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Cleopatra: The Defiance of Feminine Virtue

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Cleopatra: The Defiance of Feminine Virtue

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph:

William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* is a tragic love story that interlaces empire and political responsibility with lust and licentious sexuality. Throughout the play, Cleopatra represents otherness. She is a woman in power, of darker complexion, and is the embodiment Orient Empire. Cleopatra is belittled, humiliated, and degraded throughout the entirety of the play. These harsh representations, along with her highly sexualized and manipulative nature, make it difficult for her to succeed in a patriarchal society. Originally published in 1616, shortly after the death of Queen Elizabeth, it is through *Antony and Cleopatra* that Shakespeare depicts many of the frequent anxieties held about women during this time period.

Disciplines

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Comments

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Cleopatra: The Defiance of Feminine Virtue

William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* is a tragic love story that interlaces empire and political responsibility with lust and licentious sexuality. Throughout the play, Cleopatra represents otherness. She is a woman in power, of darker complexion, and is the embodiment of the Orient Empire. Cleopatra is belittled, humiliated, and degraded throughout the entirety of the play. These harsh representations, along with her highly sexualized and manipulative nature, make it difficult for her to succeed in a patriarchal society. Originally published in 1616, shortly after the death of Queen Elizabeth, it is through *Antony and Cleopatra* that Shakespeare depicts many of the frequent anxieties held about women during this time period.

The reign of Queen Elizabeth was a major turning point in politics, as well as in culture. Katherine Eggert, author of *Showing like a Queen: Female Authority and Literary Experiment in Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton*, speaks of literature during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in her opening lines: "If nearly twenty years of new-historicist studies of early modern England have taught us anything, it is that England's literature from 1558 to 1603 was preoccupied with the anomalous gender of the country's monarch, Elizabeth Tudor" (1). Several authors demonstrated the unease caused by a female ruler, and this apprehension existed even after the death of the Queen. When speaking of literature of the time period, Eggert also asserts the claim that queenship is projected so often as a model for English Renaissance literary innovation because "feminized authority proves an enabling strategy for negating otherwise unmanageable authorial straits – that is, for stretching literary shape in the direction of effeminized form" (13). The topic of female authority served as a particularly strong subject primarily because Renaissance culture as a whole viewed women as inherently changeable and

therefore ultimately unreliable (Eggert 21). Male authors focusing on the queenship of Elizabeth lead to reasons why women were deemed so threatening during this period in history.

In order to understand the complexities and underlying themes of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, it is important to explore the increasingly high tension that occurred due a woman holding a position of power. Louis Adrian Montrose speaks of the anxieties of the Elizabethan age in his introduction to "Shaping Fantasies": Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture." In this article, he states, "all forms of public and domestic authority in Elizabethan England were vested in men: in fathers, husbands, masters, teachers, magistrates, lords. It was inevitable that the rule of a woman would generate peculiar tensions within a 'patriarchal' society" (64-65). In a culture dominated by men, it is no wonder a woman ruler caused extreme cases of anxiety, especially for men of the time period. Any woman not seen playing her "proper role" was perceived as intimidating and as a disgrace. It was women who had to remain in their private sector, while men were the only ones allowed in public affairs.

The private sphere and the public sphere were a crucial part to the gender norms during the Renaissance. Merry E. Wiesener-Hanks focuses on female authority in *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*. In this, she speaks of the major differences between the roles of men and women, specifically in the terms of public sphere (where men belong) and the private sphere (where women belong): "This understanding of 'public' is broader than simply the 'public sphere' of newspapers and salons but also includes all political, economic, and intellectual institutions that control people's lives" (278). At this period in time, women did not hold positions of power and were absent from politics. Queen Elizabeth broke the social norms by passing from the private sphere into the public sphere, which caused others to perceive her as much more threatening.

Throughout the Elizabethan era women were meant to be domestic, taking care of the housework, of her husband, and of her children. They were meant to follow the unwritten laws of their culture: to remain silent and chaste. We can relate to *Antony and Cleopatra* what Adrian Montrose states: “Shakespeare’s public play-text embodies a culture-specific dialect between personal and public images of gender and power; both are characteristically Elizabethan culture forms” (65). Shakespeare reveals the political and cultural angst of the Elizabethan era specifically through Cleopatra. Portrayed as a highly theatrical, sexualized woman ruler, Cleopatra goes against the European model of feminine virtue. This model of virtue is associated with purity, obedience, and whiteness or Europeaness. Therefore, as a powerful, non-white Egyptian woman, Cleopatra is viewed as threatening and as an object of scrutiny.

Cleopatra’s Orient race furthers the complexities of her powerful status. Cleopatra’s darker complexion is an area that must be explored and neither Eggert nor Montrose acknowledges this. Cleopatra’s race coincides with the several disparities between Rome and Egypt and we see this dissimilarity portrayed throughout various scenes of the play. In “Roman World, Egyptian Earth: Cognitive Difference and Empire in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*,” Mary Thomas Crane speaks of the differences between Rome and Egypt. Rome is “composed largely of large, opaque, human-fashioned materials, and its surface is divided into almost obsessively named—and conquered—cities and nations” and on the contrary, Egyptians “inhabit the ‘earth,’ in which they imagine themselves to be immersed and which they perceive and understand through all of the senses” (2). We see the differences between Rome and Egypt represented specifically through the characters of the play, primarily Antony and Cleopatra.

Antony is illustrated as possessing all of the Roman values of *goodness*, such as when Soothsayer calls him “noble, courageous, high, unmatched” (2.3. 24). On the contrary,

Cleopatra is viewed disgracefully because of her race, such as when Caesar degrades Cleopatra by referring to Antony's affair with her as him "tippling with a slave" (1.4. 21) and later on accuses Antony of giving his empire "up to a whore" (3.6. 77). Cleopatra also demeans herself when she refers to herself as "serpent of old Nile" (1.5. 30) which also physically links her to her land. When Alexas is speaking to Cleopatra about what Antony has said in her absence, she replaces Cleopatra's name with her empire in their conversation. Alexas states:

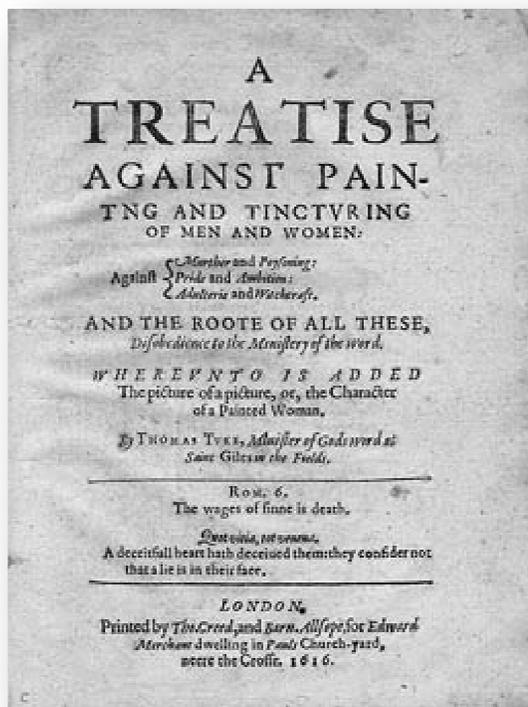
Say the firm Roman to great Egypt sends
 This treasure of an oyster; at whose foot,
 To mend the petty present, I will piece
 Her opulent throne with kingdoms. All the East,
 Say thou, shall call her mistress. (1.5. 51-55)

Egypt and Cleopatra's empire are alluded to several times in this passage. In the first line, "Egypt" takes the place of Cleopatra's name, tying her physically to her land. She is also referred to the "mistress of the East," words that classify her exotic and orient nature. The decadence of her court is referred to when Alexas quotes Antony saying he will "piece her opulent throne with kingdoms"—*opulent* meaning luxurious and sumptuous. Cleopatra is also called the "treasure of an oyster," which again parallels Alexas calling her an "orient pearl" (1.5. 47). This language further portrays Cleopatra representing the orient East, contrasting Antony who signifies the occident West. Cleopatra, who is consistently referred to as *whore* and *slave* along with her being physically linked to her exotic empire, prove the fact that both gender and race combined are thought to be the cause of much danger. By Shakespeare depicting Cleopatra as *tawny*, he is demonstrating the standard views of the era.

Cleopatra's extravagant and theatrical nature makes her threatening to men and women. For this reason, she goes against the social norm of the time period—rather than being submissive and compliant, Cleopatra possesses qualities that are the contrary to the ideal woman. Published in 1616, Thomas Tuke's *A Treatise Against Painting and Tincturing of Men and Women* discusses these beliefs about women. In his essay, Tuke boldly claims that women who “paint their face” and make themselves appear to be darker in complexion risk going to hell. Cleopatra therefore reflects the view of the era—highly sensual and sexualized women who “paint their faces” are deemed as a threat to those around them and are seen as living a life of sin.

Tuke declares that women should remain natural and not make any attempt at changing

themselves. When speaking of women and makeup, Tuke states, “She was born in her own, nature would show itself in her proper colors; she was not born painted in this world, neither shall she rise painted in the next world, and I think she would be loath die painted, why then should she live painted?” (Tuke 11-12). Tuke believes that women should not alter their appearances in any way and should remain, instead, as God created them—pure. This particular passage relates specifically to *Antony and Cleopatra*. Cleopatra, representative of Egypt is extravagant, while Antony's new wife, Octavia, signifying Rome, is



Object 1: Thomas Tuke's *A Treatise Against the Painting and Tinkering of Men and Women*

just the opposite. Octavia is described as beautiful, wise, and modest (2.2. 244), while Cleopatra is blatantly defined a whore: “For vilest things / Become themselves in her, that holy priests /

Bless her when she is riggish” (2.2. 243-245). Cleopatra is so highly sexualized that even holy priests bless her unholy actions. Cleopatra is directly contrasted with Octavia, as Octavia is natural (unpainted) and therefore virtuous, while Cleopatra is an exotic woman, altering her appearance and as a result going against the model of virtue. We see this demonstrated within Cleopatra’s Court as well:

SOOTHSAYER. You shall be yet far fairer than you are.

CHAIRMAN. He means in flesh.

IRAS. No, you shall paint when you are old.

CHAIRMAN. Wrinkles forbid! (1.2. 18-21)

This dialogue further reveals otherness, as Shakespeare portrays Egypt as being “painted” which goes against Tuke’s *Treatise*. Through the use of cosmetics, one is able to alter their appearance to be more beautiful and also, to change the color of their skin. This is represented when the Soothsayer speaks of being “fairer” as well as when Chairman expresses fear of appearance at old age while speaking of wrinkles. According to Tuke, going against nature is a defiance of purity and virtue, an act Cleopatra as well as her court are committing. Tuke goes on to further speak of how makeup is unholy and indirectly compares women wearing it wanting to become black.

Tuke characterizes women who paint themselves to be *the other* and believes they are not to be trusted. He states, “Because *Lycoris* pleases herself being painted, being otherwise black, as an overripe Mulberry, doth she therefore think to gain a husband, who knows an ill face well-painted, is but as a piece of counterfeit silver” (12-13). Tuke is objectifying women in comparing them to a piece of silver He also claims that women who make the choice to wear makeup are artificial when he declares they are counterfeit. In addition, it is significant that Tuke makes

references to lycoris, because lycoris is a plant native to the East. By comparing women who paint themselves to lycoris, he is indirectly categorizing them as *the other*. This further leads to the orient and the occident, as in this context, the East is the *other* or as Tuke states, “black.” This supports the claim that Tuke views the West as superior. It is important to take notice that Tuke also speaks of the mulberry, which is native to the East as well. Both of these native plants are being incorporated in Tuke’s piece in a derogatory way to describe women who wear makeup. This can directly be related to Cleopatra who is native to the East, “tawny,” and therefore all the more threatening because she is going against nature by being of darker complexion. Cleopatra’s race and eccentricities relate to her theatrics, which also displace her from the ideal, silent woman.

Cleopatra is highly theatrical; she is therefore depicted in an extravagant fashion. This is portrayed when Enobarbus describes Cleopatra when Antony sees her for the first time:

The barge she sat in like a burnished throne
 Burned on the water. The poop was beaten gold,
 Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
 The winds were lovesick with them. The oars were Silver,
 Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
 The water which they beat to follow faster
 As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,
 It beggared all description: she did lie
 In her pavilion—cloth-of-gold, of tissue—
 O’erpicturing that Venus where we see
 The fancy outwork nature. (2.2. 227-237)

Shakespeare's description of Cleopatra is anything but simple. She is depicted as luminous and luxurious, which parallels her as a character. This relates to Tuke's view of the natural woman as well because it is contradictory to the portrayal of Cleopatra. She is so radiating that she is more beautiful than any artist's depiction of the goddess Venus. Cleopatra is revealed as so stunning that the "fancy outwork nature"—again contrasting the natural woman with the unnatural woman. This description of her is also highly theatrical; her ship is representative of her stage. She is equivalent to an actress or performer who is always entertaining others. The colors in this passage are also unearthly and consequently, *unnatural*. Sitting upon a barge that is defined instead as a gleaming throne, Cleopatra is surrounded by purple, gold, and silver, colors of royalty that glimmer and glow. Shakespeare's description of Cleopatra in this passage also represents her highly theatrical nature. This too goes against the natural woman, as Cleopatra is consistently represented throughout the play as putting on a show for all those around her. She is aware of her own dramatics and embraces this notion. This also clashes with the belief of the time period that women should remain quiet, passive, and in the private sphere. Shakespeare uses Cleopatra's theatricality to bring her into the public realm where women were not allowed.

Along with Shakespeare presenting Cleopatra's theatrics, he also demonstrates metatheatricality through her. This is represented when Cleopatra is envisioning her love affair with Antony played out in front of an audience:

Saucy lictors

Will catch at us like strumpets, and scald rhymers

Ballad us out o' tune. The quick comedians

Extemporally will stage us, and present

Our Alexandrian revels: Antony

Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see

Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness

I' th' posture of a whore. (5.2. 214-221)

Cleopatra's performance shows her as having a voice and therefore, going against the model of virtue that was held so highly during the 1600's. In this passage, Cleopatra speaks of how others view her and refers to herself as a whore not once, but twice. This signifies how Cleopatra as a woman ruler is patronized and consistently demeaned. It is also significant to note that although Cleopatra is the speaker and central to this scene, both she and Antony are completely absent because she is talking about how they will be staged and how actors will play their parts.

Cleopatra is further distanced because there will not even be a woman playing her role, but instead a "squeaking boy." Cleopatra is so accustomed to living in a patriarchal society that she cannot even be represented as a woman in a production that is based and revolved around her.

Carol Cook touches on this topic briefly in her article "The Fatal Cleopatra" in which she declares that the stage represents the culture as a whole in which women are completely absent and are instead represented by men. For this reason, Cleopatra chooses to stage her own death in order to escape a scene of demonstration which would reduce her otherness to the limits of its own terms (245). Throughout the play, Cleopatra is trapped living under the patriarchy. The stage is symbolic of Cleopatra's life, as it is dominated by men just as her life has been. Her theatricality ultimately shows her resistance, and in part relates to Queen Elizabeth. Eggert declares that "Cleopatra represents the welcome farewell England had to bid to queenship" (134) and also that "*Antony and Cleopatra* summons up reminiscence of England's recently deceased Queen Elizabeth along the lines of Elizabeth and Cleopatra's shared fondness for theatrical spectacle" (134). When Shakespeare's production was put on in front of an audience and

Cleopatra was shown in her royal garments, spectators could have easily related this to their queen in “all her magnificence, but also in the ambivalence of her sensually pleasing splendor” (Eggert 134). The parallel between Shakespeare’s Cleopatra and Queen Elizabeth is developed further in primary documents discussing the scorn and ridicule women rulers received, even prior to Shakespeare publishing *Antony and Cleopatra*.

In 1558, shortly before Elizabeth was crowned in England, “The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women” by John Knox was published. Knox spoke out publically against Mary Queen of Scots, as well as Queen Mary of England. In this, he claims that women are incapable of reign and also, incapable of any authority in general. Similar to Tuke’s view, Knox claims that any woman possessing power is going against nature, and even worse, God. Knox’s belief also coincides with Tuke’s opinion in terms of how women should remain *natural* and therefore, not in a position of power:

Nature, I say, doth paint them forth to be weak, frail, impatient, feeble, and foolish: and experience hath declared them to be unconstant, variable, cruel, and lacking the spirit of counsel and regiment. And these notable faults have men in all ages espied in that kind, for the which not only they removed women from and authority, but also some have thought men subject to the counsel or empire of their wives were unworthy of all public office. (138-139)

Here, Knox generalizes all women and declares that by nature, they are weak. Therefore, how can a feeble, thoughtless woman possibly have the knowledge and power to be in a position of authority? Since they have no right to be in control of their nation, men must remove them and furthermore, if a man is even associated with a woman in power, he will be depicted as unworthy as well. In relation to *Antony and Cleopatra*, by associating with a woman in authority, Antony

is jeopardizing his political role. He is completely powerless when he is in the company of Cleopatra and his men notice this as well, which is portrayed when Enobarbus states, “Our courteous Antony, / Whom ne’er the word “No” woman heard speak” (2.2. 261-262). Knox also states that “where women reign or be in authority, that there must needs vanity be preferred to virtue, ambition and pride to temperancy and modesty” (139). A woman in power is perceived as not possessing any natural traits, such as modesty and virtue. She is instead viewed as sinful, vain, and threatening. Men are the ones who are meant to be authoritative positions and women should instead remain silent, since they “neither may be judges, neither may they occupy the place of the magistrate, neither yet they be speakers for others” (Knox 139). Women were unable and not allowed to hold the same positions as men, which is another issue to explore for this time period—just as women were held to societal standards, men were as well.

During the Elizabethan era, there were strong views held on masculinity and femininity, and the more masculine an individual was the better off they were. Wiesner speaks on this topic and declares that “strong same-sex attachments were often regarded as a sign of virility, as long as they were accompanied by actions judged honorably masculine, such as effective military leadership, and not accompanied by actions judged feminine” (293). Marriage was strengthening for one’s masculinity, as “the notion of masculinity became increasingly dominant and was enforced by law as well as custom” (Wiesner 294). Marriage also played such an important role that “men who remained unmarried did not participate to the same level as their married brothers; in some cities, they were barred from being members of city councils” (Wiesner 294). The strong link between marriage, masculinity, and power is represented in *Antony and Cleopatra*, specifically in the scene when there is discussion of Antony marrying Caesar’s sister, Octavia.

When Antony and Caesar are together discussing the topic, Agrippa speaks of the positive outcome the marriage between Octavia and Antony will bring:

To hold you in perpetual amity,
 To make you brothers, and to knit your hearts
 With an unslipping knot, take Antony
 Octavia to his wife, whose beauty claims
 No worse a husband than the best of men;
 Whose virtue and whose general graces speak
 That which none else can utter. By this marriage
 All little jealousies, which now seem great,
 And all great fears, which now import their dangers,
 Would then be nothing. (2.2. 150-159)

When Agrippa uses the word brothers, he means both figuratively and literally. In order for Antony and Caesar to have a familial relationship, they must become brothers not just through closeness, but through marital relationships. Brotherhood is a bond that cannot be broken; therefore, Antony marrying Octavia will secure this tie. Agrippa also mentions knitting two hearts together in a secure knot, which is what is done when two individuals are married. However, instead of speaking of Octavia in this matter, Agrippa is instead speaking of the *unslipping knot* between Antony and Caesar. It is as if they are the two joining hands at marriage, rather than Antony and Octavia. Octavia is being used a pawn between Antony and Caesar, serving for the sole purpose of political obligations between two men. She has no voice in this passage, and is referred by name only once—all other times she is paralleled with adjectives describing the ideal woman of the time period: beautiful, graceful, and virtuous.

Through Octavia, quarrels between Antony and Caesar will lessen, as all fears and jealousies will diminish to none because Octavia's objectification is serving as a treaty in Caesar and Antony's affairs. Wiesner also speaks of the same-sex relationships between males which can be directly related to the relationship Antony and Caesar hold: "effective rulers – and effective men – had the ability to shape the world around them according to their will and used whatever means necessary to preserve order and security" (293). In order for Antony and Caesar to preserve their brotherhood, they must strengthen their political ties through the marriage of Octavia. It can also be stated that this marriage also serves as a way to help shape the masculine identities of both Antony and Caesar.

Caesar and Antony both use Octavia to fashion themselves and to help sculpt their identities to the outside world, such as the roles they play as politicians and leaders. In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Stephen Greenblatt states that self-fashioning is "linked to manners or demeanor, particularly that of the elite; it may suggest hypocrisy or deception, an adherence to mere outward ceremony; it suggests representation of one's nature or intention in speech or actions" (3). In this instance, Greenblatt's perspective on self-fashioning relates to the relationship between Antony and Caesar in all of these areas. They are both of the elite and there is hypocrisy and deception in their actions and use of Octavia. Greenblatt's points are portrayed through Caesar as well, such as when he is speaking to Antony about Octavia and states, "Let her live / To join our kingdoms and our hearts; and never / Fly off our loves again" (2.2. 182-183). Caesar directly states his intentions in marrying his sister off to Antony when he declares that her purpose of living now will be to "join their kingdoms" together and secure their bond as allies, as well as brothers now. Greenblatt also states that "there may well have been less autonomy in self-fashioning in the sixteenth century than before, that family,

state, and religious institutions impose a more rigid and far-reaching discipline upon their middle-class and aristocratic subjects” (1). Here, he is arguing that others play just as a significant role in shaping one’s identity as the individual does. This concept directly corresponds to Antony and Caesar, as they both influence the construction of each other’s identities and specifically use marriage in order to fashion themselves. In the play, Antony and Caesar use the marriage of Octavia in order to secure their political and military role as well as their own relationship. While speaking of marriage and familial affairs, it is important to note the changes Shakespeare makes in his play from history as well as from his contemporary, Plutarch.

In Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, children are left out entirely. However, in history, Octavia bore Antony’s children, as did Cleopatra. In order to further depict how Cleopatra goes against the standards of women for the time period, Shakespeare does not portray her as a mother figure and her children are absent, except for the brief reference made by Dolabella telling Cleopatra that Caesar will “send for her and the children” (5.2. 244-245). This is a major difference Shakespeare makes from his contemporary, Plutarch. Shakespeare uses “Life of Marcus Antonius” from Plutarch’s *The Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans* as a reference when creating his own adaptation, *Antony and Cleopatra*. Though there are major similarities between the two pieces, Shakespeare makes the ultimate choice to not include the children of Cleopatra in his play, which further promotes the angst of the 1600’s in regards to women. Plutarch’s “Life of March Antonius” speaks of Cleopatra’s children in different sections: After Antony rejoins Cleopatra briefly and “heaps honors on her and their children” (202) and also when Cleopatra is “requesting the realm of Egypt for her children” (207). Through the absence of children, there is no need to portray Cleopatra as having domestic qualities. With the lack of maternal and marital responsibility, Shakespeare is removing

Cleopatra from the private sphere and placing her directly in the public sphere which, as stated previously, was deemed unacceptable for women. In “The Sword Phillipian: Female Power, Maternity and Genderbending in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*,” Susan Muaddi Durraj speaks of the possible reasoning behind this major difference between Plutarch and Shakespeare and declares “a mother cannot be believably violent...One could safely conclude that society allows mothers to have a pure and moral nature, believing that a childless woman is an unfulfilled one who will thus seek satisfaction in violent and illicit ways” (3-4). Durraj’s statement is evident throughout the play, as Cleopatra is characterized as the representation of otherness. Cleopatra belonging solely in the public realm classifies her as a threat. A woman has reign in Egypt, while a man has power in Rome, which is a key difference in the two empires. Antony abandons all of his duties when in the presence of Cleopatra which further exhibits her control.

From the beginning of the *Antony and Cleopatra*, we see Antony disregarding his loyalty to Rome and instead make Egypt his primary focus, where he can take pleasure in the pastime activities as well as Cleopatra. Antony admits to Pompey that “The beds i’ th’ East are soft” (2.6. 63) and Enobarbus also speaks of his time in Egypt when he states, “We did sleep day out of countenance / And made the night light with drinking” (2.2. 213-214). These passages represent how Antony and his men can become distracted when they spend time in Egypt, which shows how easily one can come become distracted when surrounded by drinking, feasting, and sex. In the opening lines of the play, Philo notices the changes in Antony as well when he is in Egypt and speaks on the subject:

Nay but this dotage of our general’s

O’erflows the measure: those his goodly eyes,

That o'er the files and musters of the war
 Have glowed like plated Mars, now bend, now turn
 Upon a tawny front. His captain's heart,
 Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst
 The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper,
 And is become the bellows and the fan
 To cool a gipsy's lust. (1.1. 1-10)

Philo declares that Antony's heart used to be for fighting and commanding his men, but now Cleopatra has taken that place. This is therefore threatening to Philo because instead of Antony tending to his obligations in Rome, he is ignoring them completely and has made Cleopatra, a dark, ruling woman his primary focus which makes Cleopatra that much more intimidating, also that she represents the orient while Antony belongs to the occident, two differing hemispheres. Crane again speaks of how Egypt's otherness is emphasized: "the 'orientalism' of Cleopatra's court—with its luxury, decadence, splendor, sensuality, appetite, effeminacy, and eunuchs—seems a systematic inversion of the legendary Roman values of temperance, manliness, courage, and *pietas*" (1). We see this portrayed in the passage, such as when Antony is in Egypt, his infatuation with Cleopatra "overflows" the boundaries and is no longer acceptable. We also see Antony leaving his Roman values behind with the dichotomies presented in the passage, such as when Philo declares Antony to be a great masculine, military leader, to instead beckoning to Cleopatra, a highly sexualized, feminized woman. Another dichotomy presented in the passage is in comparing Antony's glowing armor like "plated Mars" to how he turns his focus upon a "tawny front"—Cleopatra. In this same line, Antony is said to be "goodly" and is compared to Mars, god of war, while Cleopatra is instead described in derogatory terms, such as being called

a “gipsy,” “dark,” and later on in the passage is labeled a whore (1.1. 13). It is important that these first lines in the play are about the portrayal of both Antony and Cleopatra, but are said by outsiders. Their romance plays a central role in the entirety of the play, and everyone around them is involved in their personal affair. This opening passage sets up the foundation for the rest of the play: Antony is political and highly militarized, while Cleopatra is a highly sexualized woman in power, which reveals her to be intimidating and living against the social and cultural standards that have been set for the time period.

In the 1600’s, women were powerless and were not allowed to hold positions of rule. Wiesner briefly speaks of this and states, “Judging from court cases, popular customs, family records, and all types of literature, reversals of the gender hierarchy were the most threatening way the world could be turned upside down” (297-298). Wiesner also says that “the maintenance of proper power relationships between men and women served as a basis for and a symbol of not only the larger political system but also for the functioning of society as a whole” (295). Women who stepped outside their boundaries and took on a “masculine role” were seen as especially threatening because they were throwing off the social order of society as a whole. Shakespeare presents this through Cleopatra’s relationship with Antony, as we see Cleopatra playing the dominant role in their relationship.

At a time where men held supremacy over women, Cleopatra instead challenges this notion and takes on masculine qualities. Durraj also speaks of Cleopatra’s male traits:

By locating Cleopatra’s power in the foreign realm of the Orient, Shakespeare frees himself to illustrate the genderbending in which such female power can result. While Cleopatra is essentially “feminine” and embodies “femininity” of

the Orient, Shakespeare allows her to exhibit masculine—even Roman—qualities.

(2)

Durraj believes that Cleopatra taking on masculine qualities helps make the genders equal and therefore, ultimately makes Cleopatra less threatening because she exercises male traits.

However, I believe that Cleopatra's emasculation of Antony reveals her as that much more threatening and instead of her leveling the gender field, she provokes it. Cleopatra's power and "genderbending" is depicted shortly after Cleopatra learns of Antony's marriage to Octavia. She is speaking to Chairman when she makes a direct reference to cross-dressing:

I laughed him out of patience; and that night

I laughed him into patience; and next morn,

Ere the ninth hour, I drunk him to his bed,

Then put my tires and mantles on him, whilst

I wore his sword Philippan. (2.5. 21-25)

In this scene, the gender roles are reversed. We see this when Cleopatra "drunk Antony to his bed" and takes advantage of him. With Antony in a drunk stupor, Cleopatra is able to have her way with him. Antony's sword is the ultimate phallic symbol that is representative of his masculinity, as he is known for his military ranking and is referred to the god of war throughout the play. Cleopatra taking away Antony's sword represents his emasculation and her ultimate authority over him. Later on, Antony admits the power Cleopatra has over him and even emasculates himself: "You did know / How much you were my conqueror, and that / My sword, made weak by my affection, would / Obey it on all cause" (3.11. 71-71). Antony is acknowledging that Cleopatra has supremacy over him when he declares her his "conqueror". Antony acknowledging that Cleopatra "weakens his sword" also represents a shift in power from

male to female. Durraj comments on this power dynamic as well: “the idea that the woman who holds or tries to hold political power will end by robbing the male of both political and sexual power” (3). Through Cleopatra taking Antony’s sword and by Antony admitting she weakens his sword, he is symbolically being castrated and therefore, all of his power is lost and is transferred to Cleopatra. Caesar even acknowledges this reversal, such as when he states, “The lamps of night in revel, is not more manlike / Than Cleopatra, nor the queen of Ptolemy / More womanly than he” (1.4. 5-7). Along Cleopatra implementing masculine qualities, she also exercises control over Antony because she plays the role as the sexual aggressor, which is again largely uncommon and shunned during the 1600’s. Shakespeare twisting the power dynamic from male to female further intensifies the anxiety of the era. Through this switch of gender roles, he also reflects why men found Queen Elizabeth to be so threatening.

In the same scene of Cleopatra shortly learning of the marriage between Antony and Octavia, Cleopatra asks Chairman to go fishing with her. Cleopatra relates her pastime of fishing to one of capturing Antony:

I will betray
Tawny-finned fishes. My bended hook shall pierce
Their slimy jaws, and as I draw them up
I’ll think them every one an Antony
And say “Aha! You’re caught.” (2.5. 13-17)

In this passage, the roles are reversed again as Cleopatra is playing the one in control and the aggressor. In “Erotic Irony and Polarity in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*,” Michael Payne mentions the reversal of gender roles in this scene as well (272). Cleopatra’s hook is a phallic symbol, representative of masculinity, while the “slimy jaws” of the fishes are yonic symbols,

representative of female sexuality. The symbols are particularly interesting because again, Cleopatra is in possession of the hook, which represents masculinity. She is in control as she is “drawing up the fishes with their slimy jaws,” which depict femininity and imagines to be Antony. Payne also acknowledges that “Cleopatra does pose a threat to Antony’s masculinity, but this threat is mainly to masculinity as the Romans define it” (273). As stated previously, masculinity was important to embrace during the Elizabethan era, so much so that that when men were involved with women who were thought to be in charge and hold power, the women were often subjected to public ridicule (Wiesner 298). Rather than Cleopatra and her court be subjected to humiliation by Caesar in front of all of Rome, she instead chooses to end her life.

Cleopatra’s choice of suicide is the last time she will exert control in a patriarchal society. Since Caesar was set on exploiting Cleopatra, she instead mocks the limitations of his power by making such a spectacle of her death (Cook 265). She keeps her theatrics until the final scene of the play, in which she is speaking to Iras and Charmian and states, “Give me my robe. Put on my crown. I have / Immortal longings in me” (5.2. 335-336). Even in death she is determined to be represented as a queen rather than an “Egyptian puppet” (5.5. 224) which is how Caesar would have presented her to all of Rome. There are also gender dynamics and sexual undertones in her final death scene as well. The fact that Cleopatra chooses an asp rather than poison for her suicide is representative all in itself. The “pretty worm of Nilus” (5.2. 297) once again links Cleopatra to empire, and is also representative of a phallic symbol, as Countryman wishes Cleopatra “all the joy of the worm” (5.2. 314) and states that the “worm will do his kind” (5.2. 316). As a phallic symbol, Cleopatra using the asp in her suicide is therefore representative of her exerting power. The death scene also continues to reveal her sexual nature through the use of double entendres. When speaking of the asp, Cleopatra asks Countryman, “Will it eat me?” (5.2.

325) and also cries out, “Husband, I come!” (5.2. 342). Race is also again referenced when Cleopatra is about to end her life and Chairman bellows, “O eastern star!” (5.2. 365). This last allusion of her race reveals her one final time as the embodiment of her empire and unites her with the land of Egypt.

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, William Shakespeare entwines all of the anxieties held during the Elizabethan era. He reveals the cultural angst of the time period specifically through Cleopatra by placing a high emphasis on race, female sexuality and authority, as well as the dangerous reversal of gender roles. From the beginning until the end of the play, Cleopatra struggled to succeed within a patriarchal society which can be paralleled to the challenges that Queen Elizabeth faced when she reigned. Just as Queen Elizabeth was extravagant, Cleopatra’s theatrical nature contributed to her role as Egyptian Queen and revealed that a woman can be a highly intelligent, successful, strong ruler while living in a patriarchal society.

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