Cleopatra: An Astute Politician in the Mask of a Lover
(A Study on William Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra)

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Himadri Sekhar Roy and Neyoti Rani Koiry
Department of English, Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Bangladesh
Email: himadri_s_roy@yahoo.com

Abstract

Though born before the birth of Christ the interest and inquisitiveness of modern people remain the same as before regarding the mystifying and puzzling queen of Egypt, Cleopatra, who is mostly remembered for her political shrewdness, beauty, exquisiteness, sensuality, and romantic life. Cleopatra’s relationships with the Roman leaders, Julius Caesar and Mark Antony have given her the most notoriety. By seducing these two great Romans, with her bewitching and breathtaking beauty, Cleopatra clings to the pinnacle of the political power of Egypt for nearly two decades. Nevertheless, many people glorify Cleopatra as an immortal lover of Antony by overlooking her political strategy. This paper is designed to divulge the political shrewdness of Cleopatra who has utilized her passion, feminine vile and beauty to maintain her throne and independent kingdom. It will also prove the fact that how Cleopatra has used her love as a device to gain political interest. William Shakespeare’s (1564-1616) Antony and Cleopatra (1623) brings out this fact of Cleopatra’s diplomacy, although critics are divided in their opinions about this fact. A political study of this text will bring out the truth hidden behind Cleopatra’s beauty.

The couple, Antony and Cleopatra, is legendary in both the realm of fact and fiction. The story of this couple has received a varied treatment by many eminent authors of world literature. The relationship between these two persons has always remained an issue of dispute for both the critics and writers. Most of the writers glorified this couple as the embodiment of love by ignoring Cleopatra’s political strategy. However, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) in his renowned play Antony and Cleopatra (1623) reveals Cleopatra’s diplomatic policy of love. Even though many critics believe that Shakespeare also glorifies their love. Nevertheless, in reality Shakespeare remains true to history to represent Cleopatra as a shrewd politician in the mask of a lover. The character of Cleopatra is known as the most complex female character of all Shakespearean creations because of her multiple layers of mind. The paper is going to explore how Cleopatra uses Antony to sustain in her throne by using her womanly charm and manipulative power. The paper will also throw light on Cleopatra’s power fixation and the magnetic power of woman over man and over the whole world.

Many critics and playwrights have discussed on the topic of Cleopatra’s diplomatic policy of love. In the midst of them George Bernard Shaw (1856 –1950) is the most prominent. In his play Caesar and Cleopatra (1898) Shaw has thrown light on Cleopatra’s subtlety and political policy to overpower Caesar in order to obtain the throne of Egypt. And Cleopatra’s influence on Rome, where she lived as Caesar’s mistress. Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra is a sequel of Shaw’s Caesar and Cleopatra. Schiff’s biography of Cleopatra sets out to reveal some of the myths that have surrounded the famous queen for ages. It particularly portrays her as nothing more than a seductress, a famine fatale who led Julius Caesar astray and destroyed Mark Antony. In Cleopatra: A Life (2010), Schiff characterizes Cleopatra as an intelligent strategist focusing on maintaining her rule and independent kingdom. Plutarch (46 - 120AD) also in his famous volume Life of Antony has demonstrated Cleopatra as a seductress and strategit. Plutarch’s Life of Antony, which is a part of Parallel Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans written in the late 1st century, serves as the major source for Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra. In the same way, John Dryden (1631 –1700) was inspired by Shakespeare to write All For Love (1678) based on the love affair of Antony and Cleopatra. However, Dryden has distorted history by characterizing them as immortal lovers by ignoring the political intention. Sarah Pomeroy’s Women in Helenistic Egypt: From Alexander to Cleopatra (1990) examines the roles of women as queens, wives, business women, and slaves in Ptolemaic Egypt where Cleopatra has been shown as a shrewd strategist and an ingenious negotiator. To Mrs. Jameson she is a “brilliant antithesis, a
compound of contradictions …whose dazzling complexity continually mocks and elude us.” (Bhatia 249) she also writes, “I have not the slightest doubt that Shakespeare’s Cleopatra is the real historical Cleopatra the Rare Egyptian” (736). For F.S. Boas “Cleopatra is among Shakespeare’s women what Falstaff is amongst his men. Both have the same infinite complexity of nature in which seemingly contradictory qualities are reconciled. Fascination radiates equally from either personality, and as Falstaff, when completely bankrupt in honor and fortune, is till the knight and the gentleman, so Cleopatra, guilty of the most detestable and squalid forms of misconduct remains every inch a queen”. (737)

Cleopatra was the last member of the Ptolemaic dynasty to rule Egypt and, in fact, the last Hellenistic ruler left. Cleopatra was born in 69 BC - 68 BC. Cleopatra’s father was King Ptolemy XII. Little is known about Cleopatra’s mother, but some assumption presumes she may have been her father’s sister, Cleopatra V Tryphaena. When her father Ptolemy XII died in 51 BC, Cleopatra became co-regent with her 10-year-old brother Ptolemy XIII. They were married in keeping with Egyptian tradition. Whether she was as beautiful as was claimed, she was a highly intelligent woman and an astute politician, who brought prosperity and peace to a country that was bankrupt and split by civil war. Cleopatra was not willing to share power and strived to run the country herself. In defiance of custom, she even removed her husband’s name from coins and official documents. Three years later she was ousted from the throne for her excessive power fixation. She managed to seduce Caesar by her physical charm and cunning manipulation. More than twice of her age, Caesar could not resist the charms of a beautiful woman; he killed Ptolemy, and made Cleopatra the undisputed ruler of Egypt. For a time Julius Caesar carried on a love affair with her, and she bore him a son named Caesarion. After the assassination of Caesar she met Antony in 41 B.C. and uses the same tactics to hypnotize him, who completely fell under her spell. She allied herself with Mark Antony in an attempt to maintain the power of Ptolemies over Egypt. Antony was a strong part of authoritative Roman Empire at that time. In addition maintaining relationship with an influential person was politically advantageous to keep Egypt free from being a province of Rome and to extend Egypt’s power right across the Eastern Mediterranean and perhaps to Rome itself. As she used Caesar to secure the throne of Egypt, in the same way Antony was used by her as a safeguard of her royal authority.

In the play, Antony and Cleopatra, Shakespeare has never given a vision of true love. He remains true to history and presented Cleopatra as a crafty queen who utilizes love as political stipulation. Within the first ten lines of the play we get the conception of Cleopatra’s character, which Shakespeare wanted to convey. She was termed as lustful “gipsy” (I. i. 9) by Philo, one of the friends of Antony. The conversation between Philo and Demetrius reveals the fatal result of Antony’s neurotic infatuation towards Cleopatra. Their opinion is summed up exquisitely in the following words:

“The triple pillar of the world transformed
Into a strumpet’s fool”

(I. i. 12-13)

Shakespeare has manifested Cleopatra as a volatile woman. She is a woman who has extended her physical favour to Pompey, Caesar and other men whenever necessary, and in the same way; Antony was a prey to her political strategy. Cleopatra has the power to enslave man. Beauty, verbal equity, and sensuality were her major weapons to conquer men. She is believed to be one of the most beautiful women of all time. In the words of Schiff, “[Cleopatra]’s power has been made to derive from her sexuality, for obvious reason; as one of Caesar’s murderers had noted, “how much more attention people pay to their fears than to their memories!” It has always been preferable to attribute a woman’s success to her beauty rather than to her brains, to reduce her to the sum of her sex life.”

In addition, by combining all these things she had created such an enchanting personality that was impossible for any person to overlook. There is a fascination in Cleopatra’s personality that radiates even when she is bankrupt in honour and fortune. She may do the most abominable of acts, she may be utterly wicked in her conduct, yet she remains every inch a queen. The influence of her presence was irresistible. The fact is that there are so many facets of her personality that the best of men flock around her in droves. She is gorgeous and majestic. She is rich and she knows how to flaunt it to the utmost advantage so that her wealth becomes an attachment to her already considerable charms. Shakespeare has summed up the mystifying personality of Cleopatra in the words of Enobarbus. Who opines:

“Age cannot wither her nor custom stale
Her infinite variety: other woman cloy
The appetites they feed; but she makes hungry

1 Stacy Schiff, Cleopatra: A Life, Goodreads, 2013, web, 20 September 2013
<http://www.goodreads/author/quotes/5741/stacyschiff>
Where most she satisfies: for vilest things
Become themselves in her; that the holy priests
Bless her when she is riggish”

(II. ii. 239-244)

At one of her first meetings with Antony, Cleopatra decided to adorn herself and her servants as mythical beings on a barge in the River Cydnus. The ancient biographer Plutarch describes Cleopatra’s appearance at the river: “She was laid under a pavilion of cloth of gold of tissue, appareled and attired like the goddess Venus commonly drawn in picture.” Moreover, she was successful in her attempt; Antony was completely fascinated by her charm. In this play, Antony is so absorbed in Cleopatra’s love that he hardly remembered his duty and soldier ship. It seemed that to love her is what he was born for. Antony has been reduced from being a leader of men to being a follower of woman. Antony was:

“...carried away by her to Alexandria, there to keep holiday, like a boy, in play and diversion, squandering and fooling away in enjoyment that most costly of all valuables, time.” (Plutarch 1500)

Antony has enough experience to see through her lies but in his blind infatuation, he does exactly what she wants. However, at the end, he also realizes that his reputation is gradually declining due to his continuous carousing with Cleopatra. He rebukes himself for falling into intense dotage. He comprehends that:

“I must this enchanting queen break off
Ten thousand harms, more than the ills I know
My idleness doth hatch.”

(I. ii. 124-126)

Such powerful is Cleopatra’s enchantment that even after realizing his fall he cannot break himself free from this enslavement.

Cleopatra’s love does not contain any spiritual or intellectual content. Her love is based on situation and need. Love, in Antony and Cleopatra, is not comprised of private intimacies as it is in Romeo and Juliet (1597). Instead, love belongs to the public arena. The couple links private emotions to affairs of state. It is true that Mark Antony has a virility about him that is bound to fascinate any woman. Moreover, he owns one third of the world. All these qualities of Antony may bring about an initial fascination in Cleopatra, but this fascination is bound to lessen with lapse of time. What remains is only the profoundly political content of the relation. Antony himself calls her “a triple turned whore” (IV. xii. 13) an obvious reference to her being the lover of Julius Caesar and Pompey prior to Antony. She never allows Antony to go far away from her because her spiritually stripped love does not permit distance to shape its way. Cleopatra’s love is purely sensual and physical presence is essential for this kind of love. Plato admits four sorts of flattery, but Cleopatra had a thousand. Depending on Antony’s mood, she had at any moment some new delight or charm to meet his wishes. She played at dice with him, drank with him, hunted with him; and when he exercised in arms, she was there to see. Enobarbus’ words best summed up this frail nature of Cleopatra:

“I have seen her die twenty times upon far poorer moment. I do think there is mettle in death, which commits some loving act upon her, she has such celerity in dying.”

(I. ii. 138-139)

Antony and Cleopatra lived a hedonistic life of drinking, carousing, and sensuality. It is because of Cleopatra’s spiritually stripped love, she never shows any support to Antony when he was in acute psychological commotion. It is better to call it lust than love. She had loved Julius Caesar as flippantly as she loved Mark Antony. And after Antony’s death she would have transferred her charms with ease to Octavius Caesar.

Cleopatra’s action in the battle of Actium is most fitting instance of Cleopatra’s loveless union with Antony. The Battle of Actium was fought in September 2, 31 BC during the Roman Civil War between Octavian and Mark Antony. Octavius Caesar declared war against Antony for Antony’s negligence to the duty to Rome and towards his wife Octavia, who was Octavius’ sister. Antony accepts the challenge and starts war in the sea on the advice of Cleopatra, although he was strong on land. Cleopatra helped Antony with 60 fleets. However, in the middle of the war, Cleopatra fled from the battlefield without any reason and stunned at his lover’s departure, Antony quickly forgot the battle and sailed after his queen with forty ships. The departure of 100 ships doomed the Antonian fleet. While some fought on, others attempted to escape the battle. By late afternoon those that had remained surrendered to Agrippa. This act of fleeing was an act of great humiliation for a person like Antony. Through this defeat Antony not only lost half of the world but also his reputation and honour. In the words of Scarus:

“I never saw an action of such shame;
Experience, manhood, honour never before

2 University of Chicago, Cleopatra page, 2007.web, 3 June 2013
Did violate so itself.”

(III. x. 22-24)

Cleopatra’s fleeing from the scene has confused many critics, but it is a profound insight into Cleopatra’s psyche. There is no answer, why she left the battlefield in the middle of the war. When asked by Antony about the reason of her departure from the war she only gives a lame excuse of womanly fear:

“O my lord, my lord
Forgive me my fearful sails: I little thought
You would have follow’d”

(III. xi. 55-57)

This excuse of womanly fear from a courageous and majestic woman as Cleopatra is not only lame but also unbelievable. There must be some political tactics. As Antony was no longer powerful and a safeguard of her throne as before, she might have thought to shift from him to Octavius. In addition, her fleeing from the battle might be a preplanned action to satisfy Octavius. In the following scene, her treatment with Octavius’ envoy Thidias is the clear illustration of this. If she had loved Antony, she would not have accomplished such betrayal.

Shakespeare has introduced this volatile nature of Cleopatra in the play through the episode of Thidius. Thidius is the envoy of Octavius Caesar; who received a warm reception from Cleopatra. It appears that, in the form of Thidius, she was looking for a friend in the court of Caesar because her next mission was conquering Octavius Caesar. Cleopatra informs Thidius that, she never gave her honour willingly to Antony but was forced to do so. Subsequently, when the messenger wants to know whether she can convey this to Caesar, for it is bound to please his heart. Cleopatra replies:

“I kiss the conquering hand: tell him I am prompt
To lay my crown at’s feet, and there to kneel”

(III. Xiii. 75-76)

These lines clearly expose what Cleopatra actually has in her mind. Her fickle love towards Antony has been presented by Shakespeare through this diplomatic scene.

Cleopatra’s influence over Caesar and Antony is the perfect example of woman’s magnetic power over man and world. Shakespeare has emphasized the influence and possibilities that a woman in control can possess. Shakespeare has portrayed Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, as a commanding presence. She controlled Egypt, Antony, and even Caesar. Her feminine capabilities affected love, relationships, and the decisions that governed both Rome and Egypt. In the lines of Schiff, “Cleopatra stood at one of the most dangerous intersections in history; that of women and power. Clever women, Euripides had warned hundreds of years earlier, were dangerous.” From the opening of Shakespeare’s play, we are introduced to Cleopatra’s domination over Antony. Her dominance to Antony “in theatrical terms, in military terms, and ultimately in sexual terms” (Dusinberre 57) confirms the imbalance of gender equality in the play, and we consider Cleopatra the character with the most control. Cleopatra’s distinctive qualities are emphasized by Shakespeare when he compares her to Venus, and Isis. Cleopatra’s power continues throughout the play as Antony continues to make political decisions based on his feelings for Cleopatra. He follows her into a battle by sea, even after being warned by Enobarbus that their efforts would be stronger on land. He withdraws from the sea battle inappropriately and in doing so discards his responsibilities as commander and male. Rocking the balance of gender, Cleopatra fills the role of a dominant male by being assertive in her decision making while Antony follows her like a lovesick school boy. Thus, Shakespeare has presented Cleopatra as such a powerful woman who can wrap great men around her finger. Her personal charisma far exceeds her talents as a strategist.

Shakespeare’s representation of Cleopatra brings out some of the misogynist character traits of the play. In the play, woman has been presented as cunning and hypocritical. Through the words of Enobarbus, Shakespeare brings out his aversion for sly woman. By observing Queen Cleopatra’s activities Enobarbus comments that. “There is never a fair woman has a true face” (II. vi. 99) In All For Love a great play by John Dryden written on Antony and Cleopatra, Dryden also discloses the fact of misogyny through the character of Ventidius, who opines:

“O woman! Woman! Woman! All the Gods
Have not such power of doing good to man
As you of doing harm.”

(II. i. 451-453)

The vile and diplomatic nature of Cleopatra makes the author abhor woman. He represented woman as enchantress whose beauty cast a dangerous enchantment over men. To H. W. Mabie

3 Stacy Schiff, Cleopatra: A Life, Goodreads,2013, web, 20 September 2013
<http://www.goodreads/author/quotes/5741/stacyschiff>
“Cleopatra is the greatest of all enchantresses. She has wit, grace, humour; the intoxication of sex breaths from her; she unites the passion of her great temperament with the fathomless coquetry of a courtesan of genius … it is the magnificence which invests Cleopatra’s criminality with a kind of sublimity so vast is the scale of her being and so tremendous the force of her passions.” (Howard 271)

Cleopatra is a Machiavellian politician who seeks personal gain above anything else. Her conquest to the throne can be termed as conquest by criminal virtue in the words of Niccolo Machiavelli. Conquest by criminal virtue is one in which the new prince secures his power through cruel, immoral deeds, such as the execution of political rivals, as had been done by Cleopatra. Her political performance can be explained as Machiavellian. She directs herself with the strategy of Machiavelli that the promise given was a necessity of the past; the word broken is a necessity of the present. Present always dominates her. She never bothers about whom she used to love and who helped her. She always seizes the moment to sustain in power. She used Julius Caesar when it was necessary and in the same way Antony was used, in addition she also had planned to conquer Octavius Caesar but ultimately she failed in that mission. In this sense, making relationships and taking the false promises of love was a political requirement to her. Consequently she never hesitates to break those false promises of love. To a Machiavellian character like hers ethics, morality and honesty never made any sense, only throne was significant to her. She was highly ambitious, whose sole aim was to enlarge her kingdom. Antony gave Cleopatra, land in Phoenicia, Syria, Cyprys, Sicily, a coastal strip of Arabia all the way down to the Red Sea and the side of Judea. Cleopatra wanted more. She felt that as a Ptolemy, she deserved all of Judea, which had once belonged to her ancestors. As a Machiavellian ruler, she knew, however, that it was important to allure Egyptian population. Cleopatra was primarily a Macedonian queen. She was Greek Macedonian by Descent and did not have a drop of Egyptian blood in her veins. She knew that it was important to gain the support of her Egyptian followers, because they made up the majority of the diverse population of her empire. Once the Egyptian masses supported her, the smaller upper class would have to follow suit. She was the first of her Dynasty to learn the Egyptian language among the many languages she knew. Plutarch wrote that besides her native Greek, she spoke the language of the Ethiopians, the Hebrews, Troglydotes, Arabians, Syrians, Medes, and the Parthians. He noted that none of her royal predecessors went to the trouble to acquire Egyptian tongue. “It was a pleasure merely to hear the sound of her voice, with which, like an instrument of many strings, she could pass from one language to another,” (Plutarch 1500). She wanted to make her as the voice of Egypt by learning their language and accepting their religion. Cleopatra loved to recognize herself as the representative of the Egyptian Goddess Isis.

Cleopatra did not commit suicide by chasing the path of Antony. Many critics have misinterpreted Cleopatra’s suicide as a sacrifice of an immortal lover by paying no attention to the fact of history. The fact is that, she had no option but to commit suicide. She was intelligent enough to understand that the ruthless Caesar would not show any generosity towards her. After the defeat of Egypt in the battle of Actium, Octavius Caesar issued an order to imprison Cleopatra, which was intolerable to her. She would like to die in a ditch of Egypt rather than dying in Rome as a prisoner.

“Shall they hoist me up
And show me to the shouting varletry
Of censuring Rome? Rather a ditch in Egypt
Be gentle grave unto me! rather on Niles’s mud
Lay me stark na’d and let the water flies
Blow me into abhorring!”

(V. ii. 55-60)

Cleopatra was a woman who had never compromised with her identity. Her suicide signifies the unconquerable self of Cleopatra. She chooses an honourable death by refusing to compromise with her identity. Even her way of dying was royal. She dies in the attire of a royal queen. She did not let herself deprive from the royal authority until the last moment of her death. Her sovereign authority does not allow her to be an Egyptian puppet in the hand of Romans. Cleopatra tried her charms on the cool and calculating Octavian but he would have none of it. And seeing everything lost, she committed suicide. Rather than falling under the domination of Octavius Caesar, Cleopatra committed suicide on August 30, 30 B.C., by means of an asp, a poisonous Egyptian serpent, and symbol of divine royalty. After Cleopatra had died there was a huge struggle for the power of Egypt, which puts her in the limelight, despite the fact that she was no longer alive. Cleopatra’s son by Caesar, Caesarion, was proclaimed pharaoh by the

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5 Ibid.
Egyptians after Cleopatra’s death. However, Octavian had already won claim to the throne. Therefore, Caesarion was captured and executed. This act ended the line of Egyptian pharaohs and started a new era.

Enslavement of Antony in Egypt represents a clash of East and West. Cleopatra’s manipulation was a revolt against the imperialistic impulse of western role. Cleopatra was bound to live in Rome with Caesar because if she had refused to be with him in Rome she would have lost her throne which Caesar has recently attributed to her. She wanted to sustain her throne at the cost of anything. It was believed that she was sided with the Republicans in the plot of Caesar’s assassination. After Caesar was murdered, on 15 March 44 BC, she then returned to Egypt and assumed sole rule of Egypt making her and Julius Caesars’ son co-regent. In 41 BC, Mark Antony, one of the triumvirs who ruled Rome following Caesar's death, sent his intimate friend Quintus Dellius to Egypt to summon Cleopatra to meet Antony and answer questions about her loyalty. During the Roman civil war, she allegedly had paid much money to Cassius. It seems that, in reality Antony wanted Cleopatra’s promise to support his intended war against the Parthians. Cleopatra arrived in great state, and Antony was so charmed that he chose to spend the winter of 41 BC–40 BC with her in Alexandria. Moreover Cleopatra got an opportunity to revenge on west for imprisoning her. Antony’s imprisonment in Egypt was a kind of revenge against Caesar’s imprisonment of Cleopatra in Rome. For her cunning policy, she was known as “serpent of old Nile” (I. v. 16) and “false soul of Egypt” (IV.xii.25). Some historians say Antony was enslaved by Cleopatra’s seductive powers. Antony treated her as a monarch of equal stature rather than a subject, much to the dismay of the people of Rome. In addition, she seizes the opportunity to enslave Antony and to make him die at the pedestal of her desire. Shakespeare does not align the play’s sympathies with the West. The play suggests that the East will live on as a visible and unconquerable counterpoint to the West.

The saga between Antony and Cleopatra might have changed the world. If Antony had succeeded in winning solitary control of Rome with Cleopatra as his queen, she could have changed the pathway of the Roman Empire, making the world we live in today a different place. Her ambition made her beloved by most and hated by a few. It was these few who eventually defeated her at the Battle of Actium ending her aspiration but preserving her story. Her legacy itself serves to accomplish her goal of restoring glory to Egypt in a way. When people think of Egypt, they think of the powerful Queen Cleopatra who would do whatever it took to save her empire. She has been an inspiration to many over the years because of her politically cunning and uniquely crafted image. It is this ability to be the perfect embodiment of all things beauty and ugliness, virtue and vice, has made her the mystifying queen and an astute politician of all time who has used love as a mask to accomplish political favour.

**Bibliography**

Antony and Cleopatra is a tragic play by William Shakespeare first performed in 1606. Summary. Read a Plot Overview of the entire play or a scene by scene Summary and Analysis. Plot Overview. Summary & Analysis. See a complete list of the characters in Antony and Cleopatra and in-depth analyses of Mark Antony, Cleopatra, and Octavius Caesar. Character List. Mark Antony. Welcome to the LitCharts study guide on William Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra. Created by the original team behind SparkNotes, LitCharts are the world's best literature guides. Antony and Cleopatra: Introduction. A concise biography of William Shakespeare plus historical and literary context for Antony and Cleopatra. Brief Biography of William Shakespeare. Shakespeare's father was a glove-maker, and Shakespeare received no more than a grammar school education. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind around 1590 and moved to London, where he became an actor and playwright. He was an immediate success: Shakespeare soon became the most popular playwright of the day as well as a part-owner of the Globe Theater. Enter CLEOPATRA, CHARMIAN, and IRAS.

CLEOPATRA My desolation does begin to make A better life. 'Tis paltry to be Caesar; Not being Fortune, he's but Fortune's knave, A minister of her will: and it is great To do that thing that ends all other deeds; Which shackles accidents and bolts up change; Which sleeps, and never palates more the dug, The beggar's nurse and Caesar's. PROCULEIUS Caesar sends greeting to the Queen of Egypt; And bids thee study on what fair demands Thou mean'st to have him grant thee. CLEOPATRA What's thy name? PROCULEIUS My name is Proculeius. CLEOPATRA I dream'd there was an Emperor Antony: O, such another sleep, that I might see But such another man! DOLABELLA If it might please ye