

**CLEOPATRA'S ROLE TAKING: A STUDY OF
*ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA***

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In this paper, Cleopatra, as the main character of *Antony and Cleopatra*, is analyzed with the precise idea of disclosing the game and play element inherent in her political situation.¹ The study arises from the possibility that literary games exist: games which at times can be defined by their own set of rules.² This is not a new idea and has been successfully explored by J. Leyerle in his essay, "The Game and Play of Hero".³ As far as I am aware, *Antony and Cleopatra* has not been studied in this light.

In order to understand this approach to the study of literature the reader must understand that there is something in poetry beyond its aesthetic function. That something can be explained in terms of play.⁴ The basic components of game playing have been well explored in *Homo Ludens*,⁵ and these elements often enough seem to govern the development of certain literary forms, such as courtly love. By keeping in mind Huizinga's lucid concept of play,⁶ it is not difficult to see Cleopatra as the embodiment of a literary game with all its implications: rules to follow, a power factor and the inevitable role taking. For this very same reason in *Antony and Cleopatra* we can find a clear thematic nucleus, "a nodal point about which the more manifest structures of the play are organized."⁷ This nucleus is political power, an issue that forces Cleopatra to play games with her opponents, Caesar, Pompey and Antony. To see how the game element is present most of the time in Cleopatra's behaviour we must look first at the senses inherent in the word "game". Such a word, according to *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, has a variety of senses which are quite close to the ones given in the *Middle English Dictionary*.⁸ These senses are:

- 1 amusement or pastime
- 2 competitive activity involving skill, chance or endurance
- 3 trick or strategy
- 4 fun, sport of any kind, mirth
- 5 any object of pursuit, attack, abuse
- 6 to act or play in accordance with rules

- 7 prey, quarry
- 8 artifice, plan, scheme
- 9 amorous play, love making, especially sexual intercourse
- 10 polite accomplishment
- 11 joke, jest, ridiculous circumstances.

Starting from the enumerated senses of "game" we shall try to analyze Cleopatra's character as that of a woman who is fully learned in the art of game playing and very skilled in role-taking: a role oriented to achieve the subtle and oblique control of Rome.

Cleopatra's tragedy is similar to that of Coriolanus since her death is the outcome of the role she has chosen to play due to the political situation of her country, Egypt. Thus, her life seems to follow the same trajectory throughout the play, regardless of time, place or circumstances, because her game is political, directed towards the acquisition of the needed power. At the same time it seems to proffer happiness to her because of her sensuous nature.⁹ Thus, by transforming her own bed into a battlefield, where she victoriously conducts whatever encounter she has to face, she manages to replace war strategies with Venus' games. Her life is confined within the boundaries of a board game which she has devised for two players, the Queen and the Warrior. Consequently her private and her public life are composed of a variety of closely-linked moves. Each move is a carefully-planned attack or counterattack designed to maintain control of her opponent.¹⁰

The play opens with a political predicament in which Cleopatra is faced with the possibility of having Antony displaced by Rome from the boundaries of her board game. Aware that she must do something to retain him she predictably takes recourse in "amorous play", the ninth sense of "game":

If it be love indeed, tell me how much.

(I,i.14).

Compared with the number of times that Antony uses endearing terms when speaking of Cleopatra, she seldom uses the word "love." In fact, we never see Antony concerned with the idea of being the object of any woman's affection other than that of his Cleopatra, while she dwells again and again upon the fact that she has been loved by Rome's greatest men:

Your Caesar's father oft,
When he hath mus'd of taking kingdoms in,
Bestow'd his lips on that unworthy place
As it rain'd kisses.

(III,iii.82-84).

She is speaking of an affair that benefitted her and, by extension her country.

Although Cleopatra's tone is playful this type of "amorous play" does not seem to be very usual in her judging by Antony's response which is dry and sarcastic. His reply gives the audience the vague feeling that he is being confronted with an unfamiliar aspect of his beloved that upsets him. We have no idea about Cleopatra's design. However, she must be under the impression that her "strategy" is working for, despite Antony's answer, she pushes the issue a little further precisely when the messenger is about to appear in the room. With the arrival of the messenger the woman who wants to know how much she is loved fades away. She suddenly changes, and becomes a creature who is circuitously "abusing" and "attacking" (the fifth sense of "game") Antony's manhood:

Nay, hear them, Antony
 Fulvia perchance is angry; or who knows
 If the scarce-bearded Caesar have not sent
 His powerful mandate to you; do this, or this
 Take in that kingdom, and enfranchise that
 Perform't, or else we damn thee.

(I.i.19-23).

Cleopatra, as a woman, is the most mercurial character that Shakespeare has ever created. Thus, she is a magnificent role taker so long as hysteria does not take hold of her.¹¹ At this moment, since Antony's duty is that of hearing the ambassadors, she induces him to act "in accordance with the rules." Apparently there is nothing devious about it, but she transforms this event into an opportunity to make Antony an "object of pursuit, attack, abuse."¹²

With the arrival of the ambassadors, Cleopatra has to compete with Rome, a powerful enemy capable of awaking in Antony a "Roman thought." Thus, she is confronted with a competition that involves not only ability but chance and endurance. She knows she is playing a game of skill against Fulvia and Rome and she equally knows that Antony may go. If Antony cannot be kept within her playground, the best thing for her is to arouse in him an animosity towards Caesar. This she achieves by making him feel like a servant ready to jump at "his powerful mandate."

Most critics, when dealing with this play, seem to be concerned primarily with the theme of love, with Cleopatra's duplicity and with death as a way of attaining heroic stature.¹³ However, some of them tend to ignore the poetic nucleus of the play: power and freedom, embodied in Cleopatra despite the fact that again and again she proclaims herself to be "Egypt's Queen."¹⁴ Thus, if we place less emphasis on the theme of love¹⁵, the symbolism of the Nile and Antony's feelings, and try to concentrate on what Cleopatra is, we shall be able to comprehend why Shakespeare granted her a glorious and noble death, a magnificent death when compared with that of Antony. Whatever Cleopatra did, she did it for Egypt's sake and for that of her offspring. We cannot say the same thing about Antony, a man who, induced by reprehensible flaws, acted against his own people. This is a very

serious infraction when considering England's posture towards insurgents. Consequently Shakespeare is merciless with Antony when death overtakes him.¹⁶

Perhaps Antony, when facing death, can forgive Cleopatra precisely because in that supreme moment he reaches *anagnorisis* seeing in her what she is, a queen fighting in her own way the Roman oppressor. This throws some light upon Cleopatra's character, a powerful symbol of the Machiavellian philosophy of life so important during the Renaissance. Let us not forget that for Cleopatra anything is valid, even the prostitution of her own body,¹⁷ so long as she can achieve her ends: the indirect control of Rome. Her games with Julius Caesar, Pompey and Antony are incited not by a "serpentine evil, and utterly selfish streak of bottomless evil,"¹⁸ as some critics believe perhaps misled by the "worm" symbolism, but pressed by her need to transform her opponents into servile fools. Perhaps one could reverse the coin and consider Cleopatra as a great woman precisely because she was capable of discovering the way of avoiding being Rome's game, something that Octavius was contriving to make her. What makes Cleopatra's present game more dangerous when compared with previous ones, is that it has become destructive. This is not so much because of Cleopatra herself but because of Antony, something which she recognizes when it is too late.

Due to Antony's nature her game is destructive, a fact obvious from the very outset of the play. Philo, albeit unknowingly, gives the audience an insight into the main cause of Cleopatra's downfall:

Take but good note, and you shall see in him
The triple pillar of the world transform'd
Into a strumpet's fool.

(I,i.11-13).

Perhaps to speak of Cleopatra's "fool" is not strictly accurate for there seems to be much more involved than that. Antony gives the impression of being a man no longer capable of making the right moves in a political arena, a fact now confirmed by his dangerous refusal to see the ambassadors and later on by his senseless marriage to Octavia.

For Antony to elude Cleopatra's game is a very difficult task and he knows it. Cleopatra is aware of the imperious necessity of keeping him in "fetters" otherwise, Egypt could be in Roman "fetters." Cleopatra, unlike Coriolanus, wanting to "note the qualities of people", her people, appears to be interested in the welfare of the commoners:

To-night we'll wander through the streets and note
The qualities of people. Come my queen;
Last night you did desire it.

(I,i.53-55).

Since Antony gives the impression of sharing her interest, two things should be noted because they serve to emphasize the seriousness of Cleopatra's "desire." The

first one is Antony's tender tone. The other is the total absence of game-related words. Their non-appearance becomes noticeable precisely because Antony's speech, prior to this one, was laden with words associated with games, words such as "pleasure," "sport" and "sexual intercourse." The queen's healthy desire of "noting the qualities of people" has been introduced into a scene that closes with a note of serenity without provoking gestures or harsh words.

Cleopatra has aptly been compared with Coriolanus. Nevertheless, there is one point of the collation which does not bear comparison. J.L. Simmons, for example, claims:

Coriolanus and Cleopatra make strange bedfellows: yet despite their different life style, they share an unyielding horror of being scrutinized and judged by a vulgar audience.¹⁹

In Coriolanus's case it is clear enough that he hates "a vulgar audience." After all he is the embodiment of pride, a fact that prevents him from acting according to the rules of the game. His incapacity to play the required role²⁰ can be imputed to the way his mother brought him up. However, when it comes to saving Rome he is capable of sacrificing himself and accepts death as the exact price. Cleopatra resembles Coriolanus in this point, but there is not enough evidence in the text to declare she hates the common people of Egypt. Moreover, if the situation demands it, Cleopatra knows how to play the role of a humble queen when confronted with a simple messenger. Her terror has nothing to do with Coriolanus's horror. Rather she resents the prospect of being paraded through the streets of Rome as spoils of war. She knows what it means to play games with people, to make fun of them, to use them, to delude them. Hence Cleopatra's theatrical fears, in spite of Simmons's appreciation, have very little to do with Coriolanus's dread.²¹

From Cleopatra's night walk the play moves into a brief description of the lives of her servants. That room is permeated by game and play, something to be expected since characters like Iras and Charmian function within the play as the queen's foils. For some critics this scene serves primarily to emphasize the sensuous atmosphere that prevails in Cleopatra's world. This may be so, but a close analysis of it offers the reader more. By paying attention to Charmian's speech, when she is asking the soothsayer about the future a cynosural parody of her mistress' games comes to the surface:

Good now, some excellent fortune! / Let me be married to three kings in a
forenoon / and widow them all. Let me have a child at / fifty, to whom
Herod of Jewry may do homage. Find / me to marry me with Octavius
Caesar, and / companion me with my mistress.

(I,ii. 25-30).

Although Charmian's speech is a mirthful travesty of Cleopatra's attitude to kingship²² and power, it reflects no ill will or envy. The soothsayer serves to confirm this fact when he tells her, "you shall be more believing than beloved."

Hence, despite the apparent flippancy of Charmian's words, the passage should be examined in some detail for it furnishes the audience with valuable information. Firstly the idea of being the widow of three kings has several connotations. Charmian could be alluding to Julius Caesar, Pompey and Antony. Alternately she considers marriage as a profitable business that has nothing to do with love. Curiously enough, Charmian is referring to a legal union that offers power: an alliance which, due to its binding effect, releases the queen from game playing in order to keep her partner in "fetters."

Furthermore, when she speaks of Herod paying "homage" to her child, once again political and religious implications are in the air. What we have is a clear reflection upon Egypt's present situation, sad when compared with its former splendour. In her words there is an implicit desire to return to those times in which other races, like the Jews, were subjected to Egypt's power. Now the desire to become the widow of kings reinforces this desire to recover what has been lost under Rome's ruling power. The desire to achieve Herod's submission through giving birth at the age of fifty seems rather absurd at first sight. Nevertheless it is not so because a Cleopatra ugly and old would be powerless. It is natural to desire to be fertile and young at the age of fifty rather than to experience menopause and loss of physical attraction. Also, this is a sly comment on Cleopatra's own advancing age and the infertility of her relationship with Antony. Charmian's final report is related to the soothsayer's words, because induced by her love for her mistress, Charmian is voicing her unconscious desire to free her queen from her present duties by becoming Octavius's wife.

Curiously enough little attention has been paid to this scene other than considering it as a mirthful display of Cleopatra's world, a world characterized by an exacerbated lack of moral standards and a marked Epicurianism. Critics seem to ignore that we are confronted here with a group of strong people, capable of coping with their present political situation without betraying any sentiments other than mirth and fun. Despite their apparent light heartedness they are waiting for Antony, the Antony that has been confronted with serious issues from Rome.

An astonishing issue is the fact that Enobarbus, the most clear-sighted character in the play, seems to be on Cleopatra's side. He is the one who orders:

Bring in the banquet quickly; wine enough
Cleopatra's health to drink.

(I,i. 11-12).

Enobarbus does not only participate in their "amusements" but also in their "plans" whereby he gives the impression of knowing something related to Antony's departure that the audience ignores, for he appears to be against it:

Ant. I must with haste from hence
Eno. Why, then we kill all our women
See how mortal any unkindness is to them
They suffer our departure, death's the word.

(I,ii. 136-38).

Obviously they are anxious about Antony's arrival so much they can hardly suppress their surprise when they see the queen instead of Antony, a very disturbed queen due to Antony's disposition:

He was disposed to mirth, but on the sudden
A Roman thought hath struck him.

(I,ii. 86-87).

Cleopatra knows he must be brought back to "mirth", the fourth sense of "game", and that looks like a difficult task at the present moment. Antony wants to be once again a respected and feared leader in the eyes of his people. Consequently he keeps telling himself, over and over again, that he must leave her before he is completely under her sway:

These strong Egyptian fetters I must brake
or lose myself in dotage.

(I,ii.18-19).

Antony does not know he is day-dreaming, something that Enobarbus can perceive clearly enough. Enobarbus knows that those "fetters" are mental ones and he fears the results of Antony's behaviour in Rome. He knows that Antony's irrational nature can induce him to make irreversible misjudgements, mistakes that could place him in an even worse predicament in Rome.²³

Cleopatra takes the expected role of a love goddess,²⁴ a very pleasing theatrical act for Antony and till the arrival of the ambassadors everything goes according to her wishes. She plays it by offering him a life of comfort and delight using a language of sustained sexual incitement. Nevertheless, as soon as she discovers that Antony is ready to fight back she changes her tactics. Cleopatra begins to manipulate him through crafty, daring and destructive "tricks" whereby she works her own finale. The first "trick" or "stratagem", when he arrives with the ambassadors is that of avoiding him, the eighth sense of "game". The reader suspects, due to the arrival of the ambassadors with Antony, that Cleopatra's hasty departure with her servants is caused by Cleopatra's desire to over hear the conversation between Antony and the ambassadors. Enobarbus's expeditious reappearance, precisely when the messenger has left him, arouses suspicious thoughts in a sedulous reader. The problem is that we have no rubrics to confirm this possibility. Nevertheless, if one were to produce the play, it might be effective to stage this scene with the whole group in an adjacent room listening attentively to the ambassadors. Leaving this argument aside, it is clear that Enobarbus is on Cleopatra's side. Notwithstanding, Enobarbus's vehement vindication of Cleopatra's is baffling:

Her passions are made of nothing but
The finest part of pure love.

(I, i. 151-2).

What he means by “the finest part of pure love”, is difficult to comprehend, especially when one has the feeling it has nothing to do with Antony. An issue indicates this possibility: that “pure love” if he is alluding to Cleopatra’s love for him, would be too ironic, more so, when she is capable of betrayal if the need arises. Enobarbus is no fool. When he speaks of Cleopatra as a “wonderful piece of work which wholly depends on your abode” he is too clear thinking to utter idle words impelled by duty or passion. His words, since he also speaks of business, suggest something beyond a simple dependence on love. The business must be important, otherwise he would not feel free enough to remind Antony that “the business you have broach’d here cannot be without you” (I,ii. 180-81). The point, for the time being, should not be stressed any further, but Enobarbus’s words should be studied with greater care, a task that is beyond the scope of this paper. At times, Enobarbus could be referring to Cleopatra’s love for her country, a sentiment worthy of being defined as “pure love.”

Cleopatra, like Enobarbus, knows that Egypt “cannot be without him.” At times Antony can be thoughtless and, although most critics tend to insist upon his generosity, he can be an incorrigible egoist. He leaves Cleopatra disregarding her needs; he forsakes Fulvia without considering her feelings for him and he marries Octavia with the idea of abandoning her. Obviously he is self-centered. Only one thing obsesses him: the fact that in Rome he is called the “strumpet’s fool”, unwilling, despite Enobarbus’s words, to accept the true cause. Whatever he has become, as Enobarbus points out, is due to his sensuous nature. And Cleopatra knows how to satisfy this disposition since she “had such a celerity in dying”, and is capable, if the situation calls for it, “of dying twenty times upon a far poorer moment.” Here is unquestionable proof of Cleopatra’s skill in role-taking, since “sexual intercourse” is game playing according to the ninth sense of “game.”

Right now this type of game seems to be futile. So Cleopatra tries another type of “trick” or “strategy,” that of angering him by confusing him:

See where he is, who’s with him, what he does
I did not send you. If you find him sad
Say I am dancing; if in mirth, report
That I am sudden sick. Quick, and return.

(I,iii. 2-5).

There is a tremendous urgency in her orders. However these are not the words of a woman who fears a lover’s unfaithfulness. She requires information related to Antony’s political resolutions. Basically she wants to distract him from “Roman thoughts” by reverting his attention to her own person. Let us not forget that anger in a lover can be easily turned into passion. Furthermore, the reader must bear in mind that nothing could be more disturbing for a man in love, if he is sad, than to be informed that the loved one is “dancing.” Conversely, if he is having fun or “mirth,” a way of making him feel guilty is to let him know that she is “sick.”

By the time they face each other, Cleopatra knows she has lost the battle and

thus she is no longer in full control of herself. Cleopatra perhaps tries too hard and overplays her part, altogether a wrong posture since her role-taking becomes ineffective:

Help me away, dear Charmian! I shall fall.
It cannot be thus long; the sides of nature
Will not sustain it.

(I,iii. 14-15).

The cool and calm Cleopatra that we see at the monument when Antony is brought to her, seems to be very different from this one, but in essence this is not so. Cleopatra always acts according to her present circumstances and now she believes that to play the part of an hysterical woman, on the verge of madness, unable to endure the inevitable separation, could be effective. She tries everything; she does not let him speak; she frequently uses the word "love" and "dear love" and even threatens him.

Though Cleopatra's love for Antony is questionable, this fact does not necessarily transform her into a despicable creature. On the contrary, she is merely combating a perceived threat to Egypt and to herself. Thus, her cause, deep down, is noble, while Antony's is dubious. During this scene there is an illuminating moment in which Cleopatra cries out her despair at Egypt's impotence:

I would I had thy inches! Thou shouldst know
There were a heart in Egypt.

(I,iii. 40-1).

Now she is no longer acting out a role but speaking too openly for her own good. Her message was clear enough, but Antony pretends to ignore her threat: a denunciation directed not only at Antony but also at the ruling power of Rome. Her words are no game. They are too daring, something that Cleopatra immediately recognizes. She knows she has committed a serious blunder and thus she immediately reverts to her previous role, that of a poor woman horrified by the sudden awareness of having a heartless lover. To do so she uses Fulvia's death as her weapon. Antony does not seem to be moved by her histrionics, rather he waits for the right opportunity to answer her threat with another intimidation:

By the fire
That quickens Nilus's slime, I go from hence
The soldier, servant, making peace or war
As thou affect'st.

(I,iii. 68-70).

Some sort of "business" must have been "broached" between them, as Enobarbus suggested, something that Antony is not following through. Cleopatra

gives the impression of being a woman who feels cheated, so much so, that she speaks of Antony as if he were the player and she the “quarry” of his game:

Good now play one scene
Of excellent dissembling, and let it look
Like perfect honour.

(I,iii. 78-80).

Cleopatra, at this moment, is saying what she feels she has a right to voice. She seems to appeal to some legal rights that Antony has chosen to ignore. Notwithstanding, she is clever enough to know it is unwise to let him go feeling ill disposed towards her. So, with the idea of erasing possible enmity between them she attributes her words and behaviour to her “unpitied folly.” Also she begs him to “be deaf” and bids him goodbye wishing him a “smooth success.” Antony departs and one is left with the feeling that Cleopatra was right in trying to dissuade him.²⁵

Cleopatra is always true to herself. She acts, she makes plans, she dreams and her words, again and again, serve to bring the reader onto a magnificent stage with an equally magnificent actress. Egypt has become her stage, a fact which has given Shakespeare the opportunity of producing a majestic setting upon the Nile. In this play Shakespeare has managed to bring Cleopatra’s stage upon his stage and thus, her encounter with Antony is the most spectacular piece of acting that Shakespeare has ever devised for a woman. Cleopatra is not only the most accomplished actress of Shakespeare’s heroines, but a very creative producer and director of her own performances. The description, difficult to surpass, of her barge is that of a splendid pageant. Its effect upon the audience, and above all, upon Antony, needs no further discussion.

Antony back in Rome becomes the man he once was, while Cleopatra, through a raw recapitulation of past events, keeps summing up ways of catching Antony once again. The scene opens with Cleopatra giving instructions to her attendants. With her orders an intriguing question arises: is Shakespeare intending a parody of the love-sick Orsino to throw light on Cleopatra’s real feelings about Antony?

Give me some music, music, moody food
of us that trade in love.

(II,v. 1-2).

Cleopatra’s words should be analyzed with care for they could embrace some interesting puns. It is possible that the word “food” were a pun on “foo,” meaning service or even “sexual intercourse.” Furthermore, if we accept the semantic implications of the active verb “to trade,” as those of making business, or conducting dealings, then, the picture is complete. “Trade” could also imply “prostitute.” Nevertheless, this implication does not seem a plausible one, for she

would be demeaning her character. The queen is a business woman involved in political dealings.

It is during this scene, with Antony away, when Cleopatra seems to be most concerned about “good will,” “good acting” and “bad acting”:

And when good will is show'd, though't
Come too short
The actor may plead pardon.

(II,v. 8-9).

Obviously, since her acting during her last encounter with Antony was below standard, Cleopatra refers to her own failure, a typical Elizabethan apology. She claims she was “good willing”: and here “will” can also have its Elizabethan sexual meaning. At the same time she claims she was well intentioned and thus she begs to be pardoned on account of her “good will.” For her the consequences of her bad acting must be serious, otherwise she would not be pleading for anything at all.²⁶

This play, like *Richard II*, offers weighty problems since one is never sure of Shakespeare's true attitude towards the principle of the King's Two Bodies. After all, Cleopatra is a queen.²⁷ Its interpretation could depend upon the reader's posture, since we have no evidence about the play's acceptance. It would be helpful to have full knowledge of Shakespeare's public's reaction to a queen manipulating so many males upon the stage. Also the reader's judgement of Cleopatra will bear some relation to his emotional reaction at the sight of her suicide once she has no more Antonies to catch.

If we accept the implications inherent in this speech what emerges can hardly be called a romantic picture of love:

Give me mine angle! We'll to the' river, there
My music playing far off. I will betray
Twany-finn'd fishes. My bended hook shall pierce
Their slimy jaws, and I as I draw them up,
I'll think of them every one an Antony
And say, Ah, ha!, y'are caught.

(II,v. 10-14).

Words like “bended hook,” references to “betrayal” and expressions such as “twany-finn'd fishes” and “slimy jaws,” lead directly to a world permeated by game and play. To begin with love has been connected with fishing, that is to say, “sport,” the fourth sense of “game.” Furthermore, in the word “tawny” there could be a pun on “insignificant,” “little,” “tiny,” or even “tinny.” Such a word would point towards two levels of interpretation. The first one, without the possible pun, indicates their desire of making of Antony one of them, a true Egyptian. The other, implicit in the pun, refers to Antony's lack of power. Also it

could touch upon his insignificance when compared to a queen, his inferior nature made of a base metal instead of a regal one such as gold.

The concept of littleness is reinforced by the power inherent in “bended hook.” The implications do not end here for there are others not very delectable implicit in “slimy jaws.” When one considers the fact that Cleopatra is recalling her previous catch of Antony, somebody she claims to love, the expression “slimy jaws” seems to be out of place and difficult to comprehend. One must realize that the adjective “slimy” implies something that is not very savoury and something that is not perfect since it has been “pierced” and thus maimed. One could argue that this apparent distaste for fish reflects, consciously or otherwise, Cleopatra’s contempt for the male sex in general: the “fish” or the “codpiece,” that is to say the male organ. The word “caught” is not very poetic and once more it is related to game playing for it suggests that Antony is an “object of pursuit,” a “quarry” to be caught with the idea of being kept in “fettters.” The total absence of tender words or allusions to the love and admiration she claims to feel for her Antony is obvious.

This posture towards her lover is reinforced in her following speech:

That time? O time!
I laugh’d him out of patience; and that night
I laugh’d him into patience; and next morn
Ere the ninth houre I drunk him to his bed,
Then put my tires and mantles on him, whilst
I wore his sword Philippan.

(II,v. 18-20).

These are not the words of a woman in love. What we have here is the proud exultation of a woman who has achieved exchange of power. He has her “tires and mantles,” while she “wore his sword.” This passage has induced many critics to see Cleopatra as a castrater. It may be so, but such emasculation is not sadistically done. She is a queen fighting in a field in which she knows she has advantages, *abed*. All is game playing. Charmian reinforces this idea in her previous speech describing the way in which they duped Antony with a salt fish:

When your diver
Did hang a salt fish on his hook, which he
With fervency drew up.

(II,v. 16-17).

So, Antony is not only a creature with “slimy jaws” but a poor player. And since “salt” has sexual overtones, “slimy” would imply impotence in contrast. Thus Cleopatra would be the “salt fish” and Antony the weak “slimy fish.” According to Charmian it is not difficult to involve him in some sort of “ridiculous circumstances.” In spite of it all Antony is a good catch, “He shall have everyday a several greeting,/ Or I’ll unpeople Egypt” (I,v.77), capable at times of inspiring

tender feelings in others. The capture is so important that Cleopatra is willing to do anything in order to have him once again pierced by her “bended hook.”

Another intriguing point about Cleopatra's feelings is the fact that the degree of her affection or passion seems to be in direct correlation to her present circumstances, something that not even Charmian can understand. Due to the role she has chosen to undertake Cleopatra is a lonely and forlorn creature, as hapless as Coriolanus, since not even her attendants can fully comprehend her acting methods. For that reason when she tells Charmian not to compare “that brave Caesar!” (I,v.68), with her Antony, she is bewildered and perplexed. She cannot apprehend the possible implications inherent in her acceptance of having loved Julius Caesar more than Antony. Charmian becomes saucy and retorts: “By your gracious pardon I sing but after you” (I,v.73). Cleopatra cannot be angry with her maid. Moreover, she feels compelled to offer a plausible explanation for her present rejection of Caesar's greatness and she does so by imputing her previous adoration to her injudicious youth: “I was green in judgement, cold in blood” (I,v.74), altogether an unacceptable excuse precisely because she was “cold in blood.”

If Cleopatra ever loved Antony it was the soldier, not the man that inspired her devotion. It was the brave and feared Antony, a man she knew how to conquer because she had not only acquired the necessary experience to be an irresistible actress but the indispensable knowledge of how to use her sex to achieve her ends with a male.

Up to this point Cleopatra has not been defeated. Nevertheless, every game plays itself out. In Cleopatra's case her initial victory becomes a double-edged knife because Antony is not Julius Caesar and can be easily destroyed by her methods. Antony is weak so her triumph over him is illusive. Behind it is hidden Cleopatra's ultimate tragedy. In Antony's case Cleopatra failed not only because she could not foresee the destruction of that “demi-Atlas of the earth, and burgonet of men,” but also because she miscalculated the possible results of the clash between her world and Antony's public and private life in Rome.

The complete collapse of Antony's Roman world and by extension that of Egypt takes place with his return to Cleopatra. From that moment on they move from disaster to disaster: even their relationship will deteriorate so much that they will reach a point where the reader feels there is nothing left between them but self-delusion. Antony even blames her for their defeat:

This foul Egyptian hath betrayed me
My fleet hath yielded to the foe, and yonder
They cast their caps up and carouse together
Like friends long lost.

(IV,xii. 10-13).

Although there is not enough evidence in the text of her betrayal²⁸ one tends to side with Antony's suspicious thoughts.

Obviously Antony could be wrong. However it is true that Cleopatra tries to play games with Octavius and she does so by offering herself through the ambassador (III,xiii,82-84). This constant bidding for oblique power over Rome has become so much part of Cleopatra that she even resorts to it when a messenger arrives with news from Antony. In exchange for good tidings she offers him: her “bluest veins to kiss— a hand that kings/Have lipped, and trembled kissing” (II,v.29-30).

Cleopatra does not understand that her former games are no longer effective, that her political power is gone forever. She is no longer young and beautiful. She has lost so much of her striking looks that when Octavius enters the monument he cannot distinguish Cleopatra from her two servants. Her weapons have been destroyed by time in the very same way that Antony’s power has been ravaged by time and “dotage.” In spite of it all she tries to save herself, Egypt and her children. Nevertheless the possibility of a private deal with Octavius is destroyed by the enraged Antony when he catches her touching hands with the messenger.

Confronted with total disaster and fearing her personal safety, not only on account of Rome but due to Antony’s rage, Cleopatra tries a daring “trick” to pacify him. That proves to be her last mistake. Her “stratagem” is unsafe, so much so, that it becomes lethal for both of them. To understand Cleopatra’s true motives behind this “trick” is not at all easy. One has the feeling she should have known better and anticipated some drastic resolution on Antony’s part. When contemplating Antony’s death this becomes Cleopatra’s worse “trick:” a grave miscalculation though predictable considering her previous political manoeuvres. The consequences are dramatic. They serve to bring out a poignant contrast between Cleopatra’s death and Antony’s pitiful finale.

Antony, defeated, alone, and in despair, inspired by Cleopatra’s final gesture of true love and nobility decides to emulate her with the hope of recreating the brave Antony of former times, while paying her his last tribute of love.²⁹ Notwithstanding, Antony fails. In his failure the contrast between Cleopatra’s duplicity and Antony’s sincerity in love redeems him from his censurable flaws. The pity of it all is that we are not presented with a suitable end for Antony for he should have died on a battlefield. Nevertheless Shakespeare did not want to grant him a hero’s death. The manner of his death is emblematic of Cleopatra’s destructive power: a force capable of giving a temporary respite to Egypt.

Shakespeare, while making of Antony’s death a failure, keeps Cleopatra alive entertaining the vain hope of transforming young Octavius into another Julius Caesar, Pompey or Antony.³⁰ Thus, Antony’s desperate cry evokes pathos in the audience. To a certain point his death becomes an heroic act performed within the boundaries of Cleopatra’s raw world, a nation under Roman sway, a world that denies her the necessary respite to leave the monument to be able to pick up Antony’s body, as Isis would have done with her Osiris:

I dare not, dear
My dear lord, pardon! I dare not
Lest I be taken. Not th’ imperious show

Of the full-fortun'd Caesar ever shall
 Be brooch'd with me. If knife, drugs, serpents have
 Edge, sting, or operation, I am safe.
 Your wife Octavia, with her modest eyes
 And still conclusion, shall acquire no honour
 Demuring upon me. But, come, come, Antony!
 Help me, my women. We must draw thee up
 Assist good friends.

(IV,xv. 21-30).

Cleopatra's words induce us to question the nature of her love for Antony. On the other hand we must bear in mind her political situation and her responsibility as Egypt's queen.³¹

Antony dies forgiving her and that alone calls for an explanation. Perhaps through Cleopatra's illuminating words Antony sees in her what she is, Egypt's queen fighting Roman power in the only way she can. Hence, he not only forgives her but also pays her his final tribute with his, "I am dying Egypt", acknowledging his mistakes by accepting her as the queen of an occupied country.

Cleopatra's death is a political one, and although she could be impressed by Antony's forgiveness, it has nothing to do with love. Otherwise she would have killed herself upon Antony's body. Her death is merely an extension of her pageantry only apparently different because of the change of circumstances. Her death is her last performance, another "trick", another game to be played upon Octavius. Now, the cold nature and unconquerable posture of the young caesar demands of Cleopatra a lethal game with a different setting. Antony, in a way, dies because of Cleopatra. Cleopatra dies precisely because of her own nature and by extension because of Egypt. With Antony's death the last player in her board game has disappeared, for although she tries to manipulate Octavius she fails, and with her political failure her games come to an end. Once she loses, Cleopatra, very much like Coriolanus, will not play another's game. There is nothing left for her but to produce and direct her own death upon a glorious stage. Her game comes to life, becoming a piece of fiction within fiction: a painless death that will not affect her beauty or her queenly splendour.

Cleopatra's love words directed to Antony during her suicide scene are those of a reluctant actress working herself up to enter into the character she has forced herself to play. Symbolically speaking, Antony dies alone, recalling his past greatness while Cleopatra dies with her two servants. But both deaths are the product of a common political failure and thus of an equally common fear: Rome.

Cleopatra dies with Antony's name upon her lips. And she does so because she knows she must give to her death noble and lofty motives. Considering the uncomeliness inherent in her power games love is the best reason of them all. Cleopatra conquers the audience with her death for any audience would be moved by the sight of a woman killing herself invoking her lover's name.³² Furthermore, by moving beyond death she becomes unreachable, so defeating Octavius, an event

that Shakespeare celebrates by calculating the impact of every single detail. There is Charmian, still alive, to take care of the visual effects calculated to strike the audience by the spectacle of a great queen and a vanquished Octavius unable to parade her through the streets of Rome as the symbol of his victory. Cleopatra with her final game not only conquers Octavius and the audience but transforms poetry and drama into an impressive literary game.

Notes

1. This paper forms part of a series of essays, five altogether, dedicated to the study of Shakespeare's political plays, plus Marlowe's *Edward II*. The plays in question are: *Coriolanus*, *Edward II*, *Richard II*, *Richard III* and *Henry VI*. Taking as a starting point the concept of "game" as their poetic nucleus, the main idea is that of determining when a character is playing games through role-taking or through role-playing. See Berne, *Games People Play* (London: Penguin Books, 1984). At this point, I think, the differences between role-playing and role-taking must be defined. Role-playing does not require interaction with other, for it is a type of solitary game. As the child grows up, he enters into more complex games, conceiving himself as the potential initiator of a variety of different acts related to the acts of other human beings, developing the art of role-playing alongside role-taking. Ritchie P. Lowry and Robert P. Rankin, *Sociology: The Science of Sociology* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1969), pp. 68-69.
2. In an unpublished paper, supervised by J. Leyerle, a set of rules were codified to disclose the game and play element inherent in Courtly Love. Rules which served as the frame-work of *La Celestina*, *Il Filostrato*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. These rules had nothing to do with Andreas Capellanus's rules that appear in his work *The Art of Courtly Love*. It was a set of rules arising from a detailed analysis of the mentioned texts and derived from the variety of senses which the word "gomen" offered. This essay, "The Game and Play of Courtly Love" was expanded and became an M.A. Thesis, presented with the title of *El amor cortés y su configuración geométrica*. The essay has now been reworked for eventual publication.
3. J. Leyerle was able to codify a set of rules with the idea of giving a coherent structure to what he defined as "The Game and Play of Hero." See his article, "The Game and Play of Hero," in *Concepts of the Hero in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Norman T. Burns and Christopher Reagan (Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971), pp. 82-94.
4. J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (1938; rpt. New York: Beacon Paperback, 1972), p. 120.
5. *Ibid.* See chapter, "Nature and Significance of Play".
6. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
7. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 82-94.
8. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Random, 1976). For the senses of the word "gomen" in *The Middle English Dictionary* see J. Leyerle, "The Game and Play of Hero," p. 82. The word "juego" or "spiel" or "gióco" or even "jeu", semantically speaking offer similar senses to those of "game" or "gomen."

9. Bradley has noticed the lack of tragic notes in the first part of the play. He claims that as the play moves on, true tragic notes make their appearance becoming more and more acute as the play progresses. A.C. Bradley, "Antony and Cleopatra", *Oxford Lectures* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1909), p. 284.
10. According to G. Wilson Knight in Cleopatra "all women of legend combine." For him Cleopatra is Eve, Jezebel, Helen of Troy, Dante's Beatrice and the like. Basically he is right. Cleopatra has to be very mercurial to be able to master the art of role-taking, along with role-playing. G. Wilson Knight, *The Imperial Theme* (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1975), p. 309. See chapter III, "The Diadem of Love: an Essay on Antony and Cleopatra," *The Imperial Theme*, pp. 263-326. F.N. Dickey in *Not Wisely But Too Well* (San Marino, California: The Huntington Library, 1975), pp. 144-202, places a great emphasis upon Cleopatra's negative influence upon Antony. He claims that she can be so due to the variety of methods inherent in her moves to control him. Hazlitt was one of the very first critics to notice that the play was centred in the struggle of two powers or cultures, Rome and Egypt. His observation is important, however he should have realized that Egypt is Cleopatra. Whereas he is correct in seeing Rome as one opposing power it would be more accurate to refer to Cleopatra rather than Egypt as its opposite. See William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817, rpt. London: Macmillan and Co., 1920).
11. A number of critics have noticed Cleopatra's moody character. One of the best studies of Cleopatra's passionate character is that of G. Wilson Knight. For him she is a rather well-controlled person, but, at times, she has reactions which can be defined as hysterical. See G. Wilson Knight, *op. cit.*
12. From the very beginning of the play we have a Cleopatra with her "man-eating instincts," which tell her the best strategy to undermine her opponents' morale. Matthew N. Proser, *The Heroic Image in Five Shakespearian Tragedies* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 190. See chapter IV, pp. 171-235.
13. "Between the first divorce of Henry VIII and the rise of Oliver Cromwell, one art which was taken very seriously was the art of dying. Flourishing in times of despotism, reckless ambition and religious persecutions, this art enables men to face sudden death with a steadfast countenance and so snatch a kind of victory in the moment of total defeat." T. Mc Alindon, *Shakespeare and Decorum* (London: Macmillan Press, 1973), p. 167.
14. Cleopatra is very aware of her position. Again and again she exclaims, "As I am Egypt's queen." Antony is also aware she is a queen and thus he calls her "my queen." For Irving Ribner in Cleopatra, we have a symbol of lust and treachery, an awe-inspiring and majestic queen and the faithful martyr taken from Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*. Irving Ribner, *Patterns in Shakespearian Tragedy* (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1971), pp. 170-71. See also chapter eight, "The Final Paradox," pp. 168-202.
15. Too much has been made of love's theme in this play. Perhaps due to Dryden's *All for Love*, love seems to be the predominant interest. Let us look at what Derek Traversi has to say in *Shakespeare; The Roman Plays* (London: Hollins and Carter, 1976), p. 79: "The student, sooner or later, finds himself faced by two possible readings of the play. Is *Antony and Cleopatra*, to put the matter in other terms, a tragedy of lyrical inspiration presenting the relationship of its central figures as triumphant over adverse circumstances or is it rather a pitiless exposure through wilful surrender to passion?" See chapters III and IV, pp. 79-207. E.E. Stoll in *Art and Artifice in Shakespeare* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1933), p. 176, also concentrates on the theme of love. For him the type of love that unites them is greater than their own natures. Also, too many studies have been made related to the symbolism of the Nile.

16. Stirling Brents notes that "emulation is a ruling motive in the death of Antony. At the same time he will learn that one of the deaths he tried to imitate in completing his own tragedy was the pseudo-death in a bad tragi-comedy improvised by Cleopatra." S. Brents, "Cleopatra's Scene with Seleucus", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, XV (Spring 1964: 299-311), p. 305. According to G. Wilson Knight, all of them "die at the height of love or loyalty." *Op. cit.*, p. 266.
17. Many critics tend to see Cleopatra as a harlot. This attitude brings problems when one has to see the play as a whole. Thus they tend to solve the problem by claiming that the woman who is presented throughout most of the play has nothing to do with the queen who undertakes such a noble death. For Levin Schücking, for example, her death is too glorious when contrasted with what she is, a scheming harlot using sex for insidious purposes. L. Schücking, *Character Problems in Shakespeare's Plays* (London: George G. Harrap and Co., 1922), p. 132. For Irving Ribner, *op. cit.*, p. 178, "Octavia represents an ideal of womanhood against which the abandonment of Cleopatra to unlawful passion may be measured."
18. The concept of Cleopatra as "la mujer serpiente" appears even in modern studies about the psychology of sex. "La mujer virgen, casta e inapetente para el pecado, es lo opuesto a lo demoníaco femenino; serpiente del Nilo se le llamó a Cleopatra." Pedro Cava, *Los Sexos, el Amor y la Historia*, 2 vols. (Barcelona: Ediciones S.L.C., 1947), pp. 46 and 48.
19. J.L. Simmons, "Antony and Cleopatra and Coriolanus, Shakespeare's Heroic Tragedies," *Shakespeare Survey*, ed. Kenneth Muir, vol. 26 (Cambridge at the University Press, 1973), p. 95.
20. *Coriolanus* is a magnificent study of inflexibility. He is another Grotowskian Constant Prince, another Père Goriot or another King Lear. Coriolanus, unlike Richard II and Edward II, undertakes role-taking rather than role-playing, but his role becomes enervating precisely because of its consistency.
21. "Cleopatra's theatrical fears, therefore, are symptomatic of a moral comprehensiveness achieved by a playwright manipulating a diverse audience with diverse points of view." Simmons, "Antony and Cleopatra and Coriolanus, Shakespeare's Heroic Tragedies," *op. cit.*, p. 101.
22. According to Matthew N. Proser, *op. cit.*, p. 234, "Cleopatra's art, like Shakespeare, is drama, is poetry and is nature too. Caesar may win Egypt; comedy may criticize her. But as it turns out, Cleopatra's artistry, makes her queen of policy and queen of comedy as well. Everything is in her." During his discussion of Cleopatra and her relationship with Isis, M. Lloyd points out a martial element in Cleopatra. This association arises from the fact that Bellona was Venus's servant. Nevertheless, he has overlooked Isis's role as the keeper of Egypt and the fact that in the figure of Isis there are socio-political implications. After all, through Isis's revival of the dying god and her subsequent sexual union Egypt maintains its fertility. Therefore, Cleopatra as Isis, must take another male as soon as her partner dies. Thus, once she cannot bring Antony to life through the young Octavius she has no longer the needed power to maintain Egypt's life. Thus, she must die to be with her husband, now dead for ever. Michael Lloyd, "Cleopatra as Isis," *Shakespeare Survey*, ed. Kenneth Muir, vol. 12 (Cambridge at the University Press, 1959), p. 89.
23. "One might imagine Hamlet taking Cleopatra as his mistress, we can certainly not imagine him becoming her fool, or anyone else's for that matter, or shift Othello into Antony's place when he married Octavia. Can we conceive of Othello's abandonment of her, after he had sworn to take her?" Roland Mushat Frye, *Shakespeare the Art of the Dramatist* (London: George and Unwin, 1982), pp. 118-119. Obviously Enobarbus could conceive such a thing and thus he tells him to stay in Egypt.

24. "Cleopatra appeals to Antony as though she were Isis, the goddess of love." *Ibid.*, p. 239.
25. Antony's idea was to return to Cleopatra. Thus, the way he plays up to Octavius's wishes serves, by comparison, to bring out the consistency of Cleopatra's games.
26. "The sense of triumph which the play engenders springs from its immense daring, which, if it were not ultimately made good would be mere defiance". Sigmund Buckhardt, "The Kings Language": , Shakespeare's Drama as Social Discovery," *Antioch Review*, XXI (Fall 1961: 369-387), p. 385. Basically it is "ultimately made good" if we accept Cleopatra as the queen who is trying to overcome the ruling power. What we question is her method. Nevertheless there is nothing new in regard to this problem. Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* offers the very same problem to the reader.
27. See Marie Axton, *The Queen's Two Bodies and the Elizabethan Succession* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1977). Also Ernst H. Kanterowicz, *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).
28. As far as Cleopatra's betrayal is concerned critics do not agree. According to Irving Ribner, *op. cit.*, p. 181, "she is a treacherous creature." For Derek Traversi, although she is very calculating there is no real answer to the charge of betrayal. *Op. cit.*, p. 152.
29. John Holloway in *The Story of the Night* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961) also makes some remarks related to the element of emulation in the play discussed by Stirling Brents.
30. The monument scene has puzzled a number of critics. For example, David S. Berkeley is concerned with Antony's advice to Cleopatra before he dies (IV,xv. 46-48). He considers the possibility of an Antony trying to deceive Cleopatra, perhaps seeking revenge. Also he wonders if his advice is merely a sign of misjudgement of character, certainly one of his more prevalent traits. D.S. Berkeley, "On Oversimplifying Antony," *College English*, XVII (Nov. 1955: 96-99), p. 98. Miss Cynthia Grill rejects the possibility that Antony is willfully trying to trick Cleopatra. For her to do so would mean to have an Antony acting entirely out of character. C. Grill, "Antony, Cleopatra and Proculeius," *Notes and Queries*, VII, New Series (Jan. 1960), p. 191.
31. Many critics seem to be bewildered by Cleopatra's behaviour during Antony's death scene. For Bernard Jenkins "The reference to Caesar and Octavia seems out of place and callous. Her next speech, 'here's sport indeed' seems overdone and boisterous. Much that is said, up to this point, is too intimate to be shouted from stage to balcony, and Antony, poor man, is kept waiting too long before he is drawn up." He suggests that there were two versions of the scene that got into the first folio in a confused form. D.S. Berkeley, "Antony and Cleopatra: Some Suggestions on the Monument Scene," *Review of English Studies*, XXI (Jan. 1945: 1-14), p. 2.
32. "The death of Cleopatra, which closes the play, is greeted by the reader with sympathy and admiration, even with exultation at the thought that she has foiled Octavius and thus feelings are heightened by the deaths of Charmian and Iras, heroically faithful to their mistress." A.C. Bradley, *op. cit.*, p. 65.