

Shakespeare and Feminism: Gender Politics in *Antony and Cleopatra*

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Abstract: *This paper examines Antony and Cleopatra from a feminist perspective, exploring the controversies that Cleopatra's character has sparked among critics across different historical periods. Cleopatra exemplifies the fluidity and performativity of gender in ways that resist traditional definitions and expand gender boundaries. Most critics portray her as a captivating queen in a world dominated by patriarchs, while feminists view her not simply as a charming woman but also as a symbol of female rebellion. This paper investigates how the text subverts binary views of gender roles and challenges power structures and gender dynamics through a close examination of Cleopatra's character in light of diverse feminist perspectives.*

Key words: *gender performativity, female agency, power dynamics, literary subversion, feminist literary criticism.*

1.1 Introduction

A feminist reading of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* offers insights into how Shakespeare portrays, reinforces, and subverts Elizabethan gender roles and stereotypes. Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra challenges contemporary ideals regarding gender politics and identity. The gender dynamics in the text are not limited to individual characters but are also mirrored in the larger geographical and political context of the action. The play is structured on a division between Rome and Egypt, opposite worlds in which the two sexes assume different roles. This division made many critics regard Egypt, with its hedonistic values, as the inferior other of the Roman world, as an erotic space which threatens the stability of the Roman Patriarchal order.

In her seminal essay "Egyptian Queens and Male Reviewers: Sexist Attitudes in Antony and Cleopatra", feminist critic L.T. Fitz argues that the play "juxtaposes Roman values of discipline and duty with Egyptian values of pleasure and indulgence, with Cleopatra often embodying the latter in ways that have been interpreted as inherently negative by male critics." (298) The Roman Empire is portrayed as strictly patriarchal, underscored by values such as rationality, stoicism, power, honor, glory, family, heroism, and loyalty. Egypt, by contrast, is depicted as a feminine space where patriarchal values seem irrelevant. It is an erotic world of sexuality, hedonistic pleasure, desire, and passion. The rigid political structure of the Roman world is contrasted to the playful lifestyle in Egypt.

However, understanding the play's treatment of gender dynamics solely through this simplistic division oversimplifies the complexities of its characters and themes. Nonetheless, highlighting this division is crucial to understand how Shakespeare explores new possibilities of gender dynamics. This division is intertwined with characters' identities and the tragic plot. The structure of the play, the portrayal of characters, and the diverse points of view presented in the text serve to complicate gender identity, highlighting the performativity and the fluidity of gender.

1.2 Research Objectives

This research aims to explore the gender politics in *Antony and Cleopatra* from a feminist perspective. The feminist theory provides novel perspectives to assess the text, highlighting gender biases that influenced its historical interpretations. The paper demonstrates how Shakespeare both reinforces and subverts the gender norms of his time. By analyzing the enigmatic character of Cleopatra, the paper examines how the play engages with questions of gender. Feminist readings of the text are central to this research. Ultimately, the paper argues that the text presents a complex portrait of gender dynamics that challenges simplistic notions of masculinity and femininity. By examining the intersections of gender, power, and identity, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of gender roles in Shakespeare.

1.3 Research Importance

Feminist literary theory is not merely restricted to the work of the elitist critics who attempt to locate the position of woman in language and culture. The theory seeks to understand the historical marginalization of women in order to liberate and empower them in the present. Analyzing woman's images in literature and the ways of interpreting these images are necessary steps to fulfill this objective, as literature has always been a product of culture and reality. This research explores the representation of woman in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, focusing on the dramatized image of the Eastern woman represented by Cleopatra. The paper aims to shed light on the complexities of Cleopatra's character, complexities that enable her to transcend the limits of cultural stereotypes of women.

Chapter Two: The cultural and the Social Context of the Text

2.1 Gender Roles in the Elizabethan Era

The Elizabethan understanding of gender roles was rooted in a long-entrenched patriarchal binary view of gender throughout history. Since the Greeks, women were considered inferior to men. This inferiority in England was reinforced by medicine and religion. Medical science, drawing on notions suggested by Plato, Hippocrates, Galen, assumed that females were incomplete creatures or unfinished males, a defect caused by lack of heat that resulted in the 'female lack of sexual genitalia'. Therefore, women were seen as weaker than men, and as more prone to physical and psychological ailments. The social inferiority of women was also supported by biblical notions which affirmed man's supremacy over women. Therefore, women were deemed in need of constant care, supervision, and even control by men.

The gender dynamics of the 17th century England were formed by such concepts that created a strict distinction between the social expectations and roles of men and women. Men were associated with power, honor, reason, stoicism, and mental and psychological stability. Women, on the other hand, were associated with weakness, desire, passivity, and instability. In terms of social roles, women were confined to the private sphere where they were expected to be subservient and homebound. Women were not allowed to vote or own property. Marriage was considered woman's ultimate ambition, and her responsibilities were limited to domestic duties related to marriage and motherhood. A woman's value was measured by her virtue and obedience to patriarchal power, whether that of her father or husband. These values were reflected on stage where men portrayed female characters because it was both immoral and illegal for a woman to perform on public stages.

2.2 Shakespeare's Presentation of Female Characters

These gender assumptions are mirrored in Shakespeare's plays. While some critics believe that Shakespeare reinforced the stereotypical images of Elizabethan women on stage, others argue that he challenged these stereotypes in his drama. Critic Jeanne Addison Roberts argues that Shakespeare's drama echoed women's position in the Elizabethan social structure, although he sought to present the struggles they faced in society:

There is no point, of course, in blaming Shakespeare for this lopsided picture of the world. He could have only known a patriarchal society. His actors were male, and competent boy actors for female

roles may have been in short supply. We all know that compared to most of his contemporary playwrights, Shakespeare showed astonishing insight into a variety of female dilemmas and strengths. (367)

However, these gender norms were not unchallenged in society itself as Queen Elizabeth I ruled England. She was both the 'virgin queen' and a powerful monarch. This dualism in the character of Elizabeth is echoed and complicated Cleopatra. Some critical opinions argue that Shakespeare wrote the play after King James I ascended the throne, thus suggesting that a male ruler is always superior to a female one (Mondal 1).

Shakespeare's female characters exhibit different traits in comedies and tragedies. In comedies, women make life interesting for their male counterparts in the quest for love, while in tragedies and romances, women are involved in deeper social, ideological and psychological complexities and struggles. Shakespeare's audience and critics were predominantly male and therefore he could not completely defy the contemporary patriarchal expectations of gender boundaries. These norms also seem to frame Shakespeare's perception of virtuous female characters who adhered to patriarchal ideals of loyalty, chastity and obedience.

The heroines of Shakespeare's tragedies, such as Desdemona in *Othello*, serve, to some extent, as models of female individualism. However, they do not seriously attempt to subvert the existing stereotypes of woman. Desdemona might be seen as a rebel against some patriarchal norms in her society, but she generally conforms to the patriarchal expectations of a virtuous woman:

Desdemona is one of the most widely criticized women in all of Shakespeare's works. She seems to be a paradoxical combination of staunch individualism and willing submissiveness. Shakespeare portrays her as an attractive, intelligent Venetian fully capable of stating her own arguments and making her own decisions; yet, she embodies the wifely ideals through her loyalties, at great individual cost, to her husband. (Greer 137)

2.3 Cleopatra's uniqueness as a Shakespearean character

Antony and Cleopatra is exceptional in its portrayal of gender roles and power relations. The play explores new possibilities of gender dynamics by setting the action in different worlds. In Egypt, a feminine space, women are not subservient to men. Cleopatra resists the categorization of the patriarchal binaries; she is neither "a whore" nor "a virtuous lady". She is both a passionate lover and a strong queen, a cunning manipulator and a loyal companion. Her character challenges the familiar types through which audiences traditionally approached female characters. This complexity makes the text significant for feminist critics, who view Cleopatra as an inspiring literary and historical figure.

2.4 Literature Review

2.4.1. Plutarch's presentation of Cleopatra

Plutarch's historical account of the story of Antony and Cleopatra was the source of Shakespeare's dramatic material. Plutarch acknowledges Cleopatra's feminine charm and political acumen but regrets that Antony was her plaything, blaming her for stirring the vices in him and for his neglect of his duties as a Roman general. His perspective is patriarchal and aligns with Roman morality, which portrays Cleopatra as a morally degraded woman. This patriarchal view is reflected in the play through the words of many Roman men, such as Enobarbus, whose vision of the queen as a quintessential temptress is held misogynistic by many critics.

2.4.2 A Feminist perspective on Shakespeare's Cleopatra

Feminists celebrate the complexity of Cleopatra's motives and behaviors, viewing this complexity as a source of feminine resistance to patriarchal categorizations and limitations. Cleopatra exhibits both masculine and feminine characteristics. She exerts control over Egypt and inspires the loyalty and love of Antony. Additionally, she earns Caesar's respect by the end of the play. Her rich sexuality is intertwined with her political power, and she uses her feminine charm as a tool to reinforce her political status, alluring Antony and thus defying Rome. She is a hedonistic woman indulged in

pleasure, yet her feelings for Antony are sincere. The duality of her character challenges the patriarchal binary understanding of gender roles:

Shakespeare's Cleopatra is the real historical Cleopatra, the 'rare Egyptian'...Her mental accomplishments, her unequalled grace, her woman's wit and woman's wiles, her irresistible allurements, her star of irregular grandeur, her bursts of ungovernable temper, her bivory of imagination, her petulant caprice, her fickleness and her falsehood, her tenderness and her truth, her childish susceptibility to flattery, her magnificent spirit, her royal pride the gorgeous eastern coloring of the character; all these contradictory elements has Shakespeare seized, mingled them in their extremes and fused them into one brilliant impersonation of classical elegance, oriental voluptuousness and gipsy sorcery. (Mondal 3)

Shakespeare's Cleopatra is enigmatic and cannot be easily judged. This complexity is likely why Dryden simplified her character in *All For Love*, presenting her as a flat helpless lover rather than a complex queen. In his prologue to the play, he wrote that he wanted to impart a moral lesson, and therefore had to modify Shakespeare's original text. He was aware of the moral ambiguity surrounding Cleopatra's motives and actions, and of the audience's difficulty in making moral judgements about her character. However, the majority of male critics tend to criticize Cleopatra's lack of virtue according to Roman or patriarchal standards. Conversely, critics who praise Cleopatra often mythologize her. Plutarch identifies her with the Egyptian goddess Isis. From a feminist perspective, mythologizing Cleopatra is as problematic as degrading her because it presents her as a unique figure rather a woman who represents her sex.

2.4.3 Feminist Comments on the Sexist Interpretations of the play

In "Revisiting Cleopatra Through Feminist Lens", critic Sharama highlights the biased views that approach Cleopatra through moral patriarchal perspectives which focus on Cleopatra's sexuality and disregard her other qualities:

However, most writers have pictured Cleopatra as a most unsavoury character. Propertius dubbed her "the whore queen". "For Dio Cassius, she was "a woman of insatiable sexuality and insatiable avarice". Boccaccio called her "the whore of the eastern kings". She was "a carnal sinner" for Dante. Thus, most writers repeatedly speak of Cleopatra's insatiable libido and the other qualities of her head and heart are overlooked... The poet Horace called her "a crazy queen plotting to demolish the Roman Empire". The Roman poet Lucan labelled her "the shame of Egypt, the lascivious fury who was to become the bane of Rome. (2)

In "Egyptian Queens and Male Reviewers: Sexist Attitudes in Antony and Cleopatra", L.T. Fitz asserts that Cleopatra needs to be demythologized to fully appreciate her value as a human and as a woman. Fitz critiques the sexist analyses provided by reviewers of the play. According to Fitz, the majority of male critics are threatened by what Cleopatra represents- feminine power and diversity. These critics failed to list the play among Shakespeare's great works. They represent Cleopatra negatively by comparing her to other Shakespearean female characters. Fitz asserts that "Cleopatra has been seen as a seductive but ultimately destructive force, a woman whose power lies not in her political acumen but in her ability to manipulate men through her sexuality." (313) She criticizes classifying women into 'wicked' like Cleopatra or 'loyal' like Octavia, and highlights Cleopatra's difference, uniqueness, liveliness, and charm. Shakespeare, for her, manages to dramatize the worries of an aging woman in a world that values women solely for their beauty. The sexism of critics, she claims, is also clear in their attitudes toward Cleopatra's sexuality; when bawdy lines are spoken by male characters, they are not criticized but often left uncommented upon: "While Antony's flaws are often attributed to his tragic heroism, Cleopatra's actions are frequently judged with a moralistic lens, reflecting the gender biases of the critics rather than the text itself." (309)

2.4.4 Biased Double Standards

Another sexist reason for marginalizing the text among Shakespeare's works is the belief that love among men and women is secondary compared to familial love. The gender of the protagonist also contributes to this marginalization. *Othello* is considered a great play simply because it is about a

male protagonist. Fitz exposes the sexist double standards applied to the play; what is considered noble in Antony is criticized in Cleopatra. For instance, Antony is criticized for neglecting public duties, while Cleopatra is criticized for concerning herself with them. This mirrors patriarchal claims that women should prioritize love and concern for their men, while men should prioritize public duties. Due to such double standards, many critics view Cleopatra as an antagonist in the play rather than a co-protagonist: "Cleopatra's agency is frequently undermined by male reviewers who focus on her relationships with men, rather than her role as a powerful ruler in her own right." (302) Fitz presents several pieces of evidence to argue that Cleopatra is the true protagonist. For instance, Antony dies in act four while Cleopatra dies in act five, unlike other Shakespearean tragedies where the protagonist dies in the end. For Fitz, the primary conflict in the play is between Cleopatra and Caesar, with Antony serving merely as a middleman.

Fitz highlights the differences between Plutarch's account and Shakespeare's dramatization of it. In Shakespeare, Antony fights at sea not merely because Cleopatra suggests it, as Plutarch indicates, but because Antony seeks to challenge Caesar. From a feminist perspective, the unreasonable decision to fight by sea is motivated by exaggerated masculinity rather than Cleopatra's irrational influence on Antony. This is a prime example of how patriarchy carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. Another point emphasized by Fitz is that Cleopatra's escape from the battle of Actium- a point of controversy regarding her loyalty to Antony- is also presented differently in Shakespeare. Shakespeare includes a denial that Cleopatra conspired with Caesar against Antony and justifies her escape as an act of fear. Her dying speeches, among other additions, evoke sympathy for her. Fitz suggests that Shakespeare wanted to write a play centered on a female protagonist, concluding her essay with the remark that Shakespeare elevates Cleopatra's role to that of a tragic heroine. It is Cleopatra who learns and grows throughout the play, not Antony; she is the one who struggles against her inconsistencies to discover her true self by the end of the play.

3.1 Cleopatra vs. Octavia: Different Models of Femininity

Shakespeare's Cleopatra has always astonished critics with her ambiguity and complexity, which makes her difficult to judge clearly. Her character challenges the gender norms of the time. Unlike Octavia, who is an obedient sister to Caesar, a loyal wife to Antony, and a mother figure, Cleopatra cannot be constrained by social norms. Octavia is presented by Shakespeare as the epitome of Roman womanhood virtues, adhering to her society's expectations. She is dutiful, modest, stoic, chaste, and obedient. She is also used as a political pawn in the conflict between Antony and Caesar. Antony marries her to secure his alliance with Caesar, while Caesar uses her to control Antony in their alliance against Pompey, and later to dispose of Antony himself. Octavia's behavior is totally dictated by the males who control her life, and she is torn between two authorities to whom she must submit:

OCTAVIA. Ay me, most wretched,
That have my heart parted betwixt two friends
That does afflict each other! (3.6. 87-89)

Octavia's suffering due to Antony's return to Cleopatra highlights the limitations of traditional gender roles. Paradoxically, she is victimized by the very values for which she is idealized. Through her character, Shakespeare dramatizes the plight of women in patriarchal societies. Caesar knows that Antony cannot settle down with his sister, and that eventually his brother-in-law will abandon her, but he sacrifices her future to solidify his authority. Enobarbus predicts that Caesar will use Octavia as an excuse to wage war against Antony after dealing with Pompey and Lepidus. Caesar, representing Rome, claims to honor family values, but ironically, Octavia's family is partly ruined because of these values

3.2 Cleopatra's Diversity

Cleopatra's relationship with Antony reverses traditional man-woman dynamics because it is Antony who is emotionally dependent on her. In the play, Cleopatra is strategic, while Antony's character is relatively simple in comparison. From the first scene, her control over Antony is evident as she manipulates his masculinity, asking him to listen to the messengers only to make him dismiss them:

CLEOPATRA. Grates me, the sun.
 Nay, hear them, Antony.
 Fulvia perchance is angry. Or who knows
 If the scarce-bearded Caesar have not sent
 His powerful mandate to you: "Do this, or this;
 Take in that kingdom, and enfranchise that.
 Perform 't, or else we damn thee. (1.1. 22-27)

The play opens with the Roman view of Cleopatra, expressed in the words of Philo who criticizes her 'gypsy's lust'. Caesar later describes her as a 'whore'. However, as the play progresses, defining her becomes increasingly difficult. Cleopatra is multifaceted, and the diversity of her nature bewilders the audience. From the beginning and throughout the play, she cunningly manipulates Antony's feelings for her own purposes. She pleases only to make him yearn for more of her erotic passion:

ENOBARBUS. Other women cloy
 The appetite they feed; but she makes hungry
 Where most she satisfies; for vilest things
 Become themselves in her. (2.2.234-38)

In a moment of political awareness and responsibility, Antony leaves Egypt to Rome after Pompey raises armies against Caesar. A profound change occurs in Cleopatra's character as she transforms into a desperate woman whose world is worthless without Antony. She becomes irrational and impulsive. Interestingly, rage and jealousy surface when she hears about his marriage to Octavia, and her vulgarity manifests in her words to the messenger who brings the news. Her promiscuity is evident when she offers her hand to be kissed by a petty messenger. She regains her lover only to betray him in the sea battle of Actium; she flees the battle and he follows her ship, thus disgracing himself for leaving the battle. Justifying her escape by her fear, she wins her man's heart and favor again. After the final battle, Antony threatens to kill her, thinking that she has betrayed him, and we sense that she is considering Caesar's peace offering for a moment. Finally, she commits suicide not only to defeat Cesar but also to join her lover. Only with her final words we do realize how genuine her love is, and that her instability is simply a part of nature. Shakespeare designs the final scene to infuse the text with further overwhelming complexities regarding her character.

Cleopatra perplexes our judgement. Our moral sense might urge us to criticize her, but the fascination she exerts forces us to withhold our moral judgment. She is called many epithets such as 'enchanted queen!', 'witch', 'spell', 'great fairy', 'cockatrice', and 'serpent of the old Nile'. These epithets reinforce the fascination with her character, a fascination that resists traditional classifications of gender and moral judgement. It is best to quote Enobarbus's famous words describing the charm of her diversity:

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
 Her infinite variety. (2.2. 234-35)

3.3 Cleopatra's Death:

Shakespeare delineates Cleopatra in the earlier acts only to exalt her in the last. Only in the final act does Cleopatra discover her true self. Ironically, Cleopatra withdraws to her private sphere, her monument, in the end, but she does so not to be submitted by the patriarch but to defeat him. In this act, the lucidity of her vision is remarkable. She is aware that Caesar will shame her. She is worried about the fate of her children. She yearns to die 'after the high Roman fashion', but she is afraid of brutal death. After contemplating and picturing all the degradations of her captivity in Rome, she decides she cannot stand being chastised by the scornful glance of Octavia. Through suicide, she outsmarts Caesar and depraves him of the chance of gracing his triumph by shaming her. More importantly, she realizes that only in death can she join her lover not as a misinterpreted mistress but as a lawful wife. Only in death does she find the courage to overcome the fear that betrayed her in

Actium. She calls for her diadem, her robes of state, and attires herself, as if preparing again to meet Mark Antony. She must make death proud to take her, and die as she had lived, with all the pomp of preparation luxurious in her despair. The play closes with her being triumphant both in love and politics, but tragically enough this triumph is possible only in death.

John Russel Brown comments on Cleopatra's theatrical death, contrasting Shakespeare's Cleopatra to Plutarch's:

Many unpleasant things can be said of Cleopatra; and the more that are said, the more wonderful she appears. If she is dark, it is because the sun himself has been amorous of her. Even when death is close at hand, she imagines his touch as a lover's. She embraces him that she may overtake Iras and gain Antony's first kiss in the other world. She announces to her women that she is pale or sick or sullen, they must lead her to her chamber but must not speak to her. She is as strong and supple as a leopard, can drink down a master of revelry, can raise her lover's helpless body from the ground into her tower with the aid of only two women. She is a mother, but the threat of Octavius to destroy her children if she takes her own life passes by her like the wind. (149)

4.1 A Victim or a Rebel? Cleopatra's Performative Femininity

Cleopatra can be seen as a victim in a world dominated by men. She has to devise tricks to allure Antony because she needs him in Egypt to protect her kingdom. She uses her feminine wiles to keep him engaged with her:

CLEOPATRA. Where is he?

CHARMIAN. I did not see him since.

CLEOPATRA. See where he is, who is with him, what he does.

I did not send you: if you find him sad,

Say I am dancing; if in mirth, report

I am sudden sick. (1.3. 3-6)

However, using her allure should not necessarily be interpreted as a sign of weakness. Rather, it can be seen as a weapon that places her at the center of the power dynamics between Rome and Egypt. She impresses even those who oppose her, such as Enobarbus and Caesar. She wields her femininity as a form of power, and this use of feminine charm challenges traditional gender roles. Paradoxically, Cleopatra's femininity is the source of both her vulnerability and power. Her performative femininity asserts the fluidity of gender roles and presents gender not as a fixed biological category but as something shaped and enacted according to surrounding contexts. Her ability to be both a helpless lover and a seductive partner reveals her understanding of gender as an idea that can be adapted. She uses gender as a tool to survive in a world ruled by ideologies set by men. This manipulation of gender is her method for maintaining her power. Even her death, staged with great theatricality, is seen as her final act of asserting control over her complex identity and legacy. Her dual nature- being both strong and fragile, cunning and irrational- makes her a unique woman who transcends simple classifications. Cleopatra is a rebel against patriarchal values. She is not confined to the private sphere but is involved in politics and even war, domains usually forbidden for women. In the end, she refuses to be classified as a mistress and she dies as Antony's wife, expanding gender boundaries even in her death:

CLEOPATRA. Yare, yare, good Iras, quick. Methinks I hear

Antony call. I see him rouse himself

To praise my noble act. I hear him mock

The luck of Caesar, which the gods give men

To excuse their after wrath.—Husband, I come!

Now to that name my courage prove my title.

I am fire and air; my other elements

I give to baser life.—So, have you done? (5.2. 338-345)

Cleopatra enters her monument only to be immortal in history as the woman whose defiance and cunning outshined Caesar. It is tragic that only in death, she achieves her full potential as a woman. It is both tragic and paradoxical that Shakespeare chooses to close the play with Caesar, the representative of ultimate patriarchy in the play:

CAESAR. No grave upon the earth shall clip in it

A pair so famous. High events as these

Strike those that make them; and their story is

No less in pity than his glory which

Brought them to be lamented (5. 2. 430-434)

4.2 Conclusion

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare expands traditional gender boundaries, presenting a unique vision of gender dynamics through the perplexing character of Cleopatra. The play delves into the fluidity of gender roles, examining the intersections between gender, power, and identity. Cleopatra defies all traditional expectations of femininity with her enigmatic diversity and irresistible charm. For feminists, Cleopatra is not simply a myth, but a model in which women can explore new possibilities of their potential. Cleopatra's action mocks gender classifications, and she uses gender as a flexible tool to assert her power and identity in a world ruled by men.

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