

## Shakespeare's Sea Creatures: Mermaids as Temptation in *Antony and Cleopatra*

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**Abstract:** *The sea was seen as a space of imagination and endless possibilities in early modern culture. This essay discusses Enobarbus' description of Cleopatra's first encounter with Mark Antony on the river Cydnus (2.2.216-228) in Antony and Cleopatra, in relation to early modern depictions of mermaids as enticing and fascinating sea-creatures. First, I discuss the symbol of the mermaid in early modern England, based on the book by Tara Pedersen, Mermaids and the Production of Knowledge in Early Modern England (2015), and then I analyse the figures of mermaids and Nereids in the texts of Shakespeare's contemporaries, such as A dialogue between custom and veritie concerning the vse and abuse of dauncing and minstrelsie (1581) by Thomas Lovell, as well as the anonymous pamphlets A most strange and true report of a monstrous fish, who appeared in the forme of a woman, from her waste vpwards (1604) and The honorable entertainment giuen to the Queenes Maiestie in progresse (1591). I argue that Shakespeare's dramatic representation of the mermaids guiding Cleopatra's barge has a dynamic quality, which helps the audience visualize the luxurious images evoked by Enobarbus in the imagination of his audience (Roman generals attending a political meeting). As in many early modern representations, mermaids are a sign of temptation for mortals and they symbolize, in the play, Cleopatra's enticement of Mark Antony, suggested by lush golden oars and perfumed sails.*

**Keywords:** *Antony and Cleopatra*, early modern theatre, mermaids, Shakespeare, space

In Greek mythology, sirens are mythical creatures, half-birds, half-females, who lure sailors off their course through their singing, causing the ship to crash against the rocks on the shore. Homer's *Odyssey* famously mentions the lure of the mermaids on Odysseus' sailors, but not on Odysseus himself, because he took the precaution of stopping his ears with wax and binding himself to the ship's mast. In medieval times, sirens from ancient Greek mythology acquired a new meaning, and their appearance shifted to half-fish half-woman sea creatures, who were able to lure sailors through their songs. Yet all these cultural metaphors cannot explain the fascination with the mermaid's song and appearance throughout the ages. In *Mermaids and the Production of Knowledge in Early Modern England* (2015), Tara Pedersen points to various depictions of the mermaid in early modern England, as she thinks that the figures of mermaids are widespread in the literature and culture of the period,

but they are also “indexical” (101), in the sense that they point out to something “and the state to which they point is far from certain or fixed” (101). I argue that these symbols of the mermaid—in early modern popular literature and in drama—act as powerful triggers of sexual and gender identity and agency, showing both the fear of female power and the collective wish of a male-dominated society to overcome that secret female capability and bring it under male control. Moreover, summoning a mermaid to the readers’ or the theatre audience’s imagination is an active strategy of achieving agency in the face of threatening social powers, by showing that these strange imaginary sea-creatures may be defeated by reasonable thought.

As representations of specific individuals’ selfhood, mermaids epitomise a world of infinite possibilities, like the sea from which they emerge. As symbols of the temptations of the senses, the mermaids’ songs are poetic images suggesting the negative influence of singing and dancing—or, generally, entertainment, including the theatre—on people’s lives. In the early modern edition of a poem by medieval poet Thomas Lovell, entitled *A dialogue between custom and veritie concerning the vse and abuse of dauncing and minstrelsie* (1581), the speaker (Veritie) deplores the negative effects of dancing on men’s minds (when dancing with women); the righteous character (Veritie, or Truth) gives the advice to men to refrain from dancing with females, lest they be lured by their charms. As Veritie says, “In company with dauncing dame / see that thou do not liue. / Gaze not upon her beautie braue, / hear not her mermaides noyse: / Lest thou be snared, and lest that she / inchaunt thee with her voice” (Lovell *A dialogue*, not paginated). The fictional mermaid’s song is compared to noise, the negative effect of music on the human mind. Alternatively, the poem projects the medieval angst related to female enticement. However, these words are spoken by Verity (Truth), who is generally represented as female in early modern iconography.

Even more so, the spokesperson for Truth brands the minstrels’ songs as alluring and pleasure-provoking, advising the righteous young man to avoid such enchantments. As Verity says, “The minstrels with their Mermaides sound, / doo so bewitch lewd youth / That they prefer the deuilish daunce, / before the wholsom trueth” (Lovell *A dialogue*, not paginated). Men dancing with women is a form of discarding male identity and letting men be tempted by the vilified woman’s body and her alluring sexuality. Yet again, it is the poetic embodiment of Truth who speaks these words against men dancing with women, while men dancing alone, for God’s praise (such as David’s dance), is a symbol of legitimate religious worship and, therefore, it is allowed and even praised. Mermaids are enticing female sea creatures in early modern English literature, and their song can lead men into undesirable temptation. The excitement produced by dancing in the theatre in early modern England is also connected with the mermaids’ inducement and it can be dangerous for the

members of the audience, who let themselves be ensnared by their imagination and forget about reasonable thought, or the truth of life. These negative comments about music and dancing were typical for Puritans, who branded the theatre—and especially music and dancing produced on stage—as particularly harmful for the human mind.

The fundamental fear of imaginary sea creatures—especially mermaids—as symbols of temptation and angst was fed by pamphlets and “true” reports published in the early modern period, such as the anonymous pamphlet entitled *A most strange and true report of a monstrous Fish, who appeared in the forme of a Woman, from her waste vpwards* (1604). The full title of this seven-page report continues with the following details: “Seene in the Sea by diuerse men of good reputation, on the 17 of February last past 1603, neare *Gylmanes* point, in the parish of *Pendine*, in the Countie of *Carmarthen*” (Anon, sig. A2<sup>r</sup>). Carmarthenshire is a county in south-western Wales, and the geographic reality—represented by specific location details—is supposed to highlight the truthfulness of the report. These pamphlets were the early modern equivalent of modern newspapers and the report was supposed to be realistic because several men of good reputation vouched for its veracity. Furthermore, the sighted apparition occurred only a year before the actual printing of this pamphlet, so the anonymous writer pretends that this is a true report. To be even more convincing, a full image of the mermaid is presented in the woodcut on the title page (Figure 1), showing a hybrid sea creature with the head of a lion, the upper-half body of a naked woman, while the lower part has the tail of a fish. The lion’s mouth is open, as if to sing, or to swallow the passers-by, while her arms are extended in the form of an invitation, suggesting that she intends to lure men with her singing voice and her sexuality. There is no suggestion of beauty, because the lion’s head prevents any association with a beautiful woman, while the naked woman’s breasts indicate sexual attraction. Her hair is elaborately arranged, she has hound ears, and her neck is adorned with a necklace made of sea-shells.

The pamphlet is dedicated to the writer’s friend, Mr. H.P., “at his lodgings in London” (Anon, *A most strange and true report* sig. A2<sup>r</sup>), and this detail gives a note of veracity to the entire story. The sea creature was first seen swimming in the sea by Thomas Raynold, a yeoman from Pendine, who then mobilised others to keep watch for three hours. Raynold and other witnesses were later examined by William Saunders, according to the report (Anon, *A most strange and true report* sig. A4<sup>r</sup>), and there is a list of those people who claimed to have seen the mermaid, and who were examined for their sanity. The sighting is described as “a most rare and strange matter here in our confines” (Anon, *A most strange and true report* sig. A2<sup>v</sup>) and “a most strange and wonderful thing” (Anon, *A most strange and true report* sig. A3<sup>r</sup>). According to the author, other peculiar creatures and events have been

reported, such as monstrous births, strange beasts, whales and dragons, and they show God’s majesty, which is also the greatness of nature (Anon, *A most strange and true report sig. A2<sup>v</sup>*). Disregarding the religious connotation, this is an ecocritical interpretation of marvels seen at sea, *avant la lettre*.

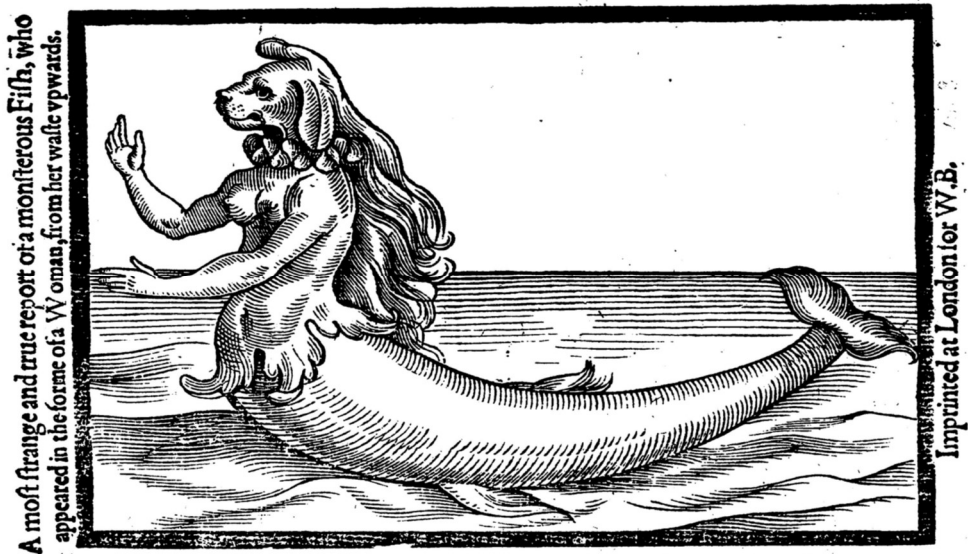


Figure 1. The image of a mermaid on the title page of the anonymous pamphlet *A most strange and true report of a monstrous fish, who appeared in the forme of a woman, from her waste vpwards* (1604).

However, the manifestation of these supernatural creatures may be taken as a warning for people that their sinful ways should be amended. The mermaid has long fair hair and her colour is brown, but her hands are like a woman’s. As if she were able to shift shape and colour, the mermaid turned into “cullour gray” (Anon, *A most strange and true report sig. A3<sup>v</sup>*), according to the report, and then she disappeared at night, but only after many witnesses saw her. There is no mention of singing, only of changing colour along with the sea, and the report appears to be truthfully honest. However, the pamphlet’s conclusion refers directly to James I, as the sighting is ambiguously interpreted as a good omen referring to the new king’s reign. Yet, it is presented in the form of a rhetorical question: “What this wonder may pretend, to his Majestie that made vs all, it is best knowen: but with vs, greatly admired” (Anon, *A most strange and true report sig. A4<sup>r</sup>*). Despite the ambivalent remark, the inference is that the occurrence of the mermaid is a good prediction for the future reign

of James I, as the sea creature appeared in 1603, when James I ascended to the throne of England.

Apparitions of mermaids (real or imaginary) were used for political purposes in early modern England, in order to show that the current monarch was better than the previous one (who was a woman, Queen Elizabeth I). Therefore, political propaganda is a strong incentive in the representation of these symbolic sea creatures, and imagination plays an important role in their visual description. Like an image in the mirror, there is a theatrically significant representation of a mermaid, in an anonymous report of a pageant dedicated to the celebration of Queen Elizabeth I, who stayed at the Earl of Hertford in Hampshire in 1591, during her progress in the region. The report is entitled *The honorable entertainment giueen to the Queenes Maiestie in progresse, at Eluetham in Hampshire, by the right honorable the Earle of Hertford* and it was published in London in 1591. During the entertainment of the third day, there was a banquet, and there were many figurines of animals made of sugar; among the creatures of the earth (reptiles), such as snakes, adders, vipers, toads and worms, there were creatures of the sea, such as “Mermaides, whales, dolphins, cungars, sturgions, pikes, breams and all sorts of fishes, in sugar worke” (Anon, *The honorable entertainment*, sig. D4<sup>v</sup>). As Queen Elizabeth I was known to have had a sweet tooth, because she liked sugared things, these images of mermaids and sea creatures made of sugar were meant to please the queen and to show that her reign was auspicious.

Mermaids, therefore, embodied various cultural codes in Elizabethan and Jacobean England; they were symbols of female enticement, of male resistance to the allures of feminine temptation, or they were just images of sweet and delightful things that royalty liked to eat. Mermaids appeared as representations of selfhood and they suggested a potentially transformative effect on those who engaged with them in an active way. In all cases, mermaids were imaginary creatures to be reckoned with, as they did not appear easily to humans. However, in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, the figure of the mermaid is potentially dangerous, but she is also a positive image, taken as a symbol of the theatre world. Enobarbus’ narrative of Cleopatra’s barge (2.2.200-235) is the description of a pageant created by Queen Cleopatra for the benefit of the Roman General Mark Antony, so it is a symbol of the play’s meta-theatricality. The mermaids symbolize one man’s (Mark Antony’s) failure to resist the temptation of the senses, represented by Cleopatra. However, this theatrical description should be interpreted with a grain of salt, because this is a Jacobean play, as Shakespeare probably completed *Antony and Cleopatra* at the end of 1606 or early in 1607. Shakespeare was then in his early forties and had been writing for the theatre for about seventeen years. Therefore, there is one man (Mark Antony), who is apparently seduced by the

alleged mermaid (Cleopatra), but there is another man in the play (Octavius Caesar), who resists her allure of histrionics and theatricality.

Scene 2.2 is set in Rome and it is definitely political, as the play moves from crisis to crisis. Mark Antony has made a difficult break with Cleopatra in Alexandria and he now faces Octavius Caesar's accusations of having weakened the Roman power in the east. The scene begins with a conversation between Enobarbus (one of Mark Antony's followers) and Lepidus (one of the triumvirs governing Rome, next to Mark Antony and Octavius Caesar). Plutarch mentions Domitius Aenobarbus in his *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (translated in 1579), which is the direct source for Shakespeare's play. Moreover, this scene of the description of Cleopatra's barge on the river Cydnus is taken directly from Plutarch. Therefore, there is an atmosphere of political intrigue, in which the triumvirs try to reach an accord. Antony appears favourably in this scene, frankly admitting his faults, but he also defends himself against undeserved criticism. On the other hand, Octavius Caesar is uncompromisingly in control and he accepts no apologies from Mark Antony. In this context, Agrippa (Caesar's friend) comes up with the idea of Antony marrying Octavia, and he describes the lady's qualities. As if to emphasize the public importance of this marriage, Agrippa concludes that, in the case of Antony marrying the pious Roman lady, "Truths would be tales, / Where now half-tales be truths" (2.2.141-142).<sup>1</sup> There is a clear opposition between the enticement of Cleopatra's sexuality and histrionics and the proper marriage to a noble Roman lady (Octavia), which would repair Antony's damaged reputation. The opposition between "truth" and "half-tales" (or fictional narratives) brings forth the opposition between the truth of Octavia's honesty as a virtuous Roman lady and the imaginary tales of Cleopatra as an Egyptian temptress, or mermaid.

Against this political background, after the diplomatic deal is struck, the triumvirs retire, and Enobarbus is left with Agrippa and Maecenas. It is here and now that Enobarbus recreates, for the benefit of his male Roman listeners, the half-true tales about Cleopatra's enticement of Mark Antony, which look rather exaggerated. When Maecenas asks whether it is true that the banquets in Alexandria were so plentiful that people ate "Eight wild boars roasted whole at a breakfast, and but twelve persons there" (2.2.189-190), Enobarbus confirms in a similarly hyperbolic manner: "We had much more monstrous matter of feast, which worthily deserved nothing" (2.2.191-193). These hyperboles suggest the rhetorical figures of the theatre. Then Enobarbus continues with the setting of the scene of Cleopatra's seduction: "When she first met Mark Antony, she pursed up his heart upon the river Cydnus"

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<sup>1</sup> References to Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* are to the Arden Shakespeare edition, edited by John Wilders (1995); acts, scenes and lines will be given parenthetically in the text.

(2.2.196-197). Cydnus is not in Alexandria, but in Cilicia, in the south east of what is now Turkey, as Cilicia was a Roman province at that time. The metaphor is monetary, as if Cleopatra put Antony's heart in her purse, like money or commodity. In counterpart, when she is about to die, Cleopatra tells Charmian, "I am again for Cydnus / To meet Mark Antony" (5.2.227-228). Two opposite moments of life, love and death lie at the two ends of a space of encounter, which is the theatre space. As Cleopatra tells Iras, when referring to their being exhibited as prisoners of war in Rome, "The quick comedians / Extemporally will stage and present / Our Alexandrian revels" (5.2.215-217). Being worried that she would be represented on stage by "Some squeaking Cleopatra" (5.2.219), the Egyptian queen alludes to the conditions of Shakespeare's theatre, where Cleopatra's role was interpreted by a boy actor.

The visuality of the description of Cleopatra's barge is marked by the vivid colours of the golden barge, described in poetic detail. As Enobarbus tells Maecenas and Agrippa, "I will tell you. / The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne, / Burned on the water" (2.2.200-202). We should remember that Enobarbus describes this image to the Romans, who are his audience, like in a play-within-the-play, and he appeals to their imagination to visualize the scene. Enobarbus describes the "purple sails" (2.2.204), which are "perfumed" (2.2.204), and the silver oars that beat the water rhythmically. The water becomes "amorous of their strokes" (2.2.207), and the winds are "love-sick" (2.2.204) with the perfumed sails, so the nautical imagery suggests sexual enticement. Cleopatra is compared to Venus (2.2.210), the Roman goddess of love, surrounded by "dimpled boys" (2.2.212) and "smiling cupids" (2.2.212). The luscious sensory imagery is pervasive, but when speaking of Cleopatra as Venus, Enobarbus says, "where we see / The fancy outwork nature" (2.2.210-211). This is a caveat for Enobarbus' male audience in the play (Agrippa and Maecenas), as well as for the audience of the play (the people in the theatre), in the sense that they should not believe all the beautiful words describing this barge, because their inflamed imagination may surpass reality. This is a reminder that Enobarbus' narrative and the hyperbolic visual images are part of a theatrical play.

In this context, Enobarbus continues with the description of the women in Cleopatra's barge: "Her gentlewomen, like the Nereides, / So many mermaids tended her i'th' eyes, / And made their bends adornings" (2.2.216-218). The Nereids were sea-nymphs, daughters of the sea god Nereus. They were imagined as young girls who inhabited the water and were beneficial to the humans they interacted with. The nautical metaphors suggest that Cleopatra's ladies are beautiful creatures, similar to sea-nymphs, and their bended position indicates that they are loyal to their queen. The leader of the gentlewomen's group is also similar to a mermaid: "At the helm / A seeming mermaid steers" (2.2.218-219). It is not clear whether this seeming mermaid is

Cleopatra herself, or one of her leading ladies, but the image is like a theatrical pageant meant to impress royalty. This description collapses the boundaries between theatrical audience and representation, as the richness of the metaphors and the colours and movement, as well as the allusions to mermaids, create an atmosphere of enticement. The implication is that Cleopatra, as a mermaid, has staged this scene to impress Mark Antony; as she is the stage-director of a play-within-the-play, Mark Antony is her audience (together with the other Roman men in attendance), while Enobarbus is the playwright and actor narrating this scene for his audience of Roman men, as well as for the audience in the theatre. The meta-theatrical implications are prevalent, and the mermaids symbolize the enticement of the senses, which made Mark Antony fall into Cleopatra's golden snare.

The suggestion of theatrical plays as mermaids—enticing the audience's imagination through the rich images of the theatre—is also a valid interpretation of this scene. Like the audience in the theatre, Enobarbus' audience in the play (Agrippa and Maecenas) is mesmerized by the luscious description. Agrippa frequently exclaims, “O, rare for Antony!” (2.2.215), “Rare Egyptian!” (2.2.228), or “Royal wench!” (2.2.236). The epithet “rare” suggests an exceptional or miraculous situation, while “wench” is habitually associated with a prostitute. However, Cleopatra is a “royal wench” (2.2.236), so her status as a queen is important in the political equation of power, as is her sexuality. From this perspective, the histrionic nature of Cleopatra's character is a pivotal point around which the play's meta-theatricality develops. It is also interesting that Enobarbus' rich visual and olfactory description (golden oars and perfumed sails) does not contain acoustic metaphors, such as music, for example. Yet, there is an acoustic metaphor when the description moves to the reception of this scene by Mark Antony. As a member of the audience attending Cleopatra's pageant, Antony is impressed. When the people attending the scene swarm towards Cleopatra's barge (according to Enobarbus), Antony is left alone in the marketplace, “Whistling to th'air” (2.2.226). This aural metaphor is similar to the audience crowding to a popular play in Shakespeare's time, while one person is left alone to wonder why he/she is deserted. Mark Antony considers himself one of the most powerful men of the Roman Empire, but everybody is seduced by Cleopatra's show. The theatrical spectacle staged by Cleopatra is more powerful than the Roman show of power.

Even more so, Enobarbus' description of Cleopatra's theatrical display is a narrative description of the live events having occurred on the river Cydnus. Both events—the mermaids' enticement on Cleopatra's barge and Enobarbus' description of this scene—are part of a theatrical show, which is the play *Antony and Cleopatra*. Enobarbus' narrative has an audience (Agrippa and Maecenas), and these men interact with the narrator's voice by expressing amazement and appreciation. Moreover, Cleopatra's histrionics are



represented through her lack of breath, like an actor who loses breath when uttering a long speech. As Enobarbus says, “I saw her once / Hop forty paces through the public street / And, having lost her breath, she spoke and panted, / That she did make defect perfection, / And, breathless, pour breath forth” (2.2.238-242). The public street may be associated with the public theatre and Cleopatra’s acting suggests the actor’s interpretation of a role in the theatre. Just as an actor may become breathless after having interpreted forty lines of verse, so Cleopatra transforms her weakness of being tired after hopping forty paces into an asset; she looks breathless, but she embodies perfection. The associations of Cleopatra with a mermaid, and of mermaids with the theatre, are metaphors used by Shakespeare to suggest the lure of female sexuality, in opposition with male order, power and rationality. In addition, the dynamism and visuality of Enobarbus’ description of Cleopatra’s barge parallels the lively images created on stage.

In early modern culture, the mermaid provides a model for reading images related to the female body, sexuality and enticement through the senses. The mermaid may be interpreted as a good omen or a funny ornament in the political context, but the symbol is always related to the sea she comes from. Water imagery is associated with the moon and the female symbols, and so is the mermaid, who is a sea-creature. Even when she is transformed into a Nereid, who is a river nymph, the mermaid spells mutability and creativity in the minds of the audience imagining this scene. The theatre is the dynamic and fluid place in which such flights of fancy may occur, as actors describe a scene scripted by the playwright. Unlike the historical event depicted by Plutarch—which is expected to be marked by objectivity—the theatrical description is imaginary and personal, depending on the impression of each member of the audience. For this reason, theatrical mermaids are shape-shifting and hybrid creatures, reminding the audience that they are attending a play. Even the mermaid allegedly seen on the shore of Wales (as in the anonymous English pamphlet) is a sea-creature of the imagination, and the realistic narrator makes an effort to assert the veracity of the report. In all these instances, mermaids are potentially transformative imaginary creatures—just like a text—and they deserve an infinity of meta-textual narratives to describe them. They are symbols of the contradictory and endless possibilities of interpreting theatrical plays.

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