



HAL
open science

”Excellent falsehood”: Secrecy and the Politics of Eros in Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra

Marie-Christine Isabelle Munoz

► **To cite this version:**

Marie-Christine Isabelle Munoz. ”Excellent falsehood”: Secrecy and the Politics of Eros in Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra. 2011. halshs-00767129

HAL Id: halshs-00767129

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00767129>

Preprint submitted on 20 Dec 2012

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

RSA MONTRÉAL

PANEL SHAKESPEARE AND SECRECY

Marie-Christine Munoz

"Excellent falsehood": Secrecy and the Politics of Eros in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*

In Shakespeare's tragedy of mature love, secrecy may be seen as the central asset of the "earthly Venus." Cleopatra's expert handling of secrecy through her endless shifts of identity, constantly defies the gaze of the spectator onstage or in the audience and denies the possibility of full vision. Relying as she does on the tricks and secrets of her erotic trade, she not only achieves political goals while enmeshing her beloved Antony, but she also blurs the definitions of genre and gender. Cleopatra eludes definition throughout the play thereby eliciting a multiplicity of representations from all the other characters. Playing on secrecy appears to be the quintessential trump card of the multifarious Egyptian queen. This paper will endeavor to explore the complexity of Cleopatra's "excellent falsehood" — her secret strategies of love, lust and power — as a significant component of the play's poetics and dramatization against Plutarch's morally upright account.

INTRODUCTION

In Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*¹ the character of Cleopatra has always been considered by critics, spectators and even other characters of the play, particularly the Romans, as a cypher reminiscent of the Egyptian hieroglyphics that exerted such a fascination on the playwright's contemporaries ever since the publication of Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica* in 1419. She is the 'secret' and coded character of the play, calling for interpretation. Extraordinary character to be noted, admired, anatomized, she is constantly under scrutiny in the play, under the 'gaze' of the Romans — by hearsay or report from different characters more than by direct contemplation —, of her Egyptian courtiers, of her temperamental lover and of the spectators in the theatre house. Her versatile identity, whether synonymous of « the

¹ All references to the play are taken from *The Oxford Shakespeare Antony and Cleopatra*, (Oxford World's Classics, Oxford University Press : 1994).

Shakespeare's tragedy of mature love between two cultural icons plays constantly on the spectacular/specular nature of their identities.

My purpose in this paper is to examine closely Cleopatra's « excellent falsehood » against the topical backdrop of the early modern pamphlets against the theatre (Gosson *The School of Abuse* 1579, Stubbes *Anatomy of Abuses* 1583, Northbrooke *A Treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine Plaies or Enterludes with other idle pastimes... are reproved* 1579, Prynne *Histrionomastix* 1633) and the controversy over women (Joseph Swetnam, *The Arraignment of Lewde, Idle, froward and unconstant woman* 1615, Rachel Speght, *A Mouzell for Melastomas, The Cynical Bayter of and foule mouthed Barker against Evahs Sex* 1617, Ester Sowernam, *Ester hath hang'd Haman : or an Answere to a lewd Pamphlet entituled, The Arraignment of Women* 1617, with references to the first defence of women by Jane Anger, *Jane Anger her Protection for Women* 1589), in order to show that the histrionic strategy of deceit and erotic manipulation developed by Shakespeare's heroine is grounded in topical debates over the dangers of the theatre, while allowing the playwright to question the validity of such a position.

I will also study the anamorphic treatment of the representation of the Egyptian queen, for it fosters a conflation of mythical and more prosaic images intended to lure and seduce the spectator, while disclosing the quintessential 'secret' of a character who specifically defies representation. This study will relate Shakespeare secretive device to the early modern taste for specular contraptions and particularly for anamorphic insertions in stately paintings.

THE WAR AGAINST VENUS' TEMPLE

Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* dramatizes somehow self-consciously the mythical love relationship of the Roman general and the Egyptian queen, in the topical context of the « antitheatrical prejudice » according to Jonas Barish's phrase⁴, that is to say the unrelenting attacks against the players and the playhouses that rose in the last decades of the sixteenth century, after the publication of the very influential pamphlets of John Northbrooke's⁵ and Philip Stubbes'⁶, and climaxed with the dissolution of the stage in 1642.

Such pamphlets emphasized the risk of impurity and contamination for theatregoers since they played blurred all sexual distinctions with the casting of boy actors as female characters :

(p. 53) It is written in the aa of Deuteronomie, that man fo euer a curse to weareth womans apparel is accursed, and that woman weareth weare co uary mans apparel is accused also. [...] Apparell was giuen us as a singe distinctiue to discern betwixt sex and sex, therefore one to weare the Apparell of another sex is to participate with the same, and to adulterate the verities of his owne kinde. Wherefore these Women may not improperly be called Hermaphroditi, that is, Monsters of bothe kindes, half women, half Hermaphroditi. (Phillip Stubbes, *Anatomy of the Abuses in England in Shakespeare's Youth*, A. D. 1583, facsimile from the New Shakespeare Society, 1877, London)

Plays were decried as highly subversive shows fostering social havoc by subverting commonly admitted values according to the reformed precepts that regulated Elizabethan and Jacobean societies. Theatrehouses allowed all types of spectators to mingle, thereby enticing the honest Christian spectator to sinful behaviours, according to William Prynne's *Histrionmastix* (London 1633) :

(p. 86) Spectators at the theater, for example, are « *Adulterers, Adulteresses, Whore-Masters, Whores, Bawdes, Panders, Ruffians, Roarers, Drunkards*, [p. 87] *Prodigals, Cheaters, idle, infamous, base, prophane, and godlesse persons, who hate all grace, all goodnesse, and make a mocke of piety* » (Sig. V). Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, (University of California Press : Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1981)

The fiercest attack against the theatre in early modern England stigmatized what was perceived as the idolatrous nature of plays, transgressing God's law :

In Gosson, plays being « consecrated to idolatrie, they are not of God [;] if they proceede not from God, they are the doctrine and inventions of the devill. » (Stephen Gosson, *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* (1582) in Kinney, *Markets of Bawdrie*, p. 151, quoted in Barish, p. 89.)

⁴ Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, (University of California Press : Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1981)

⁵ John Northbrooke, *A Treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine Plaies or Enterludes with other idle pastimes... are reprovved* (London, 1579), Sig. L.

⁶ Philip Stubbes's *Anatomy of the Abuses in England in Shakespeare's Youth*, A.D. 1583, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, New Shakespere Society (London, 1877-79), p. x (Sigs. 5^v-6, A Preface to the Reader).

And one of the most recurring criticisms against plays in Elizabethan and Jacobean pamphlets, expressed a fear of yielding to womanish allurements that flattered the senses of the spectators and enticed them to committing the sin of fornication :

(p. 22) [about Plutarch and the Ancient Romans] There set they a broche straunge consortes of melodie to tickle the eare, costly apparrell to flatter the sight, effeminate gesture to ravish the sence, and wanton speache to whette desire to inordinate lust. Stephen Gosson, *The School of Abuse, containing a pleasant invective against poets, pipers, players, jesters & c.*, facsimile of the 1841 edition by the Shakespeare Society, (London : The Elibron Classics, 1841, 2005)

Such pamphlets highlighted what Jyotsna Singh very aptly called « the erotics of dramatic performance »⁷. The use of cosmetics was criticized as the visible sign of the blurring of the natural appearance conveyed by God to his creatures, so that it allowed a confusion of gender particularly harmful to the innocent gaze of the spectator :

« Our Apparell, » says Stubbes, « was given us as a signe distinctive to discern betwixt sex and sex, & therefore one to weare the Apparel of another sex is to participate with the same, and to adulterate the veritie of his own kinde. Wherefore these Women may not improperly be called *Hermaphroditi*, that is, Monsters of bothe kindes, half women, half men. » (*Anatomy*, ed. Furnivall, p. 73 (Sig. F5^v), quoted in Barish, p. 92)

This particular point is of high interest to our reading of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* since it debunks the very histrionic nature of the character of the Egyptian queen, whose erotic secrets rely on the artifice of the stage. Moreover, being the archetypal seductress, the mythical Oriental courtesan, for most of the other characters in the play, she emblemizes the peril of carnal desire as defined by the ministers of the Elizabethan and the Jacobean Church of England :

(p. 85) *Youth*. Doe you speake against those places also, whiche are made uppe and builded for such playes and enterludes, as the *Theatre and Curtaine* is, and other such lyke places besides ?
Age. Yea, truly ; for I am persuaded that Satan hath [p. 86] not a more speedie way, and fitter schoole to work and teach his desire, to bring men and women into his snare of concupiscence and filthie lustes of wicked whoredome, than those places, and playes, and theatres are ; and therefore necessarie that those places, and players, shoulde be forbidden, and dissolued, and put downe by authoritie, as the brothell houses and stewes are.

[p. 89] for these playes be instruments, and armour of Venus and Cupide, and, to saye good soothe, what safeguard of charitie can there be where the woman is desired with so many eyes, where so many faces looke upon hir, and againe she uppon so manye ? John Northbrooke, *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes : With Other Idle Pastimes*, 1577, facsimile The Shakespeare Society, 1843, London

Such a brief survey of the main tenets of the attacks against the theatre in Shakespeare's day should be connected to the controversy over women that raged in England at the end of Elizabeth's reign and flourished during the first decades of the Jacobean era. Indeed the prevailing defiance against female allurements and duplicity allows both themes to coalesce

⁷ Jyotsna Singh, « Renaissance Antitheatricality, Antifeminism, and Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, » in *Renaissance Drama*, vol. XX, 1990, pp. 99-121, here p. 116.

in contemporary pamphlets : Pompey's libelling of the Egyptian queen as a creature in which « witchcraft join with beauty, lust with both » (2.1.22) reflects the permeability of female seduction with histrionic jesting. Both are to be condemned since they could threaten the whole social structure by fostering transgressive behaviours. And Shakespeare's Cleopatra is the quintessence of versatility since she is constantly depicted as a Protean figure, notable for her « infinite variety » (2.2.240-41), to the point of blurring gender definitions in her game of cross-dressing where she becomes another Omphale ruling over a lover turned into another Hercules, or else another armed Venus victorious over Mars (2.5.18-23). Singh speaks of the transferrance to actors of the « stereotype of women as duplicitous seducers » (p. 116), which seems particularly accurate regarding the character of Cleopatra whose represented identity throughout the play relies essentially on the cultural preconception that she is the archetypal seductress of the Mediterranean world.

The detractors of female seductive secrets target the fashions they adopt in order to increase their attractiveness, as Gosson illustrates in his pamphlet *Pleasant quippes for upstart newfangled gentlewomen* (London, 1596) : « these painted faces which they [women] weare,/ can any tell from when they cam ?/ Don Satan, Lord of fayned lyes,/ All these new fangles did devise » (5). Joseph Swetnam echoes this criticism by harping on female natural hypocrisy in *The Arraingment of Lewd, froward, idle and unconstant women* (London, 1615) : « [women] are in shape Angels but in qualities Devils'... They have myriad devices to entice, bewitch, and deceive men » (205). Such fears about the enticing play-acting of 'real life' women or actors embodying female characters permeated the minds of the spectators watching the seductive pranks of Cleopatra, to the point of colouring the perception of the opposition between Rome and Egypt. The « melting » contours of the Nile figured out metonymically the transgressive influence of women as well as of the boy-actor impersonating this paragon of femininity.

CLEOPATRA'S ANAMORPHOSES

Cleopatra's secret relies on the well-mastered art of anamorphosis as exemplified in Enobarbus's ekphrasis of her regal pageant that « made a gap in Nature », in act 2 scene 2, lines 197 to 212. Such a void at the core of the narrative painting of her godly progress emblemizes the sheer impossibility to represent her character in its entirety. In this same scene, Cleopatra's tentative and yet consummate depiction reflects the oxymoronic nature of the character in the play since she calls for representation and yet eludes it : « For her own person, / It beggared all description » (2.2.204-205).

Shakespeare suggests that the whole secret strategy of his emblematic seductress lies in a game of hide and seek, alternating moments of deliberate exposure in an exaggerated impersonation of Cleopatra, the cultural icon, and moments of concealments of her private self, nevertheless disclosed to the spectators' gaze. She is the ultimate actress, constantly defying the gaze of the spectators while mesmerizing them all the same. An example of this process is to be found in act 1, scene 2, lines 145 to 150, when Enobarbus unravels her secret ability to acquire mythical stature while expressing human passions :

[...] her passions are made of
 nothing but the finest part of pure love. We cannot call
 her winds and waters sighs and tears : they are greater
 storms and tempests than almanacs can report. This
 cannot be cunning in her ; if it be, she makes a shower
 of rain as well as Jove.

What seems particularly striking in this description of her alleged sincerity in love is the art with which her passion blurs gender distinctions, turning Cleopatra into an impregnating Jove. Not only is she acting her passions on a grand scale but she also succeeds in hiding her innermost truth by swapping parts with the father of gods. Another fleeting appearance hides her 'gypsy' emotions while Enobarbus' comment exposes her histrionic skill for the benefit of the spectator.

By conflating myths Shakespeare succeeds in creating a kaleidoscopic representation of Cleopatra as an emblematic actress, shifting identities according to the reflexions narrated by her spectators within the world of the play. She keeps shifting identities from Venus, to Omphale, to Isis or Dido, thereby conjuring up a host of evocations related to the classical myths Shakespeare preys on. In a very perceptive reading of the play, Carol Cooks writes that

« the mystique of Cleopatra *is* precisely her variety, her evasion of fixity. »⁸ She is the metonymic extension of a character whose contours can never be circumscribed : « [she] is only the figure or sign of that infinite Cleopatra who cannot be represented in the finitude of the theater. » (Cooks)

The anamorphic insertions of hidden representations of the Egyptian queen allow Shakespeare to play on the perception and the reception of his audience, so that spectators grasp the complexity of the character of Cleopatra while watching her performance and listening to the inserted comments by other characters. This dramatic pattern is highly characteristic of a work whose development relies on the interplay between these different mimetic levels.

CONCLUSION

CLEOPATRA AND THE SUBLIME

Kant's vision of the sublime as an experience of the infinity of desire and imagination casts an interesting light on Enobarbus's representation of Cleopatra's progress on her barge : such a yearning for infinity never satisfied fosters a sensation of aesthetic pleasure tinted with the pain of perpetual dissatisfaction. This later conceptualisation of the tension between pleasure and pain experienced by the spectator may be after all the 'secret' of Cleopatra's mesmerizing power over her audience : the fascinating hold of mixed emotions. Shakespeare's elusive icon of seduction and femininity is most certainly an instance of the sublime.

⁸ Carol Cook, « The Fatal Cleopatra » in Shirley Nelson Garner and Madelon Sprengnether eds., *Shakespearean Tragedy and Gender*, (1996), p. 261