“Take up her bed”: Cleopatra’s bed in *Antony and Cleopatra*

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In the fifth act of Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, the titular queen places asps to her breast and arm, ending her life. Upon discovering the poisoned body of Cleopatra, along with her women Iras and Charmian, Caesar commands his train,

> Take up her bed,
> And bear her women from the monument.
> She shall be buried by her Antony. (V.ii.355–7).

Despite what seems like a clear directive – that Cleopatra is on a bed and Caesar’s men are to remove it – since at least the seventeenth century productions and adaptations have replaced the bed while editors have questioned it. Literally, they have taken up Cleopatra’s bed before it has even had the chance to appear onstage. In Michael Scott’s commentary on v.ii in *Antony and Cleopatra Text and Performance*, he writes, “The dramatist concludes with an epilogue in which Caesar enters the room where the dead Queen of Love sits ‘marble constant’ on her throne.” In the *Cambridge Shakespeare in Production* series, Richard Madelaine notes, “Whether Cleopatra should die on a throne or a bed remains a controversial question” and adds,

> The Folio text does not make it clear where or in what position Cleopatra dies: whilst Caesar’s ‘Take up her bed’ indicates Cleopatra’s body is to be removed on a ‘bed’ of some kind serving as a bier ... it does not necessarily imply that she dies on it.

This essay investigates the “bed” in the final scene of *Antony and Cleopatra*. Why do playwrights, directors, and editors of the play feel compelled to excise the bed from Cleopatra’s suicide? If a bed is present in the scene, what sort of a bed is it and how does it function in the *mise-en-scène* that speaks to the overall dramaturgy of the tragedy? In other words, how is the bed emblematic as both a literary trope and stage property?

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We have no way of knowing how Cleopatra’s death scene was presented on the Jacobean stage. In Charles Sedley’s 1677 Antony and Cleopatra, Cleopatra dies kneeling by Antony. In a much more popular Restoration version of the story, produced the same year, John Dryden’s All for Love, which according to Dryden was written directly in imitation of Shakespeare, Cleopatra also dies in the same space as Antony but is sitting in state with him. Madelaine argues that Dryden may have had knowledge of a theatrical lineage tracing to Shakespeare’s play, and furthermore that a throne is the most common indicator of full majesty on Elizabethan and Jacobean stages. In Frederick Chatterton’s 1873 Drury Lane production, Cleopatra dies failing on the altar. In the Langtry-Wingfield production at Princess Theatre, London 1890, and Louis Calvert’s 1897 production at Queen’s Theatre, Manchester, Cleopatra died erect on her throne. In production history, a throne has rivalled, if not surpassed, a bed, as a popular locale for Cleopatra’s death. Cleopatra ends on her throne in Trevor Nunn’s 1974 Royal Shakespeare Company production starring Janet Suzman and the subsequent television adaptation. Indeed, a survey of productions from the eighteenth century to the recent 2017 production by the RSC demonstrates that Cleopatra often dies on her throne. Furthermore, Madelaine says that throneless Cleopatra may be an attempt to de-emphasise the grandeur of her death. Possibly, but certainly that depends on how Cleopatra’s grandeur is figured in the play itself.

The play provides some imagery of Cleopatra’s throne. Antony sends word through Alexas he will “piece” Cleopatra’s “opulent throne with kingdoms” (i.v.48). When Caesar speaks of Antony and Cleopatra colluding in Alexandria, he says in the marketplace “on a tribunal silver’d, / Cleopatra and himself in chairs of gold / Were publicly enthroned” (iii. vi.3–5). In most of the play, however, it is not Cleopatra’s throne, but her bed that figures prominently and foreshadows her suicide.

In the Shakespeare first folio, Caesar says “her bed” rather than “a bed” or “the bed”. Not necessarily indicative of theatrical practice but nonetheless telling of how the scene played out in early eighteenth-century imagination, an illustration for Nicholas Rowe’s 1714 Works of Shakespeare depicts Act 5, scene 2 with Cleopatra reclining in a small bed. In Samuel Daniel’s The Tragedy of Cleopatra, which some critics believe may have been in Shakespeare’s imagination when he wrote Antony and Cleopatra, there is a bed in Cleopatra’s tomb, and it is described in her death. The messenger Nintivus reports,

Lo in rush Caesars Messengers in haste,
Thinking to have prevented what was done,
But yet they came too late, for all was past.
For there they found stetch’d on a bed of gold,
Dead Cleopatra, and that proudly dead,

1 John Dryden, All for Love: or, the world well lost..., London, Thomas Newcomb for Henry Herringman, 1678, sig. A3.
2 Madelaine discusses the influence of Dryden’s play on subsequent productions of the scene. Dryden, however, removes all the lines about Cleopatra’s breast and nursing. Though Cleopatra dies on her throne with Antony, when they are discovered by a servant, he remarks, “See, see how the Lovers sit in State together” (Dryden, All for Love, sig. L3v, [italics mine]).
5 William Shakespeare, Mr. William Shakespeares comedies, histories & tragedies..., London, Isaac laggard and Edward Blount, 1623, sig. 222v.
6 Nicholas Rowe, ed., The works of Mr. William Shakespear : in nine volumes | with his life, by N. Rowe, Esq.; adorn’d with cuts..., 9 vols, London, printed for J. Tonson, E. Curli, J. Pemberton, and K. Sanger, 1714, vol. 7, p. 188.
In all the riche attyre procure shee could,
And dying Charmion trymming of her head.
And Eras at her feete, dead in like case.\textsuperscript{10}

In source definitively used by Shakespeare, Sir Thomas North’s translation of \textit{Plutarch} (1579), when Caesar’s men find the queen, they discover she is

starke dead, layed upon a bed of gold, attried and ariied in her royall robes, and one of her two women, which was called Iras, dead at her feete: and her other woman called Charmion halfe-dead, and trembling, trimming the diademe which Cleopatra ware upon her head.\textsuperscript{11}

If one accepts, as Madelaine and others do, that Shakespeare might have deviated from his sources and Caesar’s reference to the bed in Shakespeare’s play is ambiguous, then it is worth investigating the internal evidence in the play.

In Leslie Thomson’s comprehensive study of beds on the early modern stage, she contends that the use of beds must have been a conscious choice by playwrights, and when one considers the difficulties in staging a bed this becomes an even more salient point.\textsuperscript{12} In the case of Cleopatra’s bed, the challenges would have been mitigated by the advantageous ease of removing a body offstage through the use of the bed. Indeed, Thomson discovers that characters rarely sleep in beds but rather die or are killed in beds. She writes, “the use of a bed is typically pivotal in a play’s plot – a visual event with a significant build up and consequential effect”.\textsuperscript{13} In Sasha Roberts’s study of the dramatic and symbolic properties of the bed in Shakespearean tragedy, she argues that the bed has special implications in the genre that feature “tragic loading of the bed”.\textsuperscript{14} Roberts reads beds onstage as “an intense and compelling visual and symbolic arena for acting out powerful passions and transgressions, and for mapping the disruptions and collisions of public and private space”.\textsuperscript{15} Beds are feminine spaces implicated with sleeping, waking, marriage, sexual acts and childbirth. In Roberts’s study, however, she focuses on the beds in \textit{Romeo and Juliet} and \textit{Othello} and omits \textit{Antony and Cleopatra} entirely in her list of plays that require beds including the aforementioned plays as well as \textit{The Taming of the Shrew} (I.ii), \textit{Henry VI Part 2} (III.ii), \textit{Henry IV Part 2} (IV.v), and \textit{Cymbeline} (II.i).\textsuperscript{16} With its central female protagonist and queen, I cannot think of a Shakespearean tragedy, however, that occupies more of feminine space than \textit{Antony and Cleopatra}, and I argue it is the bed and not the throne that has the dramatic “build up” and “consequential effect”.

Throughout the play, there is juxtaposition between bed and battlefield, or what sometimes critics refer to as Venus and Mars. Alternatively, the bed itself is a battlefield or space of negotiation, and for Cleopatra it often signals triumph. When Enobarbus and Agrippa compare tales of Cleopatra, Agrippa calls her “Royal wench!” who made “great Caesar lay his sword to bed” (II.i.236–37). Though not mentioned in Shakespeare, in \textit{Plutarch} Cleopatra is carried to Julius Caesar in a mattress. In the tragedy, Cleopatra relays

\textsuperscript{13} Thomson, “Beds on the Early Modern Stage”, p. 49.
\textsuperscript{15} Roberts, “Let me the curtains draw”, p. 153.
\textsuperscript{16} Roberts, “Let me the curtains draw”, p. 159. Act and scene numbers are cited by Roberts.
to her female attendant Charmian the time she drank Antony “to his bed” and “Then put my tires and mantles on him, whilst / I wore his sword Philippan” (II.v.21–3). When Cleopatra conquers Antony in drinking he is submissive, on the bed, and she is able to usurp his masculine warlike attire. Later, when the messenger arrives bringing news to Cleopatra of Antony’s fate in Italy, she worries if he is dead, alive, or captive to Caesar. When the messenger begrudgingly reports Antony’s marriage to Octavia, it is figured in the bedroom:

MESSENGER. He’s bound unto Octavia.
CLEOPATRA. For what good turn?
MESSENGER. For the best turn i’the bed.
CLEOPATRA. I am pale, Charmian. (II.v.58–9)

Rather than a straightforward report of the betrothal, the messenger “turns” it into a sexual act and makes the bed the central locale of the transaction. Though Antony is safe and alive, Cleopatra’s bed has suffered defeat to the bed of Octavia. In the following Roman martial scene, which juxtaposes with the Egyptian domesticity of Cleopatra, Antony betrays his true longing for Cleopatra to Pompey when he says,

The beds i’the east are so soft; and thanks to you,
That call’d me timelier than my purpose hither;
For I have gain’d by ’t. (II.vi.50–2)

Despite his “gains”, Antony will eventually return to Cleopatra’s soft bed, waging war with Caesar. When Antony is winning he declares to her, “My nightingale, / We have beat them to their beds” (IV.xviii.8–19).

Caesar’s soldiers, however, do not remain beaten and in their beds, and with Cleopatra’s betrayal and deception of Antony (into thinking she has killed herself), her lover takes his own life. Upon stabbing himself, Antony tells Eros that he will be “A bridegroom in my death, and run into’t / As to a lover’s bed” (IV.xiv.101–2). The “death-as-bridegroom” motif is common in Shakespeare and the period, and again, the bed is always a key player. Thomson argues that Elizabethan staging may have visually emphasised this in Romeo and Juliet by using the same areas of the stage for Juliet’s bed and tomb.17 In terms of the other Shakespearean tragedy of lovers, it would be fitting to have some sort of bed for Cleopatra’s death since both she and Antony imagine it as their marital reunion. Just before her death, the queen says, “Husband, I come”, and upon discovering her body Caesar says she “looks like sleep, / As she would catch another Antony / In her strong toil of grace” (V.ii.286; V.ii.345–47). Janet Adelman argues that with their slow, leisurely pace, the rhythms of the final two acts suggest sexual intercourse.18 Likewise, Lynne Simpson attests that Cleopatra’s erotic death drive or Liebestod is evident in her evocative language. She writes of Cleopatra’s sexual puns on “will”, “thing”, “deeds”, and “come”, and writes:

The Elizabethan bawdy pun on “dying” informs the inextricable link between love and death in Antony and Cleopatra. Cleopatra pictures death as a lover whose pinch hurts but is desired (v.ii.294–5). At Antony’s death, Cleopatra had tried, paradoxically, to revive him by

making him “die” sexually: “Die when thou hast lived; / Quicken with kissing. Had my lips that power, / Thus would I wear them out” (iv.xv.39–42).

Death is consummation. The figs and asps used in Cleopatra’s death have often been read as phallic, and therefore visually a bed seems more fitting a prop than a throne or altar.

Furthermore, earlier in the play when the Soothsayer foreshadows the deaths of not only Cleopatra but also her women, Charmian and Iras, the entire section focuses upon domestic matters: beauty, marriage, childbirth, sex — all acts associated with beds and bedchambers. Charmian asks the Soothsayer to find her married and widowed to kings, including Octavius Caesar, and to have a child at fifty. They speak of her fertility, womb, and sexual desire. Alexis tells her, “You think none but your sheets are privy to your wishes”, indicating that figuratively only Charmian’s bedsheets know her secrets (i.ii.43–4). When Charmian implores the Soothsayer to tell Iras her future as well, Iras calls Charmian her “wild bedfellow” (i.ii.53). Throughout the fortune-telling, sexual puns on death and “dying” — in the sense of orgasm — continue as the Soothsayer tells the women that their “fortunes are alike”, portending their joint death in the final act of the play (l.ii.57).

The most compelling bed-image in the play, however, is certainly Enobarbus’s description of Antony’s initial encounter with Cleopatra on the river of Cydnus. Though her barge is described “like a burnish’d throne”, it is Antony who is alone “enthron’d i’ the market-place” and the image of Cleopatra’s grandeur and power is composed in an altogether different fashion (II.ii.201 and II.ii.225). Enobarbus says,

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. (II.ii.207–11)

Cleopatra is not sitting on a throne, but surrounded by servants whose postures frame her grace; she is luxurious, pleasured, and erotic.

This is the image I believe Shakespeare had in mind when writing Cleopatra’s death. The bed in the fifth act was probably not a curtained, four-poster, stately early modern bed, but some sort of small, portable bed or couch similar to the one depicted in Rowe. Thomson contends Cleopatra’s bed was probably a couch or daybed (a couch is called for or referred to in nine plays between 1580–1642), but there also seems to be little difference between a couch and a bed in the period.20 OED defines “couch” as “A frame or structure, with what is spread over it (or simply a layer of some soft substance), on which to lie down for rest or sleep; a bed”.21 In Henry Cockeram’s English Dictionary of 1623, a couch is “a little bed”.22 In David Garrick’s production of the play in 1759, the promptbook states Cleopatra “Goes to a Bed, or Sopha, which she ascends; her women compose her on it”.23 According to OED “sopha” or “sofa” has direct affiliations with Eastern countries as “a part of the floor raised a foot or two, covered with rich carpets and cushions, and used for sitting upon”.24 In examples of the word, a sofa typically includes rich materials

21 OED, “couch”, n. 1a.
22 OED, “couch”, n. 1a.
23 David Garrick, Antony and Cleopatra promptbook, London, Drury Lane, 3 January 1759, p. 96.
24 OED, “sofa”, n. 1.
such as “carpets of gold” and “marble”, and is also used for lying. This type of furniture figured with luxurious materials is evocative of the image of Cleopatra at Cydnus. Additionally, if it was small and portable it could have easily been taken up as per Caesar’s instruction at the end of the play.

Thomson cites Henslowe’s inventory of props transcribed by Edmund Malone as containing a “bedstead” listed with two tombs and immediately after a rock, cage, tomb, and hell mouth. At the time, a “bedstead” referred to the “wooden or metal stand on which a bed is raised” or “the framework of the bed.” Thomson uses this evidence to suppose that such categorisation indicates that they were large items stored together. It’s also possible that the bedstead is listed with two tombs because they were somehow used together. Characters dying in tombs or monuments, like Cleopatra, often require some sort of structure to die upon.

If we accept Caesar’s reference to the bed at the end of the play and all of the imagery that tragically – and I would add triumphantly – is used to load Cleopatra’s bed, then in v.ii the setting is a room in Cleopatra’s monument that features a little bed onstage. Cleopatra has already spoken about dreams of Antony and resolved to kill herself. She asks her women to “show” her “like a queen” and commands her “best attires”, her “crown and all” (v.ii.226–7, 231). The clown brings her the basket of figs with poisonous snakes, and Cleopatra’s women dress her in regalia. Though they are in the monument, this onstage dressing elicits the domestic sphere of women dressing (and undressing) in the bedchamber. Iras dies upon kissing her mistress, probably from grief. Cleopatra applies the asp to her chest and asks Charmian “Does thou not see my baby at my breast / That sucks the nurse asleep” (v.ii.308–9). Not only would this action be easier if Cleopatra was reclining, but the representation of children and nursing makes better sense on a bed than not on one. After applying the asp to her arm and finally succumbing to death, Charmian straightens Cleopatra’s lopsided crown. When the first guard enters, he asks “Where’s the queen?”, to which Charmian responds, “Speak softly, wake her not” (v.ii.319). A few lines later Charmian dies, fulfilling the Soothsayer’s pregnant prediction. Like on the river Cydnus, Cleopatra is framed by her servants and lying as if she were asleep.

If the bed or couch is included, the final theatrical image is a powerful one reminiscent of an iconic royal monument, including an effigy and bier. In the early modern period, tombs, more often than not, featured idealised representations of kings and queens lying as if they were asleep in full regalia. Just as in the play, dying was a ritualised art, and a royal death was lavishly memorialised in marble and gilt-bronze. Moments before she dies, Cleopatra says she is “from head to foot ... marble-constant” (v.ii.238–9). Though she is speaking of her sound resolution, she may also be prefiguring the image of her marble-like effigy. Royal funeral monuments were highly realistic such as King Henry VIII’s, which was “made veray like unto the Kings Majestis person”, or the one of Henry, Prince of Wales, which featured moveable arms and legs. In History of Britaine, John Speed remarks on the planned effigy of Henry VIII, “The king was to be recumbent, beside the Queen ‘not as death, but as persons sleeping, because to shew that famous Princes
leading behind them great fame”.

(According to Nigel Llewellyn, the doctrine of the king’s two bodies – that is, a split between the body natural and the body politic – figured in death. Even if the body natural dies, the body politic could live on as demonstrated in the cry, “The king [natural] is dead; long live the king [political]!” This is often why kings and queens were adorned in monuments with their symbols of power. Dressed in her robes and crown, lying on her bed in her monument, the image of the dead Cleopatra to an early modern audience must have evoked something like the effigy of Queen Elizabeth or Henry, Prince of Wales.

Though Caesar says Cleopatra will be buried with Antony, her onstage death is uncoupled. The queen is alone with her women, in a feminine space loaded with images of dressing, fertility, breasts, and nursing. Shakespeare devotes the last scene of his play to Cleopatra’s death and relegates the focus of the tragic conclusion entirely to her. As I have argued here, she dies on her symbolic bed, displaying her reclining eternal body politic in stage picture illustrative of a powerful effigy. In this act she has triumphed not only over Caesar, but also the decay of her natural body. Just as productions and editors remove the asp or have it bite Cleopatra’s arm rather than her breast, to take the bed out of Cleopatra’s monument and place her on a throne is to sanitise her death and insert our perhaps gendered expectations of royalty and power. Like Caesar, we would prefer to “take up” Cleopatra’s bed. The grandeur of her queenship, however, is the multi-faceted nature of her agency and rule, figured as sexual, erotic, personal, political, warlike, and pleasurable. Unlike Juliet, she does not die with her lover physically by her side, and unlike Desdemona, no man takes her life. Like she lived, Cleopatra dies – in her own space and on her own terms. The queen of the fertile Nile is not one who sits, but one who floats.

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