.311). Paradoxically enough, it is only in the ceremony of parting from her body that Cleopatra becomes authentically – visibly – herself.

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15 Lombardo, "Una tragedia dell'arte", in *Il fuoco e l'aria*, p. 95, my translation.

16 Cf. David Hillman, "'O, these encounterers': On Shakespeare's Meetings and Partings", *Shakespeare Survey*, 62 (2009), ed. Peter Holland, pp. 58-68. I am looking forward to Hillman's monograph, *Greetings and Partings in Shakespeare and Early Modern England,* on which he is currently working.

17 David Hillman, "'If it be love indeed': Transference, Love, and *Anthony* [sic] *and Cleopatra*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 64:3 (Fall 2013), pp. 301-333: 330.

In many ways, then, suicide is necessary to the dramatic architecture of *Antony and Cleopatra*. Like a prism, exposing different facets in rotation, it responds to the multiple needs of this play, including the tripartite configuration of the Elizabethan theatre: the ground, the pit and the heavens. The ground provides a proper setting for Antony's original earthly identity; the pit offers Enobarbus a ditch fit for his atonement: "I will go seek / Some ditch wherein to die" (IV.vi.36-37); and the heavens can host Cleopatra's monument according to a variety of functions: a palatial setting for the public display of her mundane power and royal status, and a private space into which to withdraw when in danger from Antony's frenzy at her alleged betrayals during and soon after Actium:

> Vanish, or I shall give thee thy deserving,
> And blemish Caesar's triumph. Let him take thee,
> And hoist thee up to the shouting plebeians –
> Follow his chariot, like the greatest spot
> Of all thy sex; […]
> and let
> Patient Octavia plough thy visage up
> With her prepared nails. (IV.xiii.32-39)

together with her "fear of being taken" by the Roman soldiers (IV.xvi.25). Moreover, the monument is the site where the queen can simultaneously come to terms with her inner self, thereby encountering in death the Other as a secret object of desire *within*, replacing the ghost of an overt threat *without.* Courtly palace and pyramidal tomb, temple for the display of absolute power as well as "secret house of death" (IV.ii.83)[18], the Mausoleum is consecrated to the promise of an unbounded totality and infinity that Cleopatra receives from Antony's prophecy at the start of the play, now taken over in her ambition to transcend the body as the final boundary, thus making possible the liberation of art[19].

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[18] Wilson, p. 351.

[19] Tanner, "Antony and Cleopatra". See footnote 4 in this essay and Wilson, p. 311.

Though in many respects different from each other, one factor shared by all the suicides in the play is that they feature as incomplete acts. Enobarbus' death unmakes his Roman identity already shaken by having betrayed his master: it does not comply with the Roman protocol of the sword, but rather wallows in melancholy – a symptom of illness of the soul as well as of a conscience that can find no relief to a biting sense of guilt. It is not surprising that such a gesture should appear as alien to the soldiers in Caesar's camp who misunderstand its form and meaning, preferring to interpret it as sleep in order to postpone acknowledging it as true:

> [H]e sleeps.
> Swoons rather […]
> The hand of death has raught him […]
> Come on then, he may recover yet. (IV.x.25-33)

Then comes Antony's clumsy performance, creeping on stage, and dramatizing the early modern crisis of the tragic hero in the wider context of the decay of the aristocracy, both in Britain and within the Roman republic[20]. The scene in which he asks the boy Eros to replace him in doing the fatal deed[21] confirms the fragility of Antony's identity, an identity which is reflected sadly in the mirror of the sky, and echoed, too, in the indistinct vision of drifting cloud formations.

> Sometime we see a cloud that's dragonish,
> A vapour sometime like a bear or lion,
> A towered citadel, a pendant rock,
> A forked mountain, or blue promontory
> With trees upon't that nod unto the world
> And mock our eyes with air.

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[20] See, in particular, David Quint, "The Tragedy of Nobility on the Seventeenth-Century Stage", *Modern Language Quarterly*, 67 (2006), pp. 7-29.

[21] The scene, in effect, revisits Brutus' protracted attempts to find a partner in taking his life (*Julius Caesar*, V.v.1-51): this is only one example among others of the playwright's dealing with the intertextual memory of his own production. For Shakespeare's self-reference as an intriguing aspect of *Antony and Cleopatra* see Neill, "Introduction" to *Anthony and Cleopatra*, p. 7, and, in this issue, Lombardo, "A Tragedy of Memory". See also footnote 5 above.

> […]
> That which is now a horse, even with a thought
> The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct
> As water in water.
> […]
> [N]ow thy captain is
> Even such a body. (IV.xv.2-13)

In failing to accomplish the fatal task – "How? Not dead? Not dead?" (IV.xv.103) – Antony proves, in fact, to be a bad actor. His unsuccessful, pathetic suicide undermines the lofty status of the classic tragic hero; therefore, understatedly, the grotesque event can happen only in the fourth act.

Once the spectacle of male suicide is over, the fifth act hosts the female agency, providing an exclusive space for Cleopatra's *grand finale,* but one which allows for a number of interpretations. On psychoanalytical grounds, David Hillman argues that in the scene of her suicide "to meet Mark Antony", Cleopatra in fact complies with a paradigmatic transference of love from its original object to a new one, in this case Death: a transference of virile objects, dramatized by Shakespeare through the gender connotation of Death (in the then current English usage). In Death as the Other, she displaces her desire for an absent Antony onto the absolute desire for an ontological absence, according to the pattern of repetition and compulsive re-enactment involved in transference[22]. The last performance in the tomb misses the encounter, as did the theatrical event on the Cydnus waters.

Another fertile interpretation focuses on some intertextual and intercultural issues explored in the play. Antony's fantasy of a posthumous reunion with his Egyptian queen in the underworld is clearly an echo of Virgil's description of Dido and Aeneas in the Elysian fields, yet reconciled by Shakespeare's hand:

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[22] Hillman quotes from Lacan's *Four Fundamental Concepts*: "If the transference is only repetition, it will always be repetition of the same missed encounter" ("If it be love indeed", p. 309) – an idea leading to Derrida's concept of the past not as a time that *was*, but as a past to come, to be acted out in the future.

> I come, my queen. […] Stay for me.
> Where souls do couch flowers we'll hand in hand,
> And with our sprightly port make the ghosts gaze.
> Dido and her Aeneas shall want troops
> And all the haunt be ours. (IV.xv.49-53)

The lines are an echo of the *Aeneid*, but they also challenge the prestigious role of Virgil's epic in giving form and meaning to the birth of the Roman Empire. This is achieved both by reinscribing in the protagonist the mythical hero torn between public duty and private passion for "the tawny front" of an African queen, and by making Cleopatra's suicide a reincarnation of Dido's, in the perspective of a foundational myth[23]. Virgil's narration of the myth tells the story of a second foundation of Rome, i.e. the foundation of the city's cultural origin in the blending of classical and local heritage. The African queen Dido served as a scapegoat, where her suicide was re-told as a sacrifice of the Other on the altar of the foundation of Roman culture, thus concealing Rome's original sin. Cleopatra's suicide is shown to serve a similar ideological purpose, instrumental to the power of a "sole sir o'th'world" (V.ii.120). One may infer that Shakespeare's revisiting of the *Aeneid* in *Antony and Cleopatra*, besides aiming to emulate Virgil's authority, was also meant to deconstruct the hegemony of the classics in the cultural establishment of the Renaissance. The 'Roman' death of Shakespeare's Cleopatra shows a basic contradiction inherent in the foundation myth of Imperial Rome. It is a myth proclaimed as one which adheres to traditional republican values of law and order, but in fact works out as a mystifying representation of diversity. This can be seen in the anamorphosis that features in the two opening scenes of the play as well as in the closing statement of Octavius Caesar, where he hypocritically mourns "a pair so famous" (V.ii.357) while at the same time appropriates their fate to celebrate his own glory:

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[23] David Quint, "Epic and Empire", *Comparative Literature*, 41:1 (Winter, 1989), pp. 1-32. This important study highlights the ideological strain that in the *Aeneid* translates what was in fact a civil war in Rome into a contest between civilization and barbarism, rational and irrational agencies in order to give credit to the foundation of the Roman Empire. See the "Editorial" to this issue. On this study is based the later *Antony and Cleopatra*, edited by David Quint, New York, Longman Cultural Edition, 2008.

> [A]nd their story is
> No less in pity than his glory which
> Brought them to be lamented. (V.ii.359-61)

In making Cleopatra survive as an icon of eros and as a thing of beauty, divested of regal identity, her future memory will lose its outstanding historical significance. Instead it is manipulated to transform Rome's internal struggle and traumatic civil war into a conflict with an exotic Other.

No wonder, then, that the ending of the play should be left at Octavius' disposal[24]. True, the "eastern star" (V.ii.307)[25] has prepared for her *pièce de resistance* with utmost care and the pride of a diva, according to a precise script complete with stage directions:

> Show me, my women, like a queen. Go fetch
> My best attires. (V.ii.227-28)

> Give me my robe, put on my crown. (V.ii.279)

and with absolute flawlessness she re-interprets in one instant each of the roles she had taken on in the unfolding of the plot: the feminine tenderness of the mother, the sensuousness of the lover, the majesty of the queen, the perceptive insight and wit of a woman's intelligence – in short her woman's difference. Yet the absolute power onstage granted to the artist through the performance of suicide also reveals its limits – the same that attend the poetry of transcendence in the tragic interruption of Cleopatra's last speech. Cleopatra is doomed to shift away from the heroic mode: the climax of her glorious Passover is marred by her broken voice, unable to finish her final line, and by her crown tilting to the side, needing the touch of a servant's hand, and the voice of another to complete her exit:

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24 Neill, "*Finis coronat opus*", p. 325.

25 I'm here extending in a theatrical sense the reference to Syrius connoted as herald of a messianic advent, replacing in the religious sense the metaphor of Venus with whom Cleopatra is often compared throughout the play. Cf. Wilson, p. 355.

CLEOPATRA
What should I stay –

She dies

CHARMIAN
In this wild world? (V.ii.312)

The play will possibly continue elsewhere – "Your crown's awry, / I'll mend it, and then play" (V.ii.316-17) – but the last lines are not assigned to her. The ultimate irony is that, in failing to play out an entirely heroic end, Shakespeare's Cleopatra bequeaths to Rome the tragedy it never had.