Act 5 Scene 2, *Antony and Cleopatra*

In this moment building up to Cleopatra's suicide, Shakespeare cleverly gives the audience one last look at Cleopatra's multi-faceted character: as a vanquished queen of Egypt whose dignity is about to be stripped away, as an indomitable tragic heroine determined to be the master of her fate, and an exemplification of erotic sexuality. In this way, Shakespeare uses Cleopatra to meditate on the extent of human agency, the importance of honour and the ambiguous ethicality of suicide.

Cleopatra begins by narrating her peripeteia, discussing the extreme indignity she will suffer at the hands of her Roman captors and highlighting the limited control man has over the uncertainties of fortune and fate. Cleopatra tells Iras that they will be "Egyptian puppet[s]… shown / in Rome": they are compared to inanimate dolls devoid of agency, with their actions fully controlled by 'puppet-masters' pulling the strings. Additionally, Cleopatra's metaphor is infused with an element of performance: just as puppet shows are put on to entertain, Cleopatra and Iras will be dishonourably put on display ("shown / in Rome") as a trophy marking Caesar's victory. In this way, Cleopatra's undignifying objectification reveals her steep fall from her royal past, an abrupt reversal of fortune characteristic of Renaissance tragedy. Cleopatra further laments that they will be handled by "mechanic slaves / with greasy aprons, rules, and hammers"; the base and crude nature of the lowly labourers is reinforced by the unpleasant tactile image of "grease" and the cumulative list of the rudimentary tools they carry. In the strictly hierarchical societies of both ancient Egypt and Shakespeare's England, the prospect of a sovereign ruler like Cleopatra being forcibly lifted by commoners would be a deeply dishonourable one, representing a great fall from high degree. Cleopatra adds that "[they] shall be enclouded" in the Romans' "thick" and "rank" breaths, "forced to drink their vapour". Not only does the selection of "drink" as a verb for gaseous "vapour" — as if it were liquid — evoke the choking heaviness of their foul breaths, but the omission of the pronoun "we" in the sentence also mirrors how they are shrouded and concealed by a cloud of odour. Most dreadful of all, their modesty will be violated: "saucy lictors / will catch at [them], like strumpets", the hissing sibilant alliteration evincing Cleopatra's outrage. While "catch" denotes the profane way Roman officials will grab at their bodies, its accompanying connotations of ensnarement highlight their trapped state, unable to free themselves from this undignifying fate. In response to this treatment, Iras repeatedly cries for divine intervention ("The gods forbid!", "O the good gods!"), only to be met with Cleopatra twice affirming that such a fate is "certain"; man is frail amidst the changing winds of fortune and power, a common insight among Renaissance tragedies.

However, Cleopatra is less distressed by being presented as a trophy than by being *re*-presented in art: these reductive caricatures constitute a greater assault on her honour, revealing the little agency man has over his legacy. Cleopatra foresees that rhymers will "ballad [them] out o' tune" and comedians will stage them "extemporally", the careless, improvised nature of these representations revealing the little care paid to preserving their honour. This clumsiness is reinforced by the discordant metre: "ballad us out o' tune" is a mouthful of dactylic feet reminiscent of a song with too many notes, and the extra syllable in "will catch at us, like strumpets, and scald rhymers" breaks the rhythmic flow of blank verse. These portrayals are not only maladroit in manner but also unflattering caricatures: Antony will be played by a "drunken" actor and Cleopatra by "some squeaking Cleopatra boy". By specifically mentioning the high "squeaking" pitch of his voice, Shakespeare meta-theatrically breaks the audience's suspension of disbelief: given that female characters were played by prepubescent boys in Shakespeare's age, he reminds the audience that they are watching "some squeaking boy" play Cleopatra right then and there. In this manner, Shakespeare's Cleopatra renders the audience complicit in her degrading caricaturisation, creating keen pathos for her plight. Eventually, this crossdressing portrayal reduces Cleopatra's "greatness" to the "posture of a whore": this transformation is so horrific and disgraceful that Iras hyperbolically promises to tear her eyes out to avoid seeing it ("my nails / are stronger than mine eyes"). Left without control over her reputation, Cleopatra's tragic lack of agency is foregrounded once more.

In spite of this, Cleopatra remains determined to reassert her agency and defend her dignity at the cost of her life, elevating her to the rank of a tragic heroine. She calls her suicide a "noble deed" that delivers "liberty", echoing the common Stoic conception of suicide as a dutiful and dignified way of escaping from disgrace. Preparing for her suicide, Cleopatra staunchly declares that her "resolution's placed" and that she has "nothing / of woman": not only does the fixed, rooted nature of her "resolution" highlight the strength of her determination, she also rejects in absolute terms ("nothing") the fickleness associated with femininity. Hence, Cleopatra asserts her utmost commitment to preserving her honour. Cleopatra subsequently cements her determination in figurative terms: she calls herself "marble-constant", not only imbuing herself with the immovable, unflinching fearlessness of a stone statue, but also reflecting her desire to immortalise her honour via an enduring effigy. Further, she casts away the "fleeting moon" — a symbol of inconstancy due to its ever-shifting shape — from her "planet"; not only does she remind audiences of her status as Egypt's sovereign queen by casting herself as the ruler of a "planet", but she also reaffirms her resolve to defend her honour through death. Reminiscent of a tragic hero, Cleopatra reveals her courage in the face of injustice, taking her life in a final attempt to protect the dignity of herself and her country.

However, this unidimensional view of Cleopatra is complicated in the second half of the extract, as the Clown takes centre stage. First, despite Cleopatra's repulsion at any prospect of her immodesty, the Clown imbues her suicide with vulgar undertones of sexuality. The Clown enters by bringing Cleopatra a basket of "figs", with the carnal associations of the fruit with sex and fecundity tainting her purportedly "noble deed" of suicide. Additionally, in stark contrast to Cleopatra's dignified verse, the Clown's use of prose immediately distinguishes him as crude and common, preparing the audience for his bawdy humour to come. He then employs a sexually-charged double entendre: he parenthetically slips in a joke about a woman "given to lie" and comments that she should not do so unless it is "in the way of honesty". Both "lie" and "honesty" hold dual meanings: while the Clown could mean that the woman ought not to tell falsehoods unless it is done with the intention of being truthful, his statement could also entail that she should not sleep with someone unless it is chaste to do so (i.e. with her husband). This intrusion of risque humour into an imminent suicide, while providing comic relief from the seriousness of Cleopatra's tragedy, also paves the foundation for the audience to consider Cleopatra in an erotic light. This humour culminates in the Clown's discussion of the devil "eat[ing]" and "mar[ring]" women, euphemisms for oral sex and the taking of a woman's virginity respectively. Given the association of the serpent with the devil in the Bible, the Clown's obscene description of the devil violating a woman mirrors the asp biting Cleopatra, rendering her suicide similarly profane. In this way, the Clown casts Cleopatra's purportedly honourable act of taking her life in an erotic, almost debased light, harking back to Cleopatra's former lustful sexuality and undermining her self-presentation as a tragic heroine.

Additionally, the Clown — beneath a veil of comedy — problematises Cleopatra's Stoic conception of suicide, questioning its purported capacity to dignify her and her legacy. Upon his entry, he bizarrely advises that the asp's "biting is immortal", confusing the immediate death brought by the poisonous bite for its polar opposite of perpetual life. However, immortality in death is exactly what Cleopatra seeks to achieve: she takes her life to ensure her fame and honour live on. By distilling Cleopatra's aims into a contradiction in terms, the Clown's dark humour casts doubt on the potential of suicide to ennoble. Further, despite the clown's repeated warnings of the danger the asp poses, with his repeated imperatives ("look you") and absolute diction ("no goodness", "give it nothing") evincing his firm belief that the asp can bring no benefit to Cleopatra, he still proceeds to wish her "joy of the worm". Once again, while we discern that Cleopatra seeks to find the "joy" of honour and reunion with Antony in the snake's bite, the phatic nature of the Clown's well-wishes — constituting an illogical and implausible hope — questions the achievability of this aim. In typical Renaissance

fashion, the Clown is hardly a “fool” at all: he complicates Cleopatra’s ostensible depiction as a heroine: her attempt to reassert her agency via suicide may be in vain.

The complexity of Cleopatra’s character and the moral ambiguity of her suicide are perhaps best encapsulated by the polyvalent symbol of the asp (“pretty worm from Nilus”) which she uses to take her life. The asp links Cleopatra to her empire: not only does the asp originate from the Nile, the lifeline of Egypt, but it is also a symbol of royalty in Egyptian culture, making it a fitting reminder of her former regal esteem. However, even as it encapsulates Cleopatra’s honour, the snake is simultaneously infused with associations of sin from the biblical iconography that pervaded the Renaissance, shrouding her in moral ambiguity. In this manner, Shakespeare highlights the deeply multi-faceted character of Cleopatra, presented variously as a dignified tragic heroine, an erotically alluring female, and a misled captive taking her life.

Ultimately, Cleopatra’s decision to commit suicide reflects her unwavering determination to assert her power and will in the face of tragic powerlessness, revealing the superlative importance of honour and dignity even at the expense of one’s life. It is the Clown, however, that grounds Cleopatra and us all in the realisation that honour is by no means guaranteed by death: she cannot run away from her former reputation as a sensuous enchantress, and she cannot immortalise herself from beyond the grave.