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# "Narcissus in thy face": Roman Desire and the Difference it Fakes in *Antony and Cleopatra*

JONATHAN GIL HARRIS

But what if the Devil, on the contrary, the Other, were the Same? And what if the Temptation was not one of the episodes of the great antagonism, but the mere insinuation of the Double? What if this duel developed in the space of the mirror?

Michel Foucault<sup>1</sup>

THIS ESSAY EXAMINES THE RELATION BETWEEN ELIZABETHAN versions of Ovid's Narcissus myth and Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. In doing so, it may seem to tiptoe through that tired terrain which Stephen Greenblatt has termed "the elephants' graveyard of literary history"<sup>2</sup>—source study. I do not intend to suggest that Shakespeare had read contemporary versions of the myth, although there are a number of telltale fingerprints in the play—borrowed phrases, motifs—suggesting this may have been the case. Rather I wish to use the tale of Narcissus to reread *Antony and Cleopatra* in a way that challenges orthodox understandings of gender difference in the play, in particular the status of Cleopatra as the quintessentially female object and origin of heterosexual desire—both the desire of her Roman suitors and, perhaps just as important, the desire of her heterosexual male spectators and readers, past and present. Hence this essay engages in "source" study of another kind: a critical reappraisal of the source of heterosexual eros in Elizabethan versions of the Narcissus myth as well as in Shakespeare's play.

## I

Criticism of *Antony and Cleopatra* has repeatedly returned to Shakespeare's representations of Rome and Egypt, a topographical and cultural opposition that is undeniably central to the play. Much attention

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, "La Prose d'Actéon," *Nouvelle Revue Française* 12 (1964): 444: "Mais si le Diable, au contraire, si l'Autre était la Même? Et si la Tentation n'était pas un des épisodes du grand antagonisme, mais la mince insinuation du Double? Si le duel se déroulait dans un espace de miroir?" (translation mine).

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, "Shakespeare and the Exorcists" in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman, eds. (New York, 1985), 163. I do not propose to reopen the debate over the nature and extent of Ovid's influence on *Antony and Cleopatra*; a useful summary of the various critical positions and conjectures on this issue is offered in *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. Marvin Spevack (New York, 1990), 594–95.

has been devoted to showing how, in contrast to Rome's "measure" and Lenten restraint, Egypt is represented as a land of excess in the thrall of an endless Bacchanal.<sup>3</sup> What is perhaps most notable about many past accounts of the Rome/Egypt opposition, however, is the extent to which these accounts have also elaborated an absolute gender polarity or, more accurately, a gender hierarchy. Rome has been characterized as a male world, presided over by the austere Caesar, and Egypt as a female domain, embodied by a Cleopatra who is seen to be as abundant, leaky, and changeable as the Nile. Significantly, it is this changeability, manifest in her legendary "infinite variety" (2.2.236), that has prompted critics such as George Brandes to style Cleopatra somewhat negatively as "the woman of women, quintessentiated Eve."<sup>4</sup> Within this disparaging assessment of Cleopatra as the archetype of a fallen femininity, there lurks a fascination with her as the irrepressible origin of male desire. For example, G. Wilson Knight's notorious observation that "Cleopatra and her girls at Alexandria are as the Eternal Femininity waiting for Man" is accompanied by the claim that she is "all romantic vision, the origin of love, the origin of life."<sup>5</sup> Whether viewed as the wily perpetrator of original sin or the redemptive source of romantic love, Cleopatra has been cast within literary criticism as the Ur-Woman, the archetypally female origin of male heterosexual eros.

<sup>3</sup> Both old and new criticisms have abided by this basic opposition. For an instance of the former, see George Brandes, *William Shakespeare: A Critical Study*, trans. William Archer, Mary Morison, and Diana White (London, 1902): "Just as Antony's ruin results from his connection with Cleopatra, so does the fall of the Roman Republic result from the contact of the simple hardihood of the West with the luxury of the East. Antony is Rome. Cleopatra is the Orient" (475). Modern feminist readings of the play informed by psychoanalytic perspectives have critically reevaluated the topographical opposition—and the gender opposition with which it has often been complicit—without necessarily disturbing it. Janet Adelman, for example, construes the opposition between Rome and Egypt as a struggle between "male scarcity and female bounty" in *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest* (New York, 1992), 177; see also her earlier study, *The Common Liar: An Essay on Antony and Cleopatra* (New Haven, CT, 1973). Edward Said's critique of European orientalism has enabled powerful analyses of the opposition's complicity with early modern colonialist discourse; see, for example, Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester, UK, 1989): "in colonialist discourse, the conquered land is often explicitly endowed with feminine characteristics in contrast to the masculine attributes of the coloniser. . . . All Egyptians, represented and symbolised by their queen, are associated with feminine and primitive attributes—they are irrational, sensuous, lazy and superstitious" (78–79).

<sup>4</sup> Brandes, 462. The tendency of critics in the first half of the twentieth century to view Cleopatra and Antony's relationship as an agon that has mythic analogues in the tales of Venus and Mars or Omphale and Hercules has doubtless contributed to the critical willingness to view both characters as archetypes of their sexes. For a summary of such archetypal readings of Antony and Cleopatra, see Spevack, ed., 655–60. Feminist criticism of the play has questioned Cleopatra's archetypal "femininity": Janet Adelman, for instance, argues that Cleopatra is not simply Omphale subduing the Herculean Antony but also the androgynous figure of *Venus armata* (*The Common Liar*, 92). For other discussions of the way in which Cleopatra problematizes rather than embodies "femininity," see Clare Kinney, "The Queen's Two Bodies and the Divided Emperor: Some Problems of Identity in *Antony and Cleopatra*" in *The Renaissance Englishwoman in Print: Counterbalancing the Canon*, Anne M. Haselkorn and Betty S. Travitsky, eds. (Amherst, MA, 1990), 177–86; and Jyotsna Singh, "Renaissance Antitheatricality, Antifeminism, and Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*," *Renaissance Drama* N.S. 20 (1990): 99–121. All quotations of *Antony and Cleopatra* follow the Arden Shakespeare, ed. M. R. Ridley (London, 1954). Quotations of all other Shakespeare plays follow the *Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> G. Wilson Knight, *The Imperial Theme: Further Interpretations of Shakespeare's Tragedies* (London, 1950), 297 and 304.

Not surprisingly, more recent criticism has taken issue with such sexist interpretations of Cleopatra and her "quintessentiated" femininity.<sup>6</sup> In the wake of feminist, poststructuralist, and cultural-materialist critiques of gender essentialism, most modern Shakespeare scholars are inclined to be far more skeptical about claims that Shakespeare possessed a unique insight into a timeless "femininity." Nevertheless, despite the historicizing impulse that has rescued Cleopatra from the negative pole of an oppressively essentialist gender opposition, much criticism continues to abide by the gendered topographical binaries that dominate romantic and formalist interpretations of the play.<sup>7</sup> In a powerful reading that undermines many of the conventional assumptions about Cleopatra's "femininity," Janet Adelman claims, for example, that "the contest between Caesar and Cleopatra, Rome and Egypt, is in part a contest between male scarcity and female bounty."<sup>8</sup> Leonard Tennenhouse asserts that "Cleopatra is Egypt," and that by virtue of her difference from patriarchal Roman "measure," "she embodies everything that is not English according to the nationalism which developed under Elizabeth as well as to the British nationalism later fostered by James. . . . She contrasts Egyptian fecundity, luxury and hedonism to Rome's penury, harshness and self denial."<sup>9</sup> I would argue that the play is far less secure in asserting the differences that Adelman's and Tennenhouse's assessments seem to uphold. While Cleopatra may appear to incarnate everything exotic and bountifully "feminine," the play suggests at crucial moments that the relationships between Egypt and Rome, Cleopatra and Antony, are less ones of opposition than of specularity—a specularity that, as we shall see, parallels and even critically interrogates the historically specific relation between the Cleopatra of the play's first performances and her Jacobean audience.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For a useful summary of the assumptions that have dominated discussions of Cleopatra, see L. T. Fitz, "Egyptian Queens and Male Reviewers: Sexist Attitudes in *Antony and Cleopatra* Criticism," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 28 (1977): 297–316. See also Malcolm Evans, *Signifying Nothing: Truth's True Contents in Shakespeare's Text* (Brighton, UK, 1986), in which he attempts to retrieve Cleopatra's "infinite variety" from those who would morally reconstrue it as a representative "feminine" inconstancy. Assessing the conventional interpretations of Cleopatra's variety, Evans concludes that "the hint here of another discourse, one which may disturb the 'truth' of the patriarchal order, is, however, recuperated for that order by the firm attributions that trail behind this figure—the 'woman's wiles,' 'female enchantment,' etc." (165).

<sup>7</sup> There have been a number of notable exceptions. Critics who have challenged the gender binaries of the play, albeit from very different standpoints, include Constance Brown Kuriyama, "The Mother of the World: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*," *English Literary Renaissance* 7 (1977): 324–51; Murray M. Schwartz, "Shakespeare through Contemporary Psychoanalysis" in *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn, eds. (Baltimore, MD, 1980), 21–32; Madelon Gohlke, "'I wooed thee with my sword': Shakespeare's Tragic Paradigms" in Schwartz and Kahn, eds., 170–87; Peter Erickson, *Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare's Drama* (Berkeley, CA, 1985), esp. 131–33; Jonathan Dollimore, "Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism, Feminism and Marxist Humanism," *New Literary History* 21 (1990): 471–93; Singh, esp. 99–100, 114–16; Theodora A. Jankowski, *Women in Power in the Early Modern Drama* (Urbana, IL, 1992), esp. 156–60; and Valerie Traub, *Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama* (London, 1992), esp. 134, 142.

<sup>8</sup> Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, 177.

<sup>9</sup> Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* (London, 1986), 144.

<sup>10</sup> In foregrounding the specularity of the play's female Egyptian and male Roman characters, my argument owes a substantial debt to Luce Irigaray's analysis of male constructions of

Instances of specularity recur throughout the play. Gnaeus Pompey "would stand and make his eyes grow in . . . [Cleopatra's] brow" (1.5.2); Caesar fills the front line of his army with deserters from Antony's army, so that the latter would "seem to spend his fury / Upon himself" (4.6.10–11); the defeated Antony sees himself reflected in the changing clouds of the Egyptian sky (4.14.1–14); the triumphant Caesar glimpses himself in the "spacious mirror" of Antony's demise (5.1.33). The self-scrutinizing gaze of Rome's triumvirs is thus obliquely but suggestively aligned with that of Narcissus, rapt in contemplation of his reflection on the surface of Ovid's spring.<sup>11</sup> Yet critics have more customarily, albeit indirectly, associated Narcissus with Cleopatra and her quintessential "femininity." If essentialist interpretations have regarded Cleopatra's *lack* of coherent selfhood, her inconstancy, as characteristic of her "sex," there has also been a paradoxical tendency to emphasize her excessive *love* of self as a uniquely "feminine" quality. For example, Anna Jameson in 1832 noted "her *consistent inconsistency*" yet lambasted her "love of self."<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Schlegel noted Cleopatra's narcissistic "royal pride [and] female vanity."<sup>13</sup> A. C. Bradley drew attention to Cleopatra's "comic vanity" in the tirade against the messenger,<sup>14</sup> which contains the play's one explicit reference to Narcissus: "Hadst thou Narcissus in thy face, to me / Thou wouldst appear most ugly" (2.5.96–97). Cleopatra invokes Narcissus here primarily to contrast his surpassing beauty with the ugliness of the messenger's shocking news about Antony's marriage to Octavia; but the allusion serves also as a sly reminder of Cleopatra's own narcissism, displayed in her insistence earlier in the scene that the messenger tell her only what she wants to hear, even if it deviates from the truth. She berates the messenger precisely because he does not have Narcissus in his face: he has failed to reflect her desire.<sup>15</sup>

Curiously, however, other moments in the play suggest that Cleopatra has less in common with Narcissus than with his reflection. When Enobarbus says of her "she makes hungry / Where most she satisfies" (2.2.237–38), he reprises an important motif in early modern English versions of the Narcissus myth. In Ovid's text Narcissus stares hungrily at his reflection in the spring and, trying in vain to kiss it, utters "*inopem me copia fecit*"—"My very

the feminine Other as the self-same; see her *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY, 1985), especially "Any Theory of the 'Subject' Has Always Been Appropriated by the 'Masculine,'" 133–46.

<sup>11</sup> Shakespeare hints at Roman rulers' capacity for self-knowledge through specular encounter also in *Julius Caesar*, when Cassius tells Brutus that "since you know you cannot see yourself / So well as by reflection, I, your glass, / Will modestly discover to yourself / That of yourself which you yet know not of" (1.2.66–69).

<sup>12</sup> Anna Jameson, *Shakespeare's Heroines: Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical, and Historical*, 2d ed. (London, 1833), 256 and 271.

<sup>13</sup> August W. von Schlegel, *A Course on Dramatic Art and Literature*, trans. John Black, rev. A. J. W. Morrison (London, 1846), 416.

<sup>14</sup> A. C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London, 1909), 299.

<sup>15</sup> Arguably, such a reading of Cleopatra's narcissistic pride acquires weight from the play's insistent identification of her with "crocodiles" and "serpents" of the Nile, creatures associated not only with deception and temptation but also with pride. One may recall the third verse of Spenser's "Visions of the Worlds Vanitie": "Beside the fruitfull shore of muddie Nile, / Vpon a sunnie banke outstretched lay / In monstrous length, a mightie Crocodile, / That . . . Thought all thinges lesse than his disdainful pride" (*The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition*, ed. E. Greenlaw et al., 9 vols. [Baltimore, MD, 1932–49], 8:175).

plenty makes me poor" (*Metamorphoses* III, l. 466).<sup>16</sup> Tudor and Stuart writers reworked this line to emphasize the thirst or hunger-inducing insubstantiality of the narcissistic reflection. Edmund Spenser compared his own gaze to that of "Narcissus vaine / whose eyes him staru'd: so plenty makes me poore."<sup>17</sup> In Henry Reynolds's 1630 *Mythomystes*, Narcissus is described as growing "thirsty as his thirst he slakes."<sup>18</sup> And in Thomas Edwards's 1595 poem "Narcissus," to which I shall soon return in greater detail, Narcissus complains of his reflection that "Neuer the greedie Tantalus pursued, / To touch those seeming apples more than I."<sup>19</sup> Cleopatra is thus accorded by Enobarbus the paradoxical power of the narcissistic reflection—like the reflection, she is depicted as possessing both an ineluctable power to "make hungry" and a frustrating insubstantiality. To this extent Cleopatra may appear to conform to the conventional misogynist archetype of the "hard-to-get" temptress, an assessment endorsed by critics like Knight with his reading of Cleopatra as the "Eternal Femininity waiting for Man." But I shall argue that the identification of Cleopatra with the hunger-inducing satisfaction of the narcissistic reflection generates resonances that seriously disrupt the essentialist perception of her as the "Eternal Femininity."

## II

The motif of the hunger-inducing reflection was just one feature of the many appropriations of the Narcissus myth in early modern England.<sup>20</sup> In addition to Arthur Golding's English translation of Ovid's entire *Metamorphoses* in 1567, there were a number of versions of the tale in wide circulation before 1630. Most united in condemning Narcissus for his pride; he was, according to both the 1560 anonymous translator and Richard Brathwayte in his poem "Narcissus Change" (1611), guilty of a hubris comparable to Lucifer's.<sup>21</sup> Significantly, such conventional attacks on pride were often made to serve a Neoplatonic critique of appearances: Henry Reynolds

<sup>16</sup> *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. Mary M. Innes (Harmondsworth, UK, 1955), 86. Interestingly, Frances Quarles appended Ovid's tag to a portrait depicting an infected breast, his emblem of postlapsarian corruption; see *Emblems, Divine and Moral*, ed. Augustus Toplady and John Ryland (London, 1839), 44. This demonstrates how the motif of plenty making poor, or of satiety prompting hunger, lent itself to numerous interpretations. Quarles's identification of Narcissus's complaint with a contaminating femininity responsible for the Fall potentially reinforces readings of Cleopatra as an Egyptian Eve; I would argue, instead, that *Antony and Cleopatra*'s preoccupation with mirrors and reflections makes it difficult to avoid pursuing a reading of Enobarbus's remark based on the more literal narcissistic resonances of Ovid's tag. Janet Adelman discusses Quarles's emblem in *Suffocating Mothers*, 5–6.

<sup>17</sup> Spenser, 8:209.

<sup>18</sup> Henry Reynolds, *Mythomystes: Wherein a Short Survey is Taken of the Nature and Value of True Poesy and Depth of the Ancients above our Moderne Poets* (London, 1630[?]), sig. N4<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Edwards, *Cephalus and Procris. Narcissus*. (London, 1882), 52.

<sup>20</sup> For a thorough discussion of Neoplatonic readings of the Narcissus myth, see Louise Vinge, *The Narcissus Theme in Western European Literature up to the Early Nineteenth Century*, trans. Robert Dewnap et al. (Lund, Sweden, 1967), esp. 123–27, 148–51, and 185–86; see also Barry Taylor, *Vagrant Writing: Social and Semiotic Disorder in the English Renaissance* (Toronto, Canada, 1992), esp. 86–89 and 185–88.

<sup>21</sup> Anonymous, *The Fable of Ovid Treting of Narcissus* in Edwards, 146; Richard Brathwayte, *The Golden Fleece, Whereunto Bee Annexed Two Elegies, Entitled Narcissus Change and Aesons Dotage* (London, 1611), sig. D7.

inveighed against Narcissus's reflection as a "deceitfull shadow";<sup>22</sup> "the transitory thinges of this world are not to be trusted," argued the author of the 1560 translation.<sup>23</sup> For these writers, therefore, Narcissus's crime was less self-love than the fatal overvaluation of a mere reflection; he misrecognized surface for depth, an image for the real thing, an effect for the source. As Reynolds remarked in his version of the tale, Narcissus mistook the "deceitfull shadow" of his reflection for a "sun-beame,"<sup>24</sup> an oxymoronic juxtaposition that highlights his debilitating confusion of origin and effect.

For writers like Reynolds, Echo—the disembodied nymph spurned by Narcissus—assumed allegorical importance not only as the authentic and legitimate object of a heterosexual desire opposed to Narcissus's self-rapture but also as the representative of a cosmic origin opposed to "deceitfull shadow": "*adore Ecco*," Reynolds commanded his readers, "This *Winde* is the Symbole of the Breath of God."<sup>25</sup> As Barry Taylor remarks in his excellent study of Neoplatonism and the Narcissus myth in early modern England, "Echo represents the 'reflex' of the image produced in the mind by the breath of God, which conduces to intellectual unity and the direction of the soul's parts towards God. Narcissus, on the contrary, is the soul which denies this process and attends instead to the reflection supplied by the sense and 'corporeal shadows.'" In symbolizing the Neoplatonic origin, Echo offers the "possibility of a re-engagement with truth through the restoration of a heterosexual mutuality which stands for all forms of 'natural' relationship."<sup>26</sup> Within the Neoplatonic interpretation of Ovid's tale, therefore, Echo functions powerfully as a twin figure of legitimacy: she is the cosmically sanctioned origin of both "true" understanding and "natural" male heterosexual eros.

The Neoplatonic understanding of Narcissus's crime is partially evident also in Thomas Edwards's 1595 "Narcissus," which is a somewhat elliptic rewriting of the story as it appears in *Metamorphoses*. Edwards's Narcissus is not the antisocial Sylvan solipsist of Ovid's poem; instead he is an urban sex-tease who plays it fast and loose and is proud of his substantial wardrobe. Narcissus, who narrates most of the poem, is accosted by a never-ending stream of suitors, both male and female. He accepts jewels and garments as gifts from them and, in the process, undergoes a curious transformation: "like a lover glad of each new toy," he exclaims, "So I a woman turned from a boy."<sup>27</sup> When Edwards's Narcissus stares into the spring, therefore, he falls prey to a double misrecognition. He follows Ovid's protagonist in believing his reflection to be substantial, but he parts company with the classical Narcissus in also believing it to be a woman: "my lips hers to have touched, / I forc'd them forward, and my head down crouched."<sup>28</sup> Narcissus perceives his reflection to be not only female but also spellbindingly exotic. He compares his discovery to that of "the English

<sup>22</sup> Reynolds, sig. O1.

<sup>23</sup> Edwards, 148.

<sup>24</sup> Reynolds, sig. N4<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> Reynolds, sig. P3<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> Taylor, 88 and 186.

<sup>27</sup> Edwards, 48.

<sup>28</sup> Edwards, 52.

globe-incompasser" Francis Drake, who "by same purueying found another land." In a fascinating variation on the paradoxical Ovidian motif of riches coupled with poverty, satiety with hunger, the intensity of Narcissus's gaze serves to deprive him of sight: in a further development of the trope of the European witness in the New World, he declares himself to have been struck blind by "gazing on this Orient sunne."<sup>29</sup> The confusion of reflection and celestial source hinted at here is made explicit with Edwards's oxymoronic description of Narcissus's image (reminiscent of Reynolds's yoking of "deceitfull shadow" and "sun-beame") as a "Sun-shine-shadow."<sup>30</sup> This disjunction serves to underline Edwards's Neoplatonic interpretation of Narcissus's crime as a failure to recognize the "true" source of his desire: Narcissus himself is the "sun" that produces the image on the spring's surface.

In directing attention to Narcissus as the source, Edwards deviates from other Neoplatonic versions of the myth in that he notably fails to include Echo in his tale. Thus the customary Neoplatonic redress to Echo as the origin of legitimate heterosexual desire and allegorical incarnation of "the breath of God" is also omitted. In the process Edwards invites a subtly different understanding of the source of male heterosexual eros: in the world of his poem, the "real thing" is neither Echo nor any female object of desire but Narcissus himself, "a woman turned from a boy." His "heterosexual" desire, therefore, is in a crucial sense homoeroticized, its origin and object disclosed as male. Edwards's Narcissus eventually understands his predicament. But unlike Ovid's Narcissus, for whom the realization that he has fallen in love with his own reflection proves fatal, Edwards's protagonist remains very much alive, musing wistfully and not particularly repentantly on the nature of his self-love.

Edwards's poem contains three important motifs: the projection of Narcissus's own sunlike qualities onto the surface of the spring; the misrecognition of the reflection as female and exotic; and the abrupt realization that this seductive image is, in fact, a reflection of a male source. As I shall show, all these motifs may be discerned in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Like Edwards's poem, that play stages an orientalist discourse of the Other which blatantly problematizes itself in the process of elaboration, revealing its "exotic" object of "heterosexual" desire to be a chimera conjured up and misrecognized by the narcissistic male gaze. Just as Edwards's Narcissus discovers that "this Orient Sunne" has an occidental origin, so do the Romans who kiss "this orient pearl" (1.5.41)—one of the play's many metonymies for Cleopatra's erotic power—find themselves desiring something far closer to home.

### III

Roman desire is characterized by contradiction in a number of ways. In terms of the opposition between Egypt and Rome, desire is more obviously an attribute of the former: it is to be expected of Egypt and its voluptuous citizens, who "trade in love" (2.5.2), but not of Lenten Rome and its "cold

<sup>29</sup> Edwards, 51.

<sup>30</sup> Edwards, 49.

and still conversation" (2.6.120), exemplified by Octavia. Yet when it comes to Cleopatra, Roman desire is seemingly uncontainable. She is the object of a lingering fascination that has ensnared Julius Caesar, Gnaeus Pompey, and Mark Antony alike. What are we to make of this history of desire? Is it enough to assert, as numerous critics have done over the centuries, that Cleopatra's desirability is simply so transcendently enormous that Rome's normally sober rulers cannot help but be bowled over by her "infinite variety"?<sup>31</sup> Or does the play suggest that there is something in the very structure of Roman desire itself which produces Cleopatra as desirable?

Near the beginning of the play, Octavius Caesar accounts for the rebellious Sextus Pompey's immense popular support with the following speech:

It hath been taught us from the primal state,  
That he which is was wish'd until he were;  
And the ebb'd man, ne'er loved till ne'er worth love,  
Comes dear'd by being lack'd.

(1.4.41–44)

The sense of this rather difficult passage becomes clear in the last line. It is part of received Roman wisdom that desire is linked to the object's absence: Romans want only what they do not or cannot have.<sup>32</sup> Sextus Pompey, precisely because he lacks power, has become desirable as an alternative to the present Roman leadership. The speech Antony makes after hearing of his hated wife Fulvia's death expresses precisely this law of Roman desire:

There's a great spirit gone! Thus did I desire it:  
What our contempts doth often hurl from us,  
We wish it ours again; the present pleasure,  
By revolution lowering, does become  
The opposite of itself: she's good, being gone:  
The hand could pluck her back that shov'd her on.

(1.2.119–24)

As with the Roman plebeians' desire for Pompey, Antony's attraction to Fulvia is triggered by her absence—by the fact that he does not, cannot, have her: "she's good, being gone." He suffers the same mood swing upon receiving the (inaccurate) news that Cleopatra has died: a mere twenty lines after denouncing her as a "vile lady" who has "robb'd" him of his sword (4.14.22–23), he contemplates suicide in order to "o'ertake . . . Cleopatra, and / Weep for . . . pardon" (ll. 44–45); he even fantasizes "couch[ing]" with her in the Elysian fields (l. 51). If Roman desire emerges in response

<sup>31</sup> Past generations of critics agree with the Romans about Cleopatra's "transcendental" desirability. See, for example, Arthur Symonds: "*Antony and Cleopatra* is the most wonderful, I think, of all Shakespeare's plays, and it is so mainly because the figure of Cleopatra is the most wonderful of Shakespeare's women. And not of Shakespeare's women only, but perhaps the most wonderful of women" (*Studies in the Elizabethan Drama* [New York, 1919], 1).

<sup>32</sup> This notion was, of course, proverbial; see M. P. Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1950), W924. The idea is expressed elsewhere in Shakespeare's plays; see, for example, *All's Well That Ends Well*, 5.3.61–63, or *Much Ado About Nothing*, 4.1.217–22. But the insistence with which the notion is articulated in *Antony and Cleopatra* to explain specifically Roman behavior serves to deprive it (at least in this play) of its conventionally universal application.

to an absence it attempts to fill or repudiate, it can be seen to parallel the Renaissance axiom "Nature abhors a Vacuum,"<sup>33</sup> alluded to in Enobarbus's account of Antony's first meeting with Cleopatra, when Cleopatra was so desirable that even the air "but for vacancy, / Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too, / And made a gap in nature" (2.2.216–18). This fantastic "gap in nature" provides an enabling figure for the intolerable vacuum into which Roman desire imperially projects itself. But what do Romans see when they project their desire into such gaps?

The answer to which the play repeatedly gestures is that the desiring Roman gaze fixes on a reflection, or projection, of itself. Like Narcissus, the spectator misrecognizes himself (or his image) as Other. Maecenas, noting the grief that Antony's death paradoxically prompts in Caesar, exclaims, "When such a *spacious* mirror's set before him, / He must needs see himself" (5.1.34–35; emphasis added); within the space created by Antony's absence, in other words, Caesar supplies his own image and, seemingly mourning Antony, grieves for himself. Caesar here conforms to the law of Roman desire, wanting what he cannot have, in at least two ways. Like Antony grieving for the much-despised Fulvia upon her death, Caesar's hand would pluck him back that shoved him on. But Maecenas's observation about the "spacious mirror" into which Caesar gazes suggests that, like Narcissus, Caesar also wants the paradigmatic instance of what he cannot have—his reflection, misrecognized as an ontologically discrete entity.

A comparable if comic misrecognition of the projected self as Other within the "spacious mirror" of absence is Lepidus's drunken perception of the Egyptian crocodile:

- LEPIDUS   What manner o' thing is your crocodile?  
 ANTONY   It is shap'd, sir, like itself; and it is as broad as it hath breadth: it is just so high as it is, and moves with its own organs: it lives by that which nourisheth it; and the elements once out of it, it transmigrates.  
 LEPIDUS   What colour is it of?  
 ANTONY   Of its own colour too.  
 LEPIDUS   'Tis a strange serpent.  
 ANTONY   'Tis so. And the tears of it are wet.

(2.7.40–48)

What does Lepidus see? Antony's litany of tautologies creates a "gap in nature" where the crocodile should be and Lepidus's "'Tis a strange serpent" suggests that he fills the space with his mind's eye. Lepidus's apprehension of the crocodile may serve as a comic diversion, but it is also far more than that: the manner in which he sees the "strange serpent" is how Rome "sees" Cleopatra. This is no mere analogy. Cleopatra is very much implicated in the exchange between Antony and Lepidus. Indeed, for all his tautologous nonsense, Antony could well be describing Cleopatra: not simply because Lepidus's remark recalls Antony's familiar name for "my serpent of the old Nile" (1.5.25); nor because the reference to the crocodile's tears may suggest Cleopatra's willingness to pretend a sadness she does not feel (see 1.3.3–5); but primarily because it is the crocodile's very vacancy that

<sup>33</sup> See R. W. Dent, *Shakespeare's Proverbial Language: An Index* (Berkeley, CA, 1981), N42.

associates it with Cleopatra or, at least, with the way in which Roman desire takes her as its object.

This assertion may seem paradoxical given that Cleopatra is traditionally praised for being the most vivid, alive, and *present* of Shakespeare's female creations.<sup>34</sup> The play indisputably invites us to regard Cleopatra as an authentic character, tragically misunderstood by her Roman suitors: "Not know me yet?" she asks Antony after he has subjected her to a torrent of perhaps undeserved recrimination (3.13.158). Her question provides a salutary reminder of the gulf that separates Roman (mis)characterizations of her and the "real" Cleopatra presented to us in, for example, her exchanges with Mardian, Charmian, and Iras. Moreover, this "real" Cleopatra possesses a vitality that is in large part the effect of the constant reminders the playtext gives us of that irreducible residue of presence, her body. Whether it is the carnal tang of her remarks ("Now I feed myself / With most delicious poison" [1.5.26–27]; "Ram thou thy fruitful tidings in mine ears" [2.5.24]) or the abundance of stage directions the text gives her ("embracing" Antony [1.1.37]; "striking" or "haling up and down" the messenger [2.5.61, 62, 64]), her insistent, melodramatic physicality lends her a seemingly undeniable presence. More than any other of the play's characters, Cleopatra is "in thy face," possessed of a corporeality that seems to cry out for recognition.

But such reminders of her physicality are supplemented by a counter-narrative in which her very vividness is shown to be the effect of a Roman desire for her presence, prompted by the gaps and absences that repeatedly afflict the play's attempts to represent her. A. C. Bradley once expressed a wish to "hear her [Cleopatra's] own remarks" about his analysis.<sup>35</sup> His wistful desire to obtain an "authentic" Cleopatra replicates a desire that the play itself repeatedly expresses and frustrates. For all of Cleopatra's undeniable corporeality, her body has an odd habit of disappearing altogether at precisely those moments when it seems most overwhelmingly present.

Think, for example, of Enobarbus's account of Cleopatra on the river Cydnus, which is often cited as proof of Cleopatra's intoxicating desirability.<sup>36</sup> Enobarbus paints a portrait of a world in which subjection to imperial power is subjection to erotic desire: Cleopatra's pages are Cupids, and even the winds that follow her are lovesick. In a manner that recalls Elizabethan notions of the power exerted by the sovereign's displayed body, Cleopatra's power appears to be predicated on the visibility of her eroticized body to her subjects, who abandon all activity to gaze on her.<sup>37</sup> But what do her subjects

<sup>34</sup> Critics from Margaret Cavendish in the Restoration to Derek Traversi in the twentieth century have paid homage to Cleopatra's vividness and vitality. Traversi's assessment is in some ways typical: "Cleopatra, though the creature of the world which surrounds her, can at times emerge from it, impose upon her surroundings a vitality which is not the less astonishing for retaining to the last its connection with the environment it transcends" (*An Approach to Shakespeare*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. [Garden City, NY, 1969], 2:223–24).

<sup>35</sup> Bradley, 298.

<sup>36</sup> For example, Harley Granville-Barker asks: "What is the best evidence we have (so to speak) of Cleopatra's physical charms? A description of them by Enobarbus" (*Prefaces to Shakespeare* [Princeton, NJ, 1947], 435).

<sup>37</sup> Discussions of the power exerted by the displayed monarch's body in early modern Europe include Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan

see? Because Enobarbus is known for the plainness of his speech (Pompey commends it at 2.6.78), it is easy to neglect the way in which his rhetoric actively and ingeniously produces Cleopatra as desirable only according to the Roman logic of desire: that is, she exerts a seductive power by virtue of her paradoxical absence within Enobarbus's depiction of her.

Enobarbus presents a wealth of detail in the opening lines of his account. He describes the deck, the sails, even the river water that, "amorous" of the oarsmen's strokes (2.2.197), caresses Cleopatra's barge. The detail is profoundly synaesthetic; the purple sails are "perfumed" (l. 193), and the procession is accompanied by the "tune of flutes" (l. 195). But when Enobarbus comes to describe Cleopatra herself, he is remarkably vague:

For her own person,  
It beggar'd all description: she did lie  
In her pavilion—cloth of gold, of tissue—  
O'er-picturing that Venus where we see  
The fancy outwork nature.

(ll. 197–201)

Here is little or no detail of "her own person." Unlike the objects around her, Cleopatra "beggar[s] all description." Enobarbus's reference to the portrait of Venus only underlines Cleopatra's "O'er-picturing" unrepresentability: her "cloth of gold" thus encloses what is effectively a "gap in nature." The speech serves as a rhetorical counterpart of a rococo mirror, its extraordinarily ornate and copious frame enclosing a subtly camouflaged glass in which Enobarbus's Roman listeners glimpse whatever they want to see. Just as Antony's nondescription of the crocodile provides Lepidus with the "spacious mirror" in which he glimpses a "strange serpent," so does Enobarbus's nondescription of Cleopatra allow Agrippa to imagine a "rare Egyptian!" (l. 218). Agrippa thus conforms to the law of Roman desire, filling a "gap in nature" with a phantom that compensates for and repudiates Cleopatra's absence. Little wonder that "she makes hungry, / Where most she satisfies." If she is an "Egyptian dish," as Enobarbus calls her (2.7.122–29), she is a food that curiously vanishes at the moment she appears to be most vividly apprehended by her Roman gazers;<sup>38</sup> in effect, she is the "vacancy" that Antony fills with "his voluptuousness" (1.4.26).

Sheridan (New York, 1979); and Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Theology* (Princeton, NJ, 1955). Studies that specifically examine the iconography of Queen Elizabeth's displayed body include Marie Axton, *The Queen's Two Bodies: Drama and the Elizabethan Succession* (London, 1977); and Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display*. Tennenhouse makes the intriguing observation that *Antony and Cleopatra* is "Shakespeare's elegy for the signs and symbols which legitimized Elizabethan power. Of these, the single most important figure was that of the desiring and desired woman, her body valued for its ornamental surface, her feet rooted deep in a kingdom" (146). In its depiction of an erotically ornamental, pageantlike display of royal female power, Enobarbus's account of Cleopatra's procession at Cydnus would in many ways appear to confirm Tennenhouse's assertion; however, as I go on to argue, the curious lack of physical detail offered by Enobarbus about Cleopatra's displayed body suggests that her power subsists in her very invisibility, her publicly paraded absence—the "*inopem me copia fecit*" of the narcissistic reflection.

<sup>38</sup> Phyllis Rackin's response to Enobarbus's speech is notable for its conjunction of traditional homage to Shakespeare's imaginative poetic power with suggestive insight into the "defect" that paradoxically underwrites the panegyric's effect of "perfection": Enobarbus "suddenly

## IV

The Romans play Narcissus not only when looking on Cleopatra.<sup>39</sup> The narcissistic component of their desire is also hinted at in Octavius's description of his namesake and sister as one "whom no brother / Did ever love so dearly" (2.2.150–51) and as "a great part of myself" (3.2.24). He uses much the same language in eulogizing Antony: gazing into the "spacious mirror" of Antony's absence, Caesar grieves for "my brother, my competitor, / In top of all design; my mate in empire, / Friend and companion in the front of war, / The arm of mine own body" (5.1.42–45). Antony's revealing transformation by Caesar from "brother" to "mate" and, finally, "arm of mine own body" shows that the desire initiated in *Antony and Cleopatra* by the narcissistic reflection need not only be heterosexual.

Caesar's eulogy for Antony provides a point of departure for a consideration of both the play's depiction of male homosocial and homoerotic desire and also the extent to which the two may overlap. As Bruce Smith has remarked, Shakespeare portrays in *Antony and Cleopatra* "a dramatic universe in which the male protagonists find their identities, not in romantic love or in philosophical ideals, but in their relationships with each other."<sup>40</sup> Such relationships in the play often conform straightforwardly to the triangular structure of homosociality described by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: women mediate between (Roman) men as exchangeable commodities, and in a fashion that intensifies the bonds of friendship or rivalry between the men. As female commodities of exchange, Cleopatra and Octavia—for all their differences—find an unlikely common ground. Octavia's position in the homosocial triangle is transparent: for Octavius Caesar and Antony, she is a token of exchange whose primary purpose is to "knit [their] hearts / With an unslipping knot" (2.2.126–28). Cleopatra serves a comparable function as she is exchanged among Rome's rulers as a "morsel for a monarch" (1.5.31); despite the strength she appears to wield within such transactions, that strength is called into question by the play's final emphasis on Octavius Caesar, for whom she is primarily a spoil of war whose acquisition and public display would attest to his victory over Antony.

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abandons his characteristic ironic prose for the soaring poetry that creates for his listeners a Cleopatra who transcends anything they could see with the sensual eye or measure with the calculating and rational principle of the soul. . . . It is a commonplace of the older criticism that Shakespeare had to rely upon his poetry and his audience's imagination to evoke Cleopatra's greatness because he knew the boy actor could not depict it convincingly. But he transformed this limitation into an asset, used the technique his stage demanded to demonstrate the unique powers of the very medium that seemed to limit him. Like Cleopatra's own art, the economy of the poet's art works paradoxically, to make defect perfection" ("Shakespeare's Boy Cleopatra, the Decorum of Nature, and the Golden World of Poetry," *PMLA* 87 [1972]: 201–12, esp. 204).

<sup>39</sup> Other early Stuart playwrights attribute narcissistic traits to Roman desire. In a tantalizingly suggestive passage, Elizabeth Cary invokes Narcissus's "*inopem me copia fecit*" to describe how Antony would have reacted to Maryam, Queen of the Jews, if he had only succeeded in disentangling himself from Cleopatra: "Too much delight did bare him from delight, / For either's love the other's did confound" (*The Tragedy of Maryam, The Fair Queen of Jewry*, ed. Barry Weller and Margaret W. Ferguson [Berkeley, CA, 1994], 1.2.185–86).

<sup>40</sup> Bruce R. Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics* (Chicago, 1991), 59. I would like to thank Charles Mahoney for his thoughtful comments on this issue.

Sedgwick claims that in modern Western culture the continuum between male homosocial and homosexual desire is "criss-crossed with deep discontinuities."<sup>41</sup> But it seems to me that relations between Roman men in *Antony and Cleopatra* repeatedly open up the possibility of slippage from the homosocial to the homosexual. This is especially true in the play's depiction of the Roman triumvirate, a version of the homosocial triangle in which Lepidus plays the part normally reserved for the mediating woman: "[H]earts, tongues, figures, scribes, bards, poets cannot / Think, speak, cast, write, sing, number, hoo! / His [Lepidus's] love to Antony. But as for Caesar, / Kneel down, kneel down, and wonder." To Enobarbus's mocking words, Agrippa replies, "Both he loves." Enobarbus goes on to describe Lepidus's function in the triumvirate with a richly suggestive image: he claims that Antony and Caesar are Lepidus's "shards, and he their beetle" (3.2.16–20)—that is, they are the wings that carry the beetle aloft. Like Octavia, Lepidus holds together the feuding rivals. In the process, he is feminized: Enobarbus describes him as suffering from "green-sickness," or love-anemia (3.2.6)—the conventional ailment of virginal maidens—pining, as does Octavia, for both of the men. Act 3, scene 2, provides an illuminating instance of *Antony and Cleopatra's* treatment of homosocial rivalry and its homoerotic underbelly. While it may be countered that Enobarbus's mocking of Lepidus marks an attempt to assert a discontinuity between legitimately "masculine" homosocial bonding/rivalry and comically "feminine" homosexual love-anemia, it is important to note that the homoerotic impulses attributed derisively to Lepidus are not confined to him, as Caesar's remarkable eulogy for Antony, with its transition from "brother" to "mate," indicates. In erotic triangles where men mediate between men, homosocial and homosexual desires become endlessly substitutable; the difference asserted by Enobarbus between the "beetle" and the "shards," the lowly insect and the soaring wings that elevate it, surely points to a difference of power rather than desire. Both Caesar and Lepidus love Antony; in doing so, both are characterized as desiring a part of their own bodies (be it "shard" or "arm"); both thus participate within the same economy of narcissistic desire glimpsed in Caesar's loving tribute to his sister as "a great part of myself."

The homoerotic dynamic that informs the bonds between the members of the Roman triumvirate provides, I would argue, a template for all Roman desire in *Antony and Cleopatra*—even desire that is putatively "heterosexual." It is here that Thomas Edwards's "Narcissus" comes in handy as a device for decoding the origins of Roman desire. As I have suggested above, Edwards's poem offers three motifs through which the homoerotic origins of Narcissus's "heterosexual" desire are articulated: the projection and/or displacement of his attributes onto the reflective surface of the spring; the misrecognition of this reflection as female; and, finally, the recognition that his object of adoration is the reflection of a male source, is a "woman turned from a boy." All three motifs find suggestive counterparts in Shakespeare's representations of the ways in which Roman desire takes Cleopatra as its object.

<sup>41</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, 1985), 2.

The first motif—the projection and/or displacement of the desiring subject's attributes onto the object of desire—is evident in Cleopatra's accounts of her love-making with Antony and Gnaeus Pompey. If Cleopatra is associated by Enobarbus with the hunger-inducing insubstantiality of the narcissistic reflection, she herself confirms the suggestion that Romans play Narcissus when gazing at her. She recalls how, after a night of Bacchanalian revelry with Antony, she "drunk him to his bed; / Then put my tires and mantles on him, whilst / I wore his sword Phillipan" (2.5.21–23). This cheerfully kinky episode involves far more than an instance of the carnivalesque gender inversion customarily identified with Shakespeare's Egypt. The effeminated Antony, Cleopatra implies, is aroused by his own Phillipan-packing reflection—an autoerotic adventure that in its exquisite narcissism surely demands to be seen as less typically Egyptian than Roman.

An equally revealing insight into the origin and object of Roman desire is afforded by Cleopatra's description of Gnaeus Pompey. As I have already noted, she styles him as a Narcissus staring at and erotically aroused by his own misrecognized reflection:

... great Pompey  
Would stand and make his eyes grow in my brow,  
There would he anchor his aspect, and die  
With looking on his life.

(1.4.31–34)

What is remarkable about Cleopatra's description of Gnaeus Pompey is its deployment and transformation of standard Ovidian motifs. We find here not only an arresting image of narcissistic self-contemplation but also an eroticized version of the paradoxical "*inopem me copia fecit*" tag: Pompey's apprehension of his "life" is the occasion for his erotic "death." Most evident in her description, however, is the projection of Pompey's own attributes onto Cleopatra. The more he looks at her, the more he manifests himself in her face, as is implied by the perverse suggestion that his eyes grow in her forehead. As a result of this specular encounter, Cleopatra indeed has "Narcissus in [her] face."<sup>42</sup>

The transformation of Cleopatra wrought by Antony's and Pompey's narcissistic desire brings to mind Slavoj Žižek's gloss on Lacan's infamous claim that woman is a symptom of man: "so, if woman does not exist, man is perhaps simply a woman who thinks she does exist."<sup>43</sup> Žižek's proposal is perfectly illustrated by Edwards's Narcissus, who becomes "a woman turned from a boy," believing his object of desire to be female. The same is true, of course, for Antony, who simultaneously displaces his own attributes onto Cleopatra and is effeminated. It is here that the second motif from Edwards's "Narcissus"—the desiring subject's conviction that his (misrecog-

<sup>42</sup> Cleopatra's speech offers an intriguing counterpart to Ovid's account of Narcissus: like Echo, Cleopatra is excluded from a circuit of desire whose origin and terminus is male. Perhaps this exclusion can help explain a puzzling reference that seems to lurk in Cleopatra's description. Pompey's eyes, she claims, "grow" in her "brow": the phrasing here invokes the inescapable image of the cuckold's budding horns. Is Cleopatra half-comically suggesting that she has been cuckolded by a Pompey who "betrays" her by making love, albeit unwittingly, to himself?

<sup>43</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London, 1989), 75. I am grateful to Heather Findlay for drawing this passage to my attention.

nized) reflection is female—may be discerned. The Romans' narcissistic perceptions of Cleopatra prompt a critical reevaluation of those very qualities that audiences and readers have not only attributed to her but also believed to be representative of an "Eternal Femininity." Her allegedly "female" attributes demand in many instances to be understood as displaced or misrecognized Roman characteristics. A particularly good example is Cleopatra's much-noted "infinite variety." The impression of her "variety" is in part created by the panoply of subject-positions she is accorded by the alternately desiring and disgusted Antony: "enchanted queen" (1.2.125); "my chuck" (4.4.2); "my nightingale" (4.8.18); "Triple-turn'd whore," "grave charm," "right gipsy" (4.12.13, 25, 28). Cleopatra's "variety" provides the specular image—is, in many respects, the very effect—of Antony's own. His displacement onto her of his own vacillations exemplifies Catherine Belsey's observation that Tudor and Stuart patriarchal ideology denied women "any single place from which to speak for themselves"; in the process, women acquired "a discontinuity of being, an 'inconstancy' which [was] seen as characteristically feminine."<sup>44</sup>

The process of narcissistic displacement which informs the Roman construction of Cleopatra's contradictory "feminine" identity may be discerned in a number of other plays from the Jacobean stage. Perhaps the best example is provided by John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, a play whose deployment of motifs from the Narcissus myth is hinted at in the Cardinal's weary lament at the play's conclusion: "When I look in the fishponds, / Methinks I see a thing arm'd with a rake / That seems to strike at me" (5.3.3–5).<sup>45</sup> This speech provides the paradigmatic instance of the way in which the play's powerful characters apprehend and/or misrecognize their own reflections as evil forces distinct from them. In particular, Ferdinand, the tyrannical duke of Calabria, attacks his own shadow at the climax of his lycanthropic madness (5.2.38), and he repeatedly displaces his own attributes onto the Duchess, his twin sister, misconstruing them as her distinctively "feminine" vices. She acquires for him the deceptive and salacious qualities that he is incapable of recognizing in himself: he warns her that "they whose faces do belie their hearts / Are witches . . . and give the devil suck," an inadvertent self-description that the Duchess acknowledges with her wry response, "This is terrible good counsel" (1.2.230–32). Ferdinand's projection of his vices onto his sister is most manifest, perhaps, when he accuses her of possessing a heart "Fill'd with unquenchable wild fire" (3.2.117) a mere two scenes after he has insanely fantasized raping her to "quench [his] wild-fire" (2.5.48). When read alongside the narcissistic projections of *Antony and Cleopatra*, these instances offer a remarkable disclosure of the unacknowledged masculine sources of "female" identity in Jacobean patriarchal ideology.

But where *The Duchess of Malfi* appears to offer its audiences and readers a genuine "flesh, and blood" protagonist (1.2.369) who counters her broth-

<sup>44</sup> Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London, 1985), 149. For a reading similar to my own of the patriarchal construction of a contradictory "feminine" identity, see Loomba, 75–79 and 125–30.

<sup>45</sup> All quotations from *The Duchess of Malfi* follow the New Mermaids text, 3rd ed., ed. Elizabeth M. Brennan (London, 1993).

er's narcissistic projections, *Antony and Cleopatra* in at least one way defers indefinitely any apprehension of an authentic Cleopatra. We are, to some extent, invited to distinguish between the Cleopatra that is a Roman projection and the "real" Cleopatra who stands in seeming contrast to male images of her. By encouraging this distinction, Shakespeare would appear to be reworking a theme found in his earlier comedies: the conflict between female characters as they are perceived by their male counterparts and as they present themselves to their audiences. Consider, for example, the much-scorned Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, transfigured by Demetrius's love-potioned gaze into "goddess, nymph, perfect, divine!" (3.2.137); or the homely Luciana in *The Comedy of Errors*, mistaken by her "brother-in-law" Antipholus of Syracuse as a "sweet mermaid" and "siren" (3.2.45, 47).<sup>46</sup> What distinguishes *Antony and Cleopatra* from these earlier plays is the way in which it places a question mark next to the "reality" of the Cleopatra whom we are encouraged to dissociate from the projections of her Roman suitors.

Crucially, it is not only Mark Antony or Gnaeus Pompey who mistakenly believe themselves to see the "real" Cleopatra when "looking on" their own lives. In the last act the relationship between Cleopatra and her spectators is reworked in a way that, like the dénouement of Thomas Edwards's "Narcissus," serves to complicate the status of the seemingly exotic, apparently female object of desire on display to the audience. Cleopatra expresses revulsion at the prospect of being transformed in one of Caesar's Roman triumphs into a degraded object of spectacle. But she goes even further—she claims to abhor above all the notion of being represented on the stage: "The quick comedians / Extemporally will stage us . . . and I shall see / Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / I'the posture of a whore" (5.2.215–20). On the Jacobean stage the boy-actor playing Cleopatra was here called upon to express disgust at the prospect of seeing a boy-actor playing Cleopatra. Such self-reflexivity cannot help but achieve an effect similar to that created by Enobarbus in his description of Cleopatra on the river Cydnus: in each instance "she" becomes curiously disembodied, an effect generated by her absence. Unlike Enobarbus's accomplished rhetorical sleight of hand, Cleopatra's reference to the "squeaking Cleopatra boy" blatantly discloses the artifice of the "authentic" queen.

Indeed, the above speech may at first glance strike the reader as one instance of an "alienation effect" all too common on the Shakespearean stage.<sup>47</sup> Attempting to guess a Jacobean audience's response (if there ever

<sup>46</sup> To this short list there could be profitably added a number of Shakespeare's other plays. The examples most pertinent to an analysis of *Antony and Cleopatra*, perhaps, are *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Othello*, and *The Winter's Tale*. All three plays subject to critical scrutiny the derogatory assumptions men make about women—Benedick's hyperbolic conviction that Beatrice is a "harpy" who "speaks poniards" (2.1.271, 247), Claudio's denigration of Hero as a "rotten orange" (4.1.32), Iago's unsubstantiated belief that Emilia has cuckolded him, Othello's mischaracterization of Desdemona as a "strumpet" and "cunning whore of Venice" (4.2.82, 89), or Leontes's jealous invectives against the irreproachable Hermione as an "adulteress," "traitor," and "bed-swerger" (2.1.88, 89, and 93).

<sup>47</sup> The term, of course, is Bertolt Brecht's. For critical analyses of this speech and the issue of the boy Cleopatra, see Michael Jamieson, "Shakespeare's Celibate Stage: The Problem of Accommodation to the Boy-Actress in *As You Like It*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Winter's Tale*" in *Papers Mainly Shakespearean*, G. I. Duthie, ed. (Edinburgh, 1964), 21–39; Rackin, 201;

is such a thing as a unified response) to the speech is, of course, a treacherous task. But I think it fair to assume that this moment of theatrical self-reflexivity—at least in its early performances—differs from others largely because of its capacity to interrogate an audience and its desires. If alienation effects frequently empower spectators by comforting them with the reminder that what they are watching is simply a play, *Antony and Cleopatra's* moment of self-reflection could have had an altogether more challenging effect on its Jacobean audience. With this episode the third motif from Thomas Edwards's poem—Narcissus's realization that the origin and object of his desire is a "woman turned from a boy"—finds a powerful parallel. Like Edwards's Narcissus, who abruptly realizes that the woman he sees in the spring is his own reflection, the play's earliest audiences were confronted with an unavoidable reminder of how the surpassingly seductive Egyptian Queen on whom they had been gazing was, like many of them, English and male.

## V

Cleopatra, the "serpent of the Nile," is coded in terms that make her legible as a threatening Other to both Roman and Jacobean body politics. But the play also unleashes a series of potentially subversive images of Cleopatra as the *same*. "Hush, here comes Antony," Enobarbus announces early in the play—only to have his vocalized stage direction flatly contradicted by the apparition of Cleopatra: "Not he, the queen," Charmian retorts (1.2.76). Enobarbus's misrecognition is symptomatic. Here and at other crucial moments, Cleopatra not only lacks the absolute gender and racial alterity that her audiences and readers, as well as her Roman suitors, have ascribed to her; like the radiant reflection that Edwards's Narcissus beholds, she is shown to be no "Orient sunne" herself but literally an image of another male sun: "Think on me," Cleopatra declaims, "That am with Phoebus' amorous pinches black / And wrinkled deep in time" (1.5.27–29). Cleopatra here provides a telling figure for how she is fashioned by (and out of) the animating "sunshine" of her European male lovers, fashioned ultimately—as her speech about the boy Cleopatra reveals—from the same matter as her theatrical spectators. Poor old Lepidus may, after all, have hit the nail on the head when he drunkenly tells Antony: "*your* serpent of Egypt is bred now of *your* mud by the operation of *your* sun. So is *your* crocodile" (2.7.26–27; emphasis added). In his unwitting but suggestive adaptation of the Neoplatonic figure of the sun as origin, together with his use of the colloquial indefinite *your*, Lepidus inadvertently provides yet another reminder of the way in which *Antony and Cleopatra* offers a compelling and

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Michael Shapiro, "Boying her Greatness: Shakespeare's Use of Coterie Drama in *Antony and Cleopatra*," *Modern Language Review* 77 (1982): 1–15; Kathleen McLuskie, "The Act, the Role, and the Actor: Boy Actresses on the Elizabethan Stage," *New Theatre Quarterly* 10 (1987): 120–30; Terence Hawkes, *That Shakespearean Rag: Essays on a Critical Process* (London, 1986), 83; Dollimore, 490; Graham Holderiness, "'Some Squeaking Cleopatra': Theatricality in *Antony and Cleopatra*" in *Critical Essays on Antony and Cleopatra*, Linda Cookson and Bryan Loughrey, eds. (Harlow, Essex, UK, 1990), 42–52; and Lorraine Helms, "'The High Roman Fashion': Sacrifice, Suicide, and the Shakespearean Stage," *PMLA* 107 (1992): 554–65.

sustained critique of the origin of male heterosexual eros. Like Edwards's "Narcissus," Lepidus's speech deviates from conventional Neoplatonic accounts of desire in hinting that the play's primary "feminine" object and origin of desire, the "serpent of the Nile," is no Ur-Woman but the specular image of a sun that is *yours*—a term that, in its second-person inclusivity, may be taken as addressing not only the male "suns" of Gnaeus Pompey, Julius Caesar, and Antony but also the "infinite variety" of those Narcissuses—spectators, readers, and critics—who have found themselves in thrall to their own seductive images of "Cleopatra."