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Shakespeare and the Mediterranean • 3

Antony and Cleopatra

Edited by Cristiano Ragni

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Shakespeare and the Mediterranean

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3

Misremembering the Classics: Self-Representation through Mythological Language in *Antony and Cleopatra*

Sina Will

Abstract

This essay analyses the function and effect of mythological references in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* in the context of the characters' sense of selfhood and the representation of their identity in the play. By examining their relationship to and manipulation of recollection in general and, more specifically, as it is reflected in the multitude of mythological references in act 4, the essay demonstrates that the confusion and inappropriateness of these references serve to highlight Antony's struggle with his non-self-identical subjecthood. In contrast, a different perspective on effective self-portrayal is offered by Cleopatra, whose representation of herself as well as of Antony showcases the possibilities emerging from an imaginative language which strives not to directly imitate or contest classical Greek and Roman narratives, but instead to set itself as a unique paradigm for future recollection.

Keywords: *Antony and Cleopatra*; classical reception; Greek and Roman mythology; identity

> Humanity had to inflict terrible injuries on itself before the self – the identical, purpose-directed, masculine character of human beings – was created, and something of this process is repeated in every childhood. (Horkheimer and Adorno 2020, 26)

In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a collection of 'philosophical fragments', Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno trace the intertwinement of enlightenment and myth throughout the history of western human civilisation. One of their central arguments is that, with the development of individual subjecthood, humans have undergone a continuous process of self-subjugation, since an 'enlightened' view of the world already contains the repressive domination of man over his own nature. In their criticism of modern

(i.e. bourgeois) enlightenment, they assert that it intrinsically contains a mythical element, as this mode of human cognition is limited to the identification of always identical, repeated, and thus mythical characteristics. This is why, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, the supposedly enlightened western individual is trapped in a continuous cycle within which "the temptation to be rid of the ego has always gone hand-in-hand with the blind determination to preserve it" (ibid.).

This vacillation between the compulsion to act as an "identical, purpose-directed, masculine character" and the temptation to succumb to self-forgetfulness in his relationship with Cleopatra represents a central conflict for Mark Antony in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. While the play is to a large degree concerned with Cleopatra's "infinite variety" (2.2.236)[1] and the intangible fluidity of her personality, it just also poses important questions regarding Antony's character, most importantly regarding his establishment of a self. Shortly before his suicide, he is indeed confronted with the inability to constructively form his own identity, observing: "Here I am Antony, / Yet cannot hold this visible shape" (4.15.16-18).

In this essay, I will examine the way in which the production of identity and the appropriation of individual and cultural processes of recollection interact in Shakespeare's play, thereby informing our understanding of the characters' sense of selfhood. Although I focus mostly on Antony, the strategies with which both he and Cleopatra manipulate memory and self-image must be read with and against each other. By highlighting the mismatched nature of Antony's allusions to classical Greek and Roman mythology in a final attempt at autonomous self-representation before his death, I argue that this way of framing selfhood is exposed as inadequate for the construction of a stable identity. Rather, the deconstruction of this Roman mythical narrative points to the non-self-identical nature Antony is anxious to suppress. This, in contrast, is positively portrayed by Cleopatra through an imaginative act of recollection unburdened by classical paradigms in the last act of the play. Finally,

1 All references are from Shakespeare 2020 and will appear parenthetically in the text.

a contrasting model of dialectic self-representation emerges in Cleopatra's use of language, which is opened up to the multifaceted possibilities of human experience unconfined by a mythical subsumption of the present under the past.

1. Recollection and (Dis-)location of Identity in *Antony and Cleopatra*

In the final chapter of her publication on nostalgia in the Elizabethan drama, Kristine Johanson asserts that idealised conceptions of the past in Shakespeare's plays do not solely focus on framing "the past as a refuge against the future's inevitable decline", which would be the most common function of nostalgia in life and literature, but that, additionally, "the idealised past possesses rhetorical force because it turns the nostalgic towards the future" (2022, 171). As long as collective or individual identity is rooted in the history and tradition of a group of people, or in the recollection of one's personal experiences, the way in which this past is dealt with can never be wholly apolitical. Perhaps the most famous Shakespearean instance of memory and recollection becoming powerful political tools can be found in another Roman play, namely in Antony's funeral oration for the assassinated Julius Caesar (*Julius Caesar* 3.2). By cleverly manipulating his plebeian audience into accepting a version of recent history and of Caesar's character that fits his own political agenda, he gains control over the past in a way that allows him to exert control over Rome's future – as Jonathan Baldo puts it: "For Mark Antony, the past is as pliable as his audience, never hardening into anything as fixed, unvarying, and immobile as a statue" (2018, 155). As Baldo goes on to remark, the character of Mark Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra* exhibits a similarly irreverent attitude towards memory, refusing to "honour and respect ancestry and memory of the dead in the Roman way" by preferring a more carefree life in Egypt, which, "[u]nlike the more historically minded Rome . . . is a place of epicurean excess leading to pleasurable oblivion" (158). This disregard for the historical continuity upon which Roman ideals of glory and virtue rest constitutes a conscious choice on Antony's part, as he makes clear right from the outset of

the play: "Let Rome in Tiber melt and the wide arch / Of the ranged empire fall. Here is my space." (1.1.38-9).

Of course, this strategy of self-forgetting only serves Antony as long as he is not confronted with a present failure or shortcoming resulting from his distancing himself from Roman ideals. After impulsively following Cleopatra's retreating ship and losing the sea battle despite his earlier advantage, he is overcome by shame at his literal and figurative loss of self-control, declaring "I have fled myself" (3.11.8) and mourning the decisions, not least his relationship with Cleopatra, which he and his fellow Romans perceive to have set him on a stray path. Remarkably, he then continues to emphasise how far he has fallen from his past self by twisting the historical facts of his famous victory over Brutus and Cassius at Philippi. While Octavius Caesar did not live up to the Roman ideals of masculinity and showed his inexperience in battle by keeping "[h]is sword e'en like a dancer" (3.11.37), Antony, according to his own account, himself "struck / The lean and wrinkled Cassius, and 'twas I / That the mad Brutus ended" (3.11.38-9). The casual audacity with which Antony constructs this "revisionary history" (both Cassius and Brutus committed suicide) is made all the more obvious, at least to a knowledgeable audience, by the fact that he "even seems to confuse his Roman history, conflating Brutus with his ancestor who feigned madness before driving the Tarquins from Rome" (Johanson 2022, 168). It is this farce which has, according to Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1939, 4.68-9), earned that ancestor the cognomen *brutus* – meaning "[d]evoid of intelligence or feeling, irrational, insensitive, brutish" (*OLD*, s.v. *brutus* 2a). Antony takes Brutus' name and ancestry too literally much in the same way that he seems unable to utilise the more subtle or complex possibilities of mythological and historical references, as I will elaborate.

In such moments of crisis, it becomes obvious that Antony's sense of identity, despite grand declarations of his disregard for Rome's history and his legacy within it, is still deeply intertwined with his past achievements as a paragon of Roman martial virtue. This selfhood, however, is shown to be constructed in an inherently unstable way because idealised conceptions of the past, such as Antony's nostalgic recollection of his victory at Philippi, are staged as untrustworthy tools of political manipulation in the play, "thereby destabilising

discourses familiar both on stage and off stage and insisting on the fictiveness of the idealised past" (Johanson 2022, 165). I argue that part of the reason why Antony suffers from an unstable sense of self and loss of control over his own narrative is due to his desire to believe in the 'fictiveness' of the history he has constructed about his person, despite being either unable or unwilling to manipulate himself into this idealised version of Mark Antony.

A somewhat different case can be made for Cleopatra, who is at least Antony's equal in terms of rewriting her personal history to better fit her own narrative. This is most obviously illustrated in her recollection of her youth and past relationships with men in act 1.5. In this scene, she asks Charmian whether she did "[e]ver love Caesar so?" (1.5.78), then reproves her for implying that she did when Charmian cites Cleopatra's own words back at her: "O, that brave Caesar! . . . The valiant Caesar!" (1.5.79-82). Cleopatra then discounts her own strong past affections for Caesar by referring to the time of their relationship as her "salad days, / When I was green in judgment, cold in blood, / To say as I said then" (1.5.88-90). Having Antony be compared to Caesar neither serves the image of Antony she wants to portray nor the part of the devoted and passionate lover she has taken on in their relationship, which, as Tzachi Zamir has argued, is acted out as a "performative model of love" (Zamir 2011, 133). Similarly to Antony, Cleopatra is consciously re-adjusting her own personal history to fit the narrative that seems most useful to the self she is presently projecting. Whereas Antony does not acknowledge this act of retelling and simply presents his version of Philippi as fact, Cleopatra's approach is rather to reframe her relationship with Caesar through a different perspective. Implicitly, she acknowledges that Charmian's account of her past emotional experience is true, while at the same time distancing herself from this past self that no longer fits her current self-concept.

Therefore, she does not flee from herself – as Antony perceives himself to have fled his idealised, supposedly stable former identity – but rather playfully reinvents her identity in ways that produce future possible selves. Whereas such "infinite variety" (2.2.236), in Enobarbus' terms, could be taken as an absence of true selfhood or identity, Katherine Eggert has demonstrated that it is precisely the freedom to play different roles which allows Cleopatra to become a

generative source of "theatrical delight" throughout the play, defining theatre as "a place where the future comes to happen" (2000, 149; 146). If Antony is defined, both by himself and by the other Roman characters, by knowledge of his past glories and the potential for present greatness that is thereby demarcated, Cleopatra embraces her own multiplicity and is less restricted by preconceived notions of a stable and self-identical nature. Of course, the expectation of her volatility – often formulated in a misogynistic manner (e.g. "gypsy", 1.1.10; "Triple-turned whore", 4.12.15) – can be detrimental to her interests, as when Antony accuses her of having betrayed him after the battle of Alexandria. Yet, just like the "serpent of old Nile" (1.5.25), which she remembers being affectionately called by Antony, Cleopatra is able to shed skin after skin as soon as an old pattern no longer serves her. If each of these transformations constitute a delightful sort of theatrical "betrayal" (Eggert 2000, 149), the last act of self-confirmation through conscious self-betrayal is enacted in her suicide, or rather, in her proposed goal of becoming "marble-constant" (5.2.293) through the enaction of her own death. These strategies of self-remembering and self-forgetting employed by the characters, as will be discussed in the following sections, translate into different approaches towards self-fashioning their legacies in anticipation of their respective deaths in the last two acts of the play.

2. Dislodging Memory: Antony's Jumbled Self-Mythologising

With the beginning of act 4, the play begins to feature ever more traditionally tragic characteristics. Even before Antony's final defeat in battle, a foreboding tone is set by the strange music heard by his soldiers at night, who suspect it to be "the god Hercules, whom Antony loved, / Now leaves him" (4.3.21-2), as well as by Enobarbus' death after having betrayed Antony (4.4.9) and the omen of swallows nesting in Cleopatra's sails that her augurs do not know how (or dare) to interpret. From the point of Antony's defeat up until his suicide, his language has noticeably shifted to employ an increasing number of references to Greek and Roman

mythology. The first of these follows a string of insults and threats hurled at Cleopatra, who has quickly left the scene again:

> The shirt of Nessus is upon me. Teach me,
> Alcides, thou mine ancestor, thy rage.
> Let me lodge Lichas on the horns o' th' moon,
> And with those hands that grasped the heaviest club
> Subdue my worthiest self. The witch shall die.
> (4.12.48-52)

Antony's identification with Hercules is an expected one, and – at first glance – his allusion to the hero's death by the poisoned shirt of the centaur Nessus given to him by his wife, Deianeira, seems fitting. This is the first instance in which Antony likens himself to his mythological forefather, but not the first time that Hercules is mentioned in the play. Before, the comparison is directly drawn once by Cleopatra ("How this Herculean Roman does become / The carriage of his chafe", 1.3.102-3), and Hercules is mentioned twice by soldier characters ("By Hercules, I think I am i' th' right", 3.7.84; for 4.3.21, see above). In contrast to Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives*, the equation is much more subdued and seems less forced by Antony himself:

> Now it had been a speech of old time that the family of the Antonii were descended from one Anton, the son of Hercules, whereof the family took name. This opinion did Antonius seek to confirm in all his doings, not only resembling him in the likeness of his body . . . but also in the wearing of his garments. (Spencer 1964, 177)

It is worth noting that the three mentions of Hercules outside of Antony's speech in act 4 are either mocking his connection with the hero or subverting it. By sarcastically calling him a "Herculean Roman", Cleopatra does not intend to praise his military achievements or elevate his heroism onto a mythological plane. Instead, as Clayton G. MacKenzie argues, she is referring to his relapse to a Roman sense of duty by returning to Rome after the death of Fulvia, assuming "that his choice has been made, that he is for 'Roman Virtue' and not 'Egyptian Vice', that he loves Fulvia and not her" (1990, 311). As in Plutarch's description above, the comparison to Hercules is most relevant in its theatrical aspect, reducing it to a

comical performance and "thus calling into question the reliability of such an association, while also highlighting the somewhat vain nature of Antony himself" (Caporicci 2016, 92). While the soldier's interjection "By Hercules, I think I am i' th' right", contradicting Antony's fatal military decision to fight Caesar by sea, does not draw a direct line between Antony and Hercules, the invocation of Hercules in this context highlights Antony's human fallibility. Finally, the link between the two is symbolically broken by the Second Soldier interpreting the music of the hautboys as Antony being deserted by his patron hero.[2]

From the outset, then, the analogy is not a functional one, humanising Antony and his flaws rather than successfully mythologising him. In that light, the purpose of his speech after the last battle, calling on Hercules as his ancestor and role model, seems much less straightforward. Upon closer inspection, the identification of Cleopatra with Deianeira does not fully align either: if Antony truly believes her to have betrayed him deliberately, Deianeira's naively good intentions in giving Hercules the shirt of Nessus substantially undermine this allegation. Deianeira is not a witchlike character such as Circe or Medea, who would better fit Antony's attempt to mythologically slander Cleopatra. He confuses this narrative further by jumbling together different Herculean myths, referring to his "fury" and "rage" (4.12.46; 49), which might even enable him to kill his lover. However, Hercules' fit of mad fury resulting in the killing of his wife and children, as dramatised in Euripides' *Heracles* or Seneca's *Hercules Furens*, does not represent the kind of justified rage Antony claims for himself in this scene. Instead, it is a divinely induced killing frenzy that ends not in righteous satisfaction, but in tragedy and the hero's miasma. Thus, neither reference seems appropriate to Antony's situation: he at once "lacks the guiltlessness and the pathos of a dying Hercules" (MacKenzie 1990, 314) as well as a true commitment to his threat of murderous rage, which is only verbalised and in no way physically acted upon (Caporicci 2016, 93).

2 In addition to these direct allusions to Hercules, Heather James cites the implicit parallel between an emasculated Antony as the "bellows and fan / To cool a gipsy's lust" 1.1.9-10) and "Hercules unmanned by Omphale, humiliatingly discovered in her clothes" (1997, 129).

MacKenzie views this failure to evoke a coherent analogy with Hercules as a "transmigration from Roman military to Egyptian love ethic" (1990, 314). I propose that it also cleverly demonstrates Antony's last-ditch effort to return his shaken selfhood to a stable identity, perhaps most easily found in an icon of Graeco-Roman masculine virtue and a personal mythical forefather. The attempt (along with Antony's bungled suicide) must ultimately fail because this identity constitutes a nostalgic construct which might never have existed in the first place, at least not in Shakespeare's play (Sullivan 2005, 88). Moreover, the confused references to classical mythology in act 4 lend themselves to analysis on a meta-poetic level concerning the role of intertextuality and originality in an early modern drama such as *Antony and Cleopatra*, especially when contrasted with Cleopatra's approach to immortalising herself in the last act of the play.

Discussing Shakespeare's contested use and knowledge of textual material from classical antiquity may seem repetitive if not entirely redundant at this point, so I will refrain from repeating the finer details of this heated scholarly debate. For the sake of lending any sort of credibility to the argument that Antony's self-fashioning after classical tradition is parodied by his inapt usage of it, not Shakespeare's own lack of learnedness, I will point to Colin Burrow's insightful proposition that "[a] large part of the creativity of Shakespeare lies in his willingness to overlayer one shard of 'the classics' with another . . . to misremember, and to reinvent what he has read" (2004, 24). As a prime example for this Shakespearean principle of "over-determination" in which multiple and possibly conflicting perspectives on his classical sources overlap each other and create an ambivalent effect, Burrow cites the mechanical's play mocking the story of Pyramus and Thisbe in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, originally found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (2015, 204). If one accepts that this imaginatively irreverent treatment of classical tradition is a conscious act of creative freedom on Shakespeare's part, there is no reason to assume why he should not transfer this technique onto his characters in order to reference and perhaps even parody his own poetic practice. The interpretation that the dramatic purpose of these mythologically allusive passages might have been aimed at creating an ambivalent effect rather than

drawing up a strictly cohesive symbolism can be corroborated by taking into consideration the perspective of Shakespeare's less educated audience. As Camilla Caporicci asserts, "even without knowing much about the original myths, the spectator would still be able to perceive their ambivalent use and conceptualise them accordingly" (2016, 89).

Besides Hercules, Antony is also compared to Ajax and/or his father, Telamon, as well as Aeneas in the scenes before his death. Notably, the other more obvious connection next to Hercules is missing here: the Roman god of war, Mars, who poses a counterpart to Cleopatra's Venus (2.2.237) or Isis (3.6.18). In the previous acts, the comparison is drawn more often than any other and is strongly connected to the Roman masculine ideal Antony is held to by himself and other characters. However, as Caporicci points out, Antony's likeness to Mars is relativised from the outset of the play as a representation of his former glory rather than his current self (2016, 90). Already in the fourth line, Philo bemoans that his general's "goodly eyes, / That o'er the files and musters of the war / Have glowed like plated Mars" (1.1.3-5) are now turned towards Cleopatra instead. When Enobarbus is asked by Lepidus to speak to Caesar in a "soft and gentle" manner, Enobarbus replies that he shall rather "entreat him / To answer like himself . . . / And speak as loud as Mars" (2.2.3; 4–7). Unsurprisingly, it is again Cleopatra who, upon learning of his marriage to Octavia, puts a subversive spin on the mythological analogy by relating Antony to a figure who is "painted one way like a Gorgon, / The other way's a Mars" (2.5.144-5). As MacKenzie emphasises, the military element of the metaphor is missing here, with Antony as Mars being defined by the absence of the monstrous, Gorgon-like in his attributes – and therefore rather by "the whole spectrum of potential human excellences" (1990, 322). Instead of verbally limiting his identity to a certain ideal by expecting him to be "like himself", a self that is tied to Roman martial virtues, she allows her idea of him to encompass both the terrible things she associates with him at this moment[3] as

3 As MacKenzie also notes, Antony's one side is *painted* like a Gorgon, "the stress lying tellingly in the sense of imaginative artifice that, to a large extent, defines the personal mythologisation of both hero and heroine" (1990, 323-4).

well as the potential for everything opposite of that. In her mind (in contrast to Philo), his love for her cannot only coexist with his potential to live up to her idea of the god Mars, but the analogy even becomes predicated on their love.

Following the argument that we are witnessing the deconstruction of the martial ideal Antony fails to live up to throughout the play, it seems fitting that he is finally stripped off this role along with his armour, assisted by Eros, upon hearing of Cleopatra's death:

> The sevenfold shield of Ajax cannot keep
> The battery from my heart. O, cleave, my sides!
> Heart, once be stronger than thy continent;
> Crack thy frail case. Apace, Eros, apace!
> No more a soldier. Bruisèd pieces, go.
> You have been nobly borne. – From me awhile.
> (4.14.48-53)

Just like the famous shield, the comparison to Ajax is manifold. Firstly, it seems to add yet another warlike mythological character to the ones already discussed. At the same time, the analogy is immediately negated – even the shield that has kept Ajax from being wounded throughout the battles described in the *Iliad* could not be of any use to Antony now. The "battery" is coming from within and cannot be fought off, just as Ajax ultimately falls not in battle against any Trojan or Greek soldier, but by his own hand after having succumbed to grief and/or madness (depending on the source). However, whereas Ajax has to give up "his" (i.e. Achilles') armour against his will, losing his sanity and his life as a result, Antony strips off his armour and military identity consciously. And in contrast to Ajax, he is unable to properly execute his suicide by himself, thus failing at becoming self-identical even in the moment of his death (Sullivan 2005, 104).[4]

This dislodged analogy with Ajax is apprehended by Cleopatra in the preceding scene. Again, there seems to be a confusion of

4 There may be an additional layer of bathos to the comparison. Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin remarks that Shakespeare also uses "Ajax" as an insult; this occurs most prominently in *Troilus and Cressida*, where "the character is so strongly ridiculed by Thersites that the very name becomes an insult", but as a pun on "a jakes (privy)", it can also be found elsewhere in his plays (2016, 7).

related, but separate traditions of Greek mythology. Directly following Antony's references to his Herculean fury, Cleopatra seems to allude to Hercules, Ajax, Ajax' father Telamon, as well as the Calydonian[5] boar all at once: "Help me, my women! O, he's more mad / Than Telamon for his shield; the boar of Thessaly / Was never so embossed." (4.13.1-3). Of all those named above, Telamon himself is the strangest choice for characterising Antony. In Ovid's account, he barely figures in the boar hunt; in one of the two instances, he is just listed as being present ("nec Telamon aberat", Ov. *Met.* 8.309; "Telamon was also there"), and in the other he trips and falls in an attempt to follow the fleeing boar into the woods ("persequitur Telamon studioque incautus eundi pronus ab arborea cecidit radice retentus", 8.378; "Telamon did attempt to follow, and in his eagerness, careless where he went, he fell prone on the ground, caught by a projecting root"). Aside from his connection to Ajax and the allusion to the boar, which – rather hyperbolically – allows Cleopatra to describe Antony's rage as animalistic, surpassing even the monstrous boar's capacity for destruction, the analogy seems far-fetched.[6] Why should Antony not instead be "more mad" than, say, Meleager for his spear? If Shakespeare had wanted to highlight themes of passionate love, martial prowess, betrayal, fury, and vengeance, he might have been a more fitting pick.

What must be taken into account is that the comparison is drawn by Cleopatra, who is once again making use of mythological references in the unorthodox manner typical of her. Here, her desperation over Antony's anger seems very real. At the same time, she is keeping the theatrical performance going, which has been

5 Since no "boar of Thessaly" exists that is known to us in the context of a mythological boar hunt, Cleopatra can only be referring to the Calydonian boar in relation to Telamon, although Mount Calydon is strictly speaking located in ancient Aetolia, not Thessaly. It is likely that Thessaly is used as a metonymy for central Greece in this case.

6 Another rather trivial link between the Calydonian boar and Antony can be found in Pausanias, who mentions that "[t]he ancient image of Athena Alea, and with it the tusks of the Calydonian boar, were carried away by the Roman emperor Augustus after his defeat of Antonius and his allies" (8.46.1). However, since Shakespeare probably has not read Pausanias, this is very likely nothing more than an interesting coincidence.

a central element to her relationship with Antony throughout the entire play. She is desperate, but not desperate enough to actually kill herself because of the rift between them, so she immediately orchestrates her staged suicide. It is a tactic we have already seen her employ in the past: whenever Antony is angry at her, she dramatises her remorse and cleverly adapts her words and actions according to what she apprehends will fit his own narrative and thus pacify him (1.3.105-8; 3.11.57-9). Instead of contradicting, provoking, and teasing him, as she tends to do at other times, she takes to mirroring his own perceived desires and feelings in critical situations.[7]

This pattern of behaviour may give insight into why Cleopatra uses such a disparate analogy in the first place – she is simply mirroring Antony's 'mythological' language in the previous scene and in this way affirms his attempt at performing as a hero of the classical tragic or epic tradition. At the same time, by directly comparing him to Telamon and a boar instead of more flattering characters like Mars, Hercules or even Ajax, she is (consciously or unconsciously) subverting his attempt at creating a mythological foil with which he seeks to stabilise his identity. Furthermore, the reference could be even read as a subtle way of establishing dominance over Antony in terms of effective self-representation. After all, the famous twist in the myth of the Calydonian boar is brought on by the female huntress, Atalanta – in Ovid, this happens immediately after the description of Telamon's clumsy fall. She is the first to draw blood from the boar by firing an arrow below its ear, thereby putting the men of the hunting expedition to shame (Ov. *Met.* 380-9). Similarly, Antony feels dishonoured by Cleopatra's faked suicide since it means that she has overtaken him in pre-empting Caesar's triumph over them:

> Since Cleopatra died
> I have lived in such dishonor that the gods

7 Zamir argues that Cleopatra "indirectly manifests her love" through acts of affirming his self-image as after Actium, when she takes on "guilt that she knows she does not have to take on" or when she shows her "willingness to endorse the other's ideal self-narrative" in the way she chooses to portray Antony after his death (2011, 144f.; 139).

> Detest my baseness. I, that with my sword
> Quartered the world and o'er green Neptune's back
> With ships made cities, condemn myself to lack
> The courage of a woman – less noble mind
> Than she which, by her death, our Caesar tells
> "I am conqueror of myself".
> (4.14.66-73)

In this vein, if not as a successful equation of Antony with great heroes of classical tradition, the allusion to Telamon and the Calydonian boar can be interpreted as a way to showcase the inadequacy of mythological analogies for capturing the deeply human tragedy of the lovers', especially Antony's, downfall. If Cleopatra here is subtly casting herself as Atalanta, this also gives insight into the complex method she employs for crafting her self-image. Charles Martindale reminds us that "[t]he play . . . is much concerned with a contestation of authority, with who controls interpretation, as characters seek to establish their own version of events" (2004, 91). This proves true for the careful way in which Cleopatra goes about constructing her own immortal legacy. Certainly, Antony plays a prominent part in her own self-representation, but even as she adopts his narrative, she refuses to edit her own voice out of it – even if it is heard only implicitly, in absence and in the opening-up of possibilities instead of a limiting self-attribution to figures of classical mythology.

A final explicit comparison of himself and Cleopatra to mythological characters is made by Antony following the reference to Ajax a few lines before he orders Eros to kill him. The analogy of the couple as Dido and Aeneas is delivered in future-directed and ecstatically competitive terms, illustrating Antony's eagerness to "o'ertake" (4.14.54) his lover in death:

> Eros! – I come, my queen. – Eros! – Stay for me.
> Where souls do couch on 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. – Come, Eros, Eros!
> (60-4)

At first glance, the close entanglement of Antony's drive for – in psychoanalytical terms – Eros and Thanatos is aided in its dramatic effect by the mention of the most famous couple in early Roman mythology, which Antony is certain will be surpassed by him and Cleopatra. Once more, however, the functionality of this image quickly caves in upon closer inspection. After all, in the *Aeneid*, there is no such happy reunion of Dido and Aeneas in the underworld as Antony imagines. Unmoved by the excuses Aeneas offers upon meeting her in the Mourning Fields, Dido does not even spare him a look and, "still his foe" ("atque inimica", Verg. *Aen.* 6.472), hurries off to rejoin her former husband in a grove. It does not take much to outbid this frosty couple, then, leaving Antony's claim for his relationship with Cleopatra as a more passionate and immortal kind of love than theirs to fall somewhat flat. On the other hand, it should be remembered that the *Aeneid* plays no small role in the large-scale orchestration of Augustan propaganda setting in after Actium. This ideological machinery is already anticipated by both Antony and Cleopatra in the last two acts, throughout which the prospect of being led in triumph by their enemy becomes an ever-looming source of dread (4.14.24; 5.2.135; 254-8). For all their grand performances, Caesar remains the one character throughout the play who firmly holds control over the threads of the narrative – after all, his remain the final words. Characterising him and Brutus as "indistractible" types of characters – in contrast to a distractible and distracting Antony in both plays – Baldo asserts that they are able to "resist the fundamental conditions of their own existence as theatrical characters" (2018, 150). Neatly wrapping up the story by re-establishing stability and order in the Mediterranean (Come, Dolabella, see / High order in this great solemnity", 5.2.436-7), Caesar already anticipates his own representation as a unifying emperor. His place, it seems, is in the history books and epics rather than on stage.

In this light, the dislodged analogy to Dido and Aeneas can hold power for Antony's self-representation precisely because it calls into question the authority of the Vergilian source on the tradition of the *Aeneid*. Heather James convincingly argues that Antony and Cleopatra represent characters who "seek control over their representation and interpretation throughout the play and resist

literary-political commodification by Octavius and his scribes" (1997, 119). While Cleopatra, the orientalised "strumpet" (1.1.14), "whore" (3.6.77), "witch" (4.12.52), and general Other of the play, receives the brunt of external representation imposed upon her in a derogatory gendered manner, Antony appears to suffer more deeply from it in his sense of identity. By taking part in imposing onto Antony the image of a ruggedly masculine hero (1.4.64-81), together with all the corresponding moral and social expectations that go along with it, Caesar has managed to turn this Roman brand of "hard pastoral, georgic, and epic" nostalgia against him as he "damagingly constructs his remembrance of the heroic Antony from fresher images of Antony's divergence from it" (James 1997, 128). Thus, subverting the expectations set by the authority of the *Aeneid*, an epic propagating core values framed as inherent to a morally superior Roman selfhood by Octavius Caesar, can signify a liberation not only from the shackles of this narrow morality, but also from the Augustan narrative itself. In this revision of the Vergilian tradition, James identifies a "habit of appropriating myths . . . analogous to Shakespeare's own imitative practice: Shakespeare returns to the books that normally lend authority, historical precedent, and iconographic material to the court, and uses them as sources to diverge from the dominant political usage" (1997, 150).

James' reading that Antony's misappropriation of classical material constitutes an effective way of deconstructing fictions imposed on him by others gives important insight into jumbled instances of mythological referencing discussed in this essay. However, one important aspect underlying these passages and much of act 4 should not be overlooked: the inadvertent comedy undercutting the prolonged tragic production of Antony's death. It becomes most apparent in the double-entendre and confusion around Eros' (failed) assistance in the suicide and in the awkward hoisting up of Antony's wounded body onto Cleopatra's platform, both scenes which regularly invite audience laughter in productions of the play (Potter 2006, 513f.; 519). Similarly, just as various scholars have described his suicide as "bungled" or "botched" (Vanhoutte 2000, 154), so could his "bungled" references be seen as a failed attempt to adhere to the self-constructed role as a tragic hero such as Hercules or Ajax. Antony's own awareness of the danger of

becoming an object of ridicule and debasement is one of his driving motives behind his suicide in the first place, describing to Eros his most feared scenario as being led in triumph by Caesar in Rome, "his face subdued / To penetrative shame" (4.14.87-8). In light of this, Jennifer Vanhoutte's criticism that scholars casting his death as one great comic farce exhibit an overtly undifferentiated and unsympathetic reading of his character seems justified (2000, 154f.). Contextualising the suicide ambivalently within the spectrum of Early Modern and ancient Roman sensibilities on the topic, she asserts that "Shakespeare does not idealize or ridicule Antony's suicide; instead, he depicts it in agonizing detail" (162).

In other words, Antony dies not a hero of a classical tragedy, going out in a flash of singular pathos, but as a manifold, utterly human character. And to be human, as is exemplified so famously throughout all of Shakespeare's plays, means also to hold the capacity for representing conflicting concepts within one's selfhood at the same time. Limited to a mythological, self-affirming language, Antony's language of self-expression may translate to his audience as unimaginative, or, in the worst case, ridiculous in its susceptibility to bathos. However, this inability to reduce himself to mythological archetypes ultimately constitutes his triumph; he is immortalised not as a Herculean Roman, a frenzied Ajax or a failed Aeneas, but as a liberated Antony, "peerless" (1.1.45) and non-identical even to himself.

3. Cleopatra – "genuine classic"?

In the context of intertextual references to classical mythology, Charles Martindale has opened up the question of whether Shakespeare could be titled, in A.D. Nuttall's words, a "genuine classic" in comparison to his more conventionally classicist contemporaries such as Marlowe and Milton.[8] Instead of adopting their more heavily referential mode of receiving ancient Greek and Roman literature, Martindale argues that Shakespeare was

8 This refers to a lecture titled "Shakespeare – genuine classic?" that I had the pleasure of attending at the *Shakespeare and the Mediterranean* Summer School organised by the Skenè Research Centre, Verona in August 2023.

able to process his mythological material with less reverence and thus more imaginatively and authentically despite, or precisely because of, the lack of classical learnedness attested to him by Ben Jonson (Silk 2005, 246). The passages cited by Martindale from *Antony and Cleopatra* to contrast with contemporary writers are all lines delivered by Cleopatra: her first monologue and the lines containing her resolution to be "marble-constant" in the last act of the play (5.2.1-8; 289-4) as well as her speech "I dreamt there was an emperor Antony" in the same scene (5.2.93-113). In this last section, I will take the liberty to apply the dichotomy of "classicising" vs. "genuine classic" within the play in order to examine Cleopatra's strategy of (self-)representation, which is fundamentally different from Antony's, as outlined above.

Moving on to act 5, the sudden lack of allusions to classical myth is striking. This is in line with Caporicci's observation that Shakespeare places remarkably little emphasis on the connection between Cleopatra and deities such as Isis or Venus explored more in-depth in his ancient sources (2016, 97). While the connection is drawn – most famously in Enobarbus' monologue in act 2, in which he describes Cleopatra's appearance on the river Cydnus as "[o]'erpicturing that Venus" (2.2.237) – there is no direct equation of the two. By evoking a "new and unrivalled mythology of the senses" (MacKenzie 1990, 321), Enobarbus' description of the queen transcends the symbolic realm to which a mere comparison with the archetypical goddess of love and beauty would otherwise confine her.

In her eulogy for Antony, Cleopatra does not even invoke the gods (Roman or Egyptian) as in the final moments of Antony's death (4.15.40-2). The poetic vision she conjures up in order to immortalise her "emperor Antony" is as imaginative as it is full of unique metaphors (e.g. "His delights / Were dolphin-like", 5.2.108-9). When she asks Dolabella whether he thinks that "there was, or might be, such a man / As this I dreamt of" (5.2.115-16), her question concerns not only what she holds as truth regarding her loving view of Antony, but implicitly also refers to the singularity of his greatness. In the personal mythology Cleopatra constructs for Antony post-mortem, conventional, i.e. classical, modes of representation such as comparisons with gods or heroes cannot

live up to the very human individual that Antony is to her. To her, his splendour is "past the size of dreaming", to imagine "[a]n Antony were nature's piece 'gainst fancy" (5.2.120-2). She refuses to confine him to a symbolic realm in her description, thus making him irreducible to prefabricated paradigms. In MacKenzie's words, Antony becomes "a myth that is unprecedented and free of the shackles of Classical mythology" (1990, 326). I would go one step further and argue that he is even liberated from the compulsion to exist within the narrow margins of identical Roman selfhood at large. Through Cleopatra's eulogy, who "commits his memory to a world of half-realities and dream" (MacKenzie 1990, 325), Antony's identity is finally opened up to the multiplicity that he has tried and failed to repress in his lifetime.

What to make, finally, of Cleopatra's own suicide and her wish to become "marble-constant"? As Sullivan has pointed out, the erotic overtones of Cleopatra's death, which she frames as a teleological act of consummating her marriage with Antony, complicate this idea of self-identity in death: "For Cleopatra, the non-singleness of being is seen as being's very condition, and it is foregrounded in her masterfully theatrical suicide" (2005, 105). Her death is future-directed in the sense that it does not mark a stop to her generativity of imagination, instead opening it up to the possibilities of a performative act transcending earthly life. The invoked likeness to archetypes such as Roman or Egyptian goddesses simply marks the abundance of these possibilities, "revealing the full spectrum of her many-faced divinity", as Caporicci puts it, "which is at the same time symbolic and highly literal" (2016, 98).

Returning once more to Adorno's and Horkheimer's dialectic model of myth and enlightenment referenced at the beginning of this essay, one may argue that (perhaps paradoxically) it is crucial for Cleopatra to incorporate the idea of a "marble-constant" element into her identity – if only as another possibility to be contradicted and rendered non-self-identical. Moreover, I propose that there is a meta-poetic dimension subverting her claims for marble-constancy: the fact of her immortalisation in the play itself. Spoken in Shakespeare's own words, "[n]ot marble nor the gilded monuments / Of princes" will lend fame to her, but "powerful rhyme", i.e. Cleopatra's representation in the play, must naturally appear as a more appropriate medium

for capturing a "living record of [her] memory" (Sonnet 55, 1-2; 8). Until the very end, Cleopatra keeps exploring and expanding the theatrical possibilities of life – and death. Her suicide, albeit carefully orchestrated, retains a sense of sensuous spontaneity in the way she decides to put another asp onto her arm ("Nay, I will take thee too", 5.2.372) and in the incompleteness of her last verse. The performance of her death is based not on narrow conventions set by classical (or other literary) paradigms of suicide, but rather constitutes a final act of self-assertion that encompasses the full possibility of human experience often attributed to Shakespeare's writing itself. Thus, Cleopatra becomes a "genuine classic" in her own right, immortalised within and beyond the limitations of the play.

4. Conclusion

In many ways, *Antony and Cleopatra* is concerned with the creation and unravelling of myth and history – individually as well as on a larger scale. References to figures and stories from Greek and Roman mythology not only serve the purpose of creating an ancient Mediterranean setting, but also highlight the different ways in which the characters may approach the representation of personal identity. The density of classical references in act 4 illustrates the importance of such paradigms for the construction of an idealised Roman masculine selfhood which Antony strives for and struggles with throughout the play. While these references at first glance may seem like a way of affirming such rigid forms of self-conception, a closer look at the passages discussed in this essay reveals another possible perspective on their function in the play: by being set up as disparate analogies which do not fit the image they are meant to portray, the audience is drawn to the inadequacy of mythological figures as foils for characters with human flaws and complexities. Especially in Antony's case, instead of achieving a coherent self-mythologisation, they rather act as destabilising moments for a self-identical characterisation and thus succeed in humanising him as a contradictory individual.

In act 5, Cleopatra demonstrates an alternative approach to self-representation and to mythologising Antony that does not

attempt to reduce herself or her lover to archetypes from classical mythology, but instead ventures for a legendary status by setting themselves up as inimitable moments in history, unequal to anyone else and even to themselves as they were in life. In this affirmative staging of such theatrical ingenuity, the same underlying poetics of literary immortalisation can be recognised that run through Shakespeare's other plays and sonnets and that are so fundamental to the afterlife and reception of the bard himself.

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