

Revisiting Cleopatra through Feminist Lens

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Abstract

Cleopatra is one of the most remarkable women that have survived through generations of human history, which has been more or less man-history. A monarch, who governed over her people for around twenty years, is considered, through historical anecdotes, no more than a royal courtesan who managed to save her career through her association with great generals of Roman empire. Following suit, the literary artists have not lagged behind; they also portray her as a seductress and a heroine of a love tragedy, the onus of which lay in her fatal flaw of inconsistency in consistent coquetry. However, recent researches reveal that Cleopatra was not a woman of great feminine charm and multifarious factors contributed to her success. The present paper attempts an analysis of Cleopatra as depicted in William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606) through the feminist lens of counter-historical perspective. The objective of the paper is to explore the alternate histories of her fictional image in the classic tragedy.

Keywords: Cleopatra, monarch, seductress, coquetry, sexuality, inconsistency, gaps, power, counter-history, gender.

Cleopatra (69-30 B.C.) was the queen of Egypt for twenty years. Generally known as 'the Jewel of the Nile', she is one of the most fascinating women of the world, a woman whom no man could resist. No doubt, she is an inexhaustible topic of discussion for historians, litterateurs and artists. Even after a lapse of two millennia, she is still talked about, she remains firmly entrenched as one of the greatest women of the world and can hold on her own even against that paragon of beauty, the legendary Helen of Troy, the queen of Greece. Enobarbus, a character in Shakespeare's play, *Antony and Cleopatra* praises her in these words:

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

Stacy Schiff, the renowned American non-fiction historian, gives a rather grandiloquent description of Cleopatra:

A goddess as a child, a queen at eighteen, a celebrity soon thereafter, she was an object of speculation and veneration, gossip and legend, even in her own time. At the height of her power she controlled virtually the entire eastern Mediterranean coast, the last great kingdom of any Egyptian ruler. For a fleeting moment she held the fate of the Western world in her hands. She had a child with a married man, three more with another. She died at thirty nine, a generation before the birth of Christ. Catastrophe reliably cements a reputation, and Cleopatra's end was sudden and sensational. She has lodged herself in our imaginations ever since. (*Cleopatra: A Life* (2010))

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. This may, partly, be because Octavius Caesar after defeating the forces of Antony, and of Cleopatra, left no stone unturned to tarnish her image. Almost all subsequent writers blindly accepted the Roman version of Cleopatra. 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" (Schiff, "Rehabilitating Cleopatra").

In spite of all that is said about Cleopatra, as A.C. Bradley puts it, "Many unpleasant things can be said of Cleopatra and the more that are said, the more wonderful she appears," (Brown 149). Cleopatra has inspired a good deal of writers of various times and climes to relate her story of power and pelf, love and lust, glory and shame and the kind of life she lived and death she had. In English literature, she figures prominently in William Shakespeare's tragedy *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607), John Dryden's tragedy, *All for Love* (1677) and George Bernard Shaw's comedy, *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1901).

As it seems, Shakespeare, from the very beginning, takes upon himself a project of presenting Cleopatra as a coquette and a seductress, in fact, as a whore, and not a decorous, dignified queen. At various places in the play, the characters refer to her as a whore. The play opens with the speech of Philo, a friend of Antony's, who condemns Cleopatra as "a tawny front" (1.1.6), "a gipsy" (1.1.10) and "a strumpet" (1.1.13). Case, a renowned critic on Shakespeare has observed, that "his picture of Cleopatra is 'of courser fibre' than that depicted in Plutarch" (qtd. in Turner 80). Morgan also thinks that Shakespeare emphasizes Cleopatra's faults more than Plutarch (qtd. in Turner 83).

Cleopatra is presented as a cunning and crafty lover in Shakespeare's play. Antony, who cannot resist her charms, calls her "enchanted queen" (1.2.112) and makes her enigmatic in the eyes of Enobarbus saying, "She is cunning past man's thoughts" (1.2.120) and laments, "Would I had never seen her" (1.2.136).

Cleopatra's sexual impact is repeatedly emphasized in the play. Anthony is completely infatuated with her. Even Dolabella, a servant of Octavius's, is infatuated with her. A.C. Bradley also

reflects, “The exercise of sexual attraction is the element of her life and she has developed nature into a consummate art ... If she is dark, it is because the sun himself has been amorous of her” (149).

In the play, according to Enobarbus, Cleopatra’s sexuality has a unique characteristic:

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)

Even Cleopatra’s attendants are well aware of her wily nature. They expose her hypocrisy by making a mention of her own earlier words of praise for Julius Caesar, wherein Cleopatra, making a comparison between her love for Caesar and for Antony blames her own immaturity for admiring Caesar in her youthful days:

My salad days,
When I was green in Judgement, cold in blood. (1.5.66-67)

Shakespeare makes his heroine’s promiscuity quite apparent when he makes her offer her hand to be kissed even to a petty messenger.

And here
My bluest veins to kiss, a hand that kings
Have lipped and trembled kissing.” (2.4.28-30)

Again, she is made to behave in a crass, churlish manner when she is conversing with the messenger who has brought the news of Octavia’s marriage to Antony. She does not exhibit any grace of the genteel during the course of the play. She becomes hysterical when she is not given attention by Antony. She is truculent and boisterous in her treatment of Antony, whom she is nagging all the time. She speaks to him frivolously when he takes leave of her in order to attend his wife, Fulvia’s funeral.

Evidently, in the earlier acts of the play, Cleopatra is shown as a shrewd diplomat exercising her feminine arts and her coquetry on Antony, and on the part of Antony, too, it is the urge of lust rather than love that keeps him in Egypt away from his own country. But in the last act of the play both Cleopatra and Antony are presented as true lovers who live for each other and die for each other.

CAESAR. She (Cleopatra) shall be buried by her Antony:
No grave upon the earth shall clip in it
A pair so famous. (5.2.357-59)

Most critics have a consensus on the point that in the last act of the play, Shakespeare has given royal dignity to Cleopatra when she, being apprehensive of the kind of treatment she would receive at

the hands of Octavius and the Romans, prefers a decent death of her own choice. Marianne Novy, in *Shakespeare and Outsiders* says, “Although Cleopatra receives her share of scorn, she is also described in more admiring words than are most of other ethnic or national outsiders. The lovers construct and reconstruct their own space, and Cleopatra dies with glory in Roman as well Egyptian terms” (15). Again, in the Epilogue of the same book, Novy emphasizes, “In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the cultural outsider stages a glorious death that even Romans can appreciate” (153). However, an overall analysis of Shakespeare’s portrayal of Cleopatra establishes that she has met with unjust treatment. But if our eyes are not dazzled by the exultation in the last act, as M.R. Ridley observes, we shall recognize that it would be hard to find anywhere in literature a more unsparing picture of the professional courtesan than Shakespeare’s picture of Cleopatra. (qtd.in Turner 83)

Again and again, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Antony is shown to put the blame of his failure on Cleopatra:

O, whither hast thou led me Egypt? See,
.....
You did know
How much you were my conqueror: and that
My sword, made weak by my affection, would
Obey it on all cause. (3.11.56-66)

Antony is guilt-ridden for fleeing the battlefield with Cleopatra. Here, Antony is made to behave in an escapist’s manner when he seeks refuge in Cleopatra’s affection:

Fall not a tear, I say: one of them rates
All that is won and lost; give me a kiss;
Even this repays me. (3.11.67-70)

On a closer analysis, it seems hardly convincing that Antony would have been a slave to somebody who is declining in her youth (she is already 39), overbearing in temperament and peevish in behaviour. What keeps him in Egypt, then? Her actions do not comply with the description given by Enobarbus that “she did make defect perfection” (2.2.231). “The infinite variety that Enobarbus makes a mention of, is not her physical beauty or her coquettishness alone; she must have possessed far greater qualities of head and heart that she unfailingly clutches the hearts of two greatest of Roman Generals—first Julius Caesar and then Mark Antony, not to speak of the Egyptian subjects who reposed their faith in her governance for twenty years.

Hence, there is a great contradiction in the image of Cleopatra created by the Roman commanders and the character traits possessed by the heroine in the play. Again, there is trouble with Cleopatra’s delineation in the earlier acts and her exaltation in the last one. Various critics have pointed out this contradiction and try to give their own justification. As quoted in Turner, “Case’s view presented as a general view is of divided hearts, of compromised motives....In Cleopatra herself it is

the confusion of motives surrounding her death: her love of Antony conflicts with and is compromised by her dislike of ignominy; (81-82)” to M.R. Ridley, “the story itself is undramatic” (82); Lord David Cecil concentrates on the political aspects of the play and argues that the central theme is not love but success. (83)” Ana Murphy Jameson has called Shakespeare’s Cleopatra “a brilliant antithesis, a compound of contradictions, of all that we most hate, with what we most admire” (*Shakespeare’s Heroines* 262). However, she offers no viable justification. She simply affirms, “But to make the extreme of littleness produce the effect like grandeur...to do this, belonged only to Shakespeare, that worker of miracles” (262). Adelman calls it “a tragic experience embedded in a comic structure” and Michael Neill identifies hyperbole as the play’s basic rhetorical and structural principle” (qtd. in Kahn 230).

This enigma of Cleopatra, this inconsistency in her character, this orifice in history, plastered over by various historians and the dramatic version of Shakespeare, seems to have its explanation in new historicism, as, for, Raymond Williams, “the discrepancies became legible mainly between the lines of literary works, where “hegemony” collided with what he called “experience”. Reading for the not-quite-said, Williams turned literature itself into a form of counter-history” (*Practicing New Historicism* 62). Williams affirms:

“There are times...when there is so high a tension between experience and description that we are forced to examine the descriptions, and to seek beyond them for new descriptions, not so much as a matter of theory but as literally a problem of behaviour.” (qtd. in *Practicing New Historicism* 63)

Again, as Cleopatra has interested historians even more than litterateurs, Stacy Schiff makes a close observation about the historians of Cleopatra, none of whom was her contemporary, and hence, none could be relied upon for the authenticity of their version:

History is written not only by posterity, but for posterity as well. Our most comprehensive sources never met Cleopatra. Plutarch was born seventy-six years after she died. (He was working at the same time as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.) Appian wrote at a remove of more than a century; Dio of well over two. Cleopatra’s story differs from most women’s stories in that the men who shaped it — for their own reasons — enlarged rather than erased her role. Her relationship with Mark Antony was the longest of her life, but her relationship with his rival, Augustus, was the most enduring. He would defeat Antony and Cleopatra. To Rome, to enhance the glory, he delivered up the tabloid version of an Egyptian queen, insatiable, treacherous, bloodthirsty, power-crazed. He magnified Cleopatra to hyperbolic proportions so as to do the same with his victory — and so as to smuggle his real enemy, his former brother-in-law, out of the picture. (*Cleopatra: A Life*)

Coppelia Kahn has also appropriately remarked in the essay “Shakespeare’s classical tragedies”, “Writers under Octavius’s patronage who were later venerated as ‘Augustan’—Virgil,

Ovid, Horace—fused xenophobia with patriarchal ideology in order to demonize Cleopatra as Rome’s most dangerous enemy, a foreigner and a woman whose power was fatally infected by her sexuality" (*The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Tragedy* 230). On a closer analysis, it may well be inferred that what one finds in the name of history of Cleopatra is as much as a fictional version as the fictional arts are. In the era, in which Shakespeare wrote the play, when King James I had recently taken over after around half a century’s reign of a woman—Queen Elizabeth, it was the moment to celebrate the end of women’s era, and Shakespeare also catered to the popular opinion and taste by deriding a woman who attempted to subvert the patriarchal model of Europe headed by Caesar. Viewing through the new historicist lens, the case of Cleopatra becomes a significant one in women’s studies. Gallagher and Greenblatt, in the introduction to *Practicing New Historicism* say:

Women’s studies, and the feminism that motivated its formation, has served as an important, if little acknowledged, model for new historicism in that it has inspired its adherents to identify new objects for study, bring those objects into the light of critical attention, and insist upon their legitimate place in the curriculum. It has also served to politicize explicitly an academic discourse that had often attempted to avoid or conceal partisan or polemical commitments, and it unsettles familiar aesthetic hierarchies that had been manipulated, consciously or unconsciously, to limit the cultural significance of women. (11)

Treating Cleopatra as a centre of power generated among the successive historians and literary artists a fear of effeminization which did not find any expression during the Queen’s reign. Discussing the gender equations in cultural terms, Stephen Orgel, in “Shakespeare, sexuality and gender” reveals:

The fear of effeminization pervades the moral literature of the age: boys must be trained to be men, and to remain manly required constant vigilance. Associating with women, falling in love, was inherently dangerous to the masculine self: lust, it was said, effeminates, makes men incapable of many pursuits; hence the pervasive antithesis of love and war throughout the age. The classic Shakespearean example is Mark Antony, transformed by love from ‘the triple pillar of the world’ into a strumpet’s fool’ (I.I. 12-13); and Cleopatra, playing her own entirely conventional role, completes her effeminization:

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. 21-3) (220-21)

Kahn also affirms, “In the dizzying succession of defeats and victories, quarrels and reconciliations that follow Antony’s defeat at Actium, he undergoes an experience of self-loss triggered not so much by defeat at Caesar’s hands as by his sense of betrayal at Cleopatra’s: not defeat *per se*, but what he perceives as domination by a woman, is what unmans Antony" (232).

Quite contrary to the popular belief, Cleopatra's beauty (or even the lack of it) did not count much with the Romans or the Egyptians. Plutarch averred that her sexiness stemmed from her intelligence and described her as a brilliant leader. Stacy Schiff, the author of '*Cleopatra: A life*' (2010) has drawn attention to the sterling qualities of Cleopatra's character. Leaving aside her physical beauty and sexiness, she describes Cleopatra as "a commanding woman, versed in politics, diplomacy and governance, fluent in nine languages, silver-tongued and charismatic." (Kakutani "The Woman").

Ethnically, Cleopatra was a Greek and descended from Alexander the Great's general Ptolemy I Soter. But she was the first in the dynasty to learn and speak the Egyptian language in order to establish direct rapport with her subjects. She is supposed to have written some books also on a variety of subjects such as weights and measures, cosmetics and even magic. Recent feminists have revived the studies in Cleopatra as a queen and woman of substance who could bring the emperors on their knees not by her seductive strategies but through her political acumen. Alessandra Stanley records, "'We have sought to show her as the ancient Egyptians saw her, as a very effective queen who was very well loved", said Susan Walker, a British Museum historian who helped curate the no-nonsense exhibition, "Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt" (Stanley "Cleopatra, Career Woman"). She further quotes Mary Hamer, who teaches cultural history at Harvard and wrote an essay on the myths of Cleopatra for the exhibition's catalogue, "The sheer belief of this exhibit is to say: Forget all that stuff about sex and love. Here is a capable ruler who was highly intelligent, a brilliant linguist and an admirable administrator" (Stanley "Cleopatra, Career Woman").

Cleopatra's foreign policy aimed at securing not only her own safety but also the security of her country, maintaining Egypt's independence from the rapidly expanding Roman Empire, "in one papyrus dated to 35 B.C. Cleopatra is called 'philopatris', 'she who loves her country'. By identifying herself as a truly Egyptian pharaoh, Cleopatra used patriotism to cement her position." (Crawford "Who was Cleopatra?").

As a stateswoman, Cleopatra plays her cards skilfully. At first, she establishes intimate relationship with Julius Caesar, the most powerful dictator of Rome. Her presenting herself, in order to have audience with Caesar, tumbling out of a carpet when it is unrolled speaks volumes for her intelligence, ingenuity and inventiveness. Interestingly, Caesar was also an equal player in the game. He also found it more accommodating to rule Egypt through Cleopatra. Suetonius, the historian on Roman politics comments:

When he found Pompey dead, he waged a very difficult war on king Ptolemy whom he perceived plotting treachery against him. Both time and place were convenient: it was winter and the enemy was skilful and well supplied within the city walls. Caesar lacked supplies and preparation. Victorious, Caesar allowed Cleopatra and her younger brother Ptolemy to rule Egypt, since he feared that if he made it a province, in the future it might be a means of political insurrection for a rather impetuous governor. (Jones *Cleopatra: A Sourcebook* 54)

With Caesar's help, Cleopatra's rival brother-cum-husband Ptolemy XIII is defeated and drowned in the Nile. Then she gets her another brother Ptolemy XIV killed. Thus, her own survival and that of her son Caesarion begotten from Julius Caesar is ensured. At the same time, Cleopatra does not stop being human and has a life full of passion, vivacity and exuberance when she has Caesar as her partner. Michiko Kakutani, in her *New York Times* review of Stacy Schiff's *Cleopatra: A Life* analyses:

In fact, Cleopatra and Caesar had not only complementary political agendas, Ms. Schiff observes, but also closely matched personalities: both were congenial, charismatic, quick-tongued people with an intellectual curiosity that was the trademark of their age, a light heartedness and a humour that set them apart from their peers. Both were natural performers. Both had daringly crossed lines in their bids for power; both had let the dice fly. Both, she continues, had as great a capacity for work as for play and rarely distinguished between the two. Caesar was so impressed with Cleopatra's kingdom that on returning to Rome he would establish a series of reforms, inspired partly by what he had observed in Egypt: most notably, laying the foundation for a public library, commissioning an official census and planning a series of engineering innovations based on Egypt's sophisticated locks and dikes. ("The Woman Who had the World Enthralled")

When Julius Caesar is assassinated in the Roman Senate in 44 B.C, she develops close ties with the great Roman ruler, Antony for personal reasons as well as in the interest of her country. It is a fine stroke of diplomatic move. With the combined forces of her own army and that of Antony, her country could successfully meet any foreign invasion and preserve its sovereignty. But again, Antony was not a fool to fall to Cleopatra's designs without a thorough consideration of his diplomatic requirements. He, too, needed Cleopatra as his political ladder as much as she did him. Here, it would not be out of place to suspect an inverted strategy; Antony exploited this opportunity and seduced Cleopatra to make his political career. Kakutani, reviewing *Cleopatra: A Life*, reveals:

As for Antony, Ms. Schiff writes, he had immediate, practical needs. Egypt's wealth could help underwrite his military ambitions that dovetailed with Cleopatra's long-range imperial ambitions and her thirst for territory. Unlike most Romans, Antony had longtime experience with quick-thinking, capable women (including his mother and his wife), while Cleopatra shared his taste for theatre and the ability to indulge it.

The possibility of inverted positions is not a mere fantasy, rather, it has been supported by many modern historians. Stanley M. Burstein also records in his *The Reign of Cleopatra* (2004):

While Antony's superiority over Octavian was declining, Cleopatra's position in Egypt was gradually improving. The details are lost, but the extensive programme of temples and monument building Cleopatra undertook in Upper Egypt and Alexandria in honour of herself and Caesarion indicates that she took advantage of her kingdom's recovery

from the famine and plague years of late 40s BCE to build support for her kingdom in the Pharaonic manner. With her hold on Egypt secure, Cleopatra's position was much stronger when Antony summoned her to Antioch to discuss his planned invasion of Parthia than it had been at the time of their first meeting at Tarsus four years earlier. (25)

Subsequently, Cleopatra takes up Antony as her lover, who abandons his wives, first Fulvia and then Octavia for her (Cleopatra's) sake and lives with Cleopatra in Egypt, neglecting the affairs of his own country. She has three children by him. When Antony is defeated by Octavius Caesar, Julius Caesar's nephew, in the war, he kills himself on hearing the news of Cleopatra's death (which is fabricated by Cleopatra to test his love for her). Thereafter, knowing that Antony has taken his life, Cleopatra, too, commits suicide uttering:

“Husband, I come;
Now to that name, my courage proves my title.” (5.2.288-89)

Now the question arises; Is Cleopatra right in calling Antony her husband? One answer is that the last words of a dying person are taken to be true even by the court of Justice. The other answer is provided by Stanley M. Burstein, who says in his book, *The Reign of Cleopatra* (2004) that Antony married Cleopatra in 33-32 B.C (xvi). If Burstein's statement is authentic and can be relied upon, it absolves them of the charge of adultery levelled against them, proving that their relation was not illicit. Turner also says:

Cleopatra is said to be an expert in the ancient art of the courtesans which she has been accused of having practised successfully upon Pompey and Julius Caesar. But in the case of Antony, her aim is love and it is also Antony's. It is the merest fatuity of moralizing to deny the name of 'love' to their passion and write it off as 'mere lust'. Maybe, it is not the highest kind of love; but it has in it something that should be an element in the highest kind of love; and, at least, it is the passion of human beings and not of animals, of the spirit as well as of body. (83-84)

Notwithstanding her dark complexion (if Plutarch is to be believed), Cleopatra embodies in her personality irresistible charm, a sort of magnetic force that draws, besides some contemporary high-ups, two most powerful Roman generals, Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, one after the other, towards her, pulling at their heartstrings and becoming their weakness. Her manoeuvring in establishing human relations and conducting the state-affairs should not be wholly attributed to her bewitching beauty that she is supposed to have (though some knowledgeable authors deny it altogether). The other traits of her character outweigh the influence of her physical appearance. Hence, her larger than life portrait emerges in the final act of *Antony and Cleopatra* despite her earlier flaws. As Stephan Greenblatt in his essay “Culture” says,

For great works of art are not neutral relay stations in the circulation of cultural materials. Something happens to objects, beliefs, and practices when they are repressed, reimagined, and performed in literary texts, something often unpredictable and disturbing. That “something” is a sign both of power of art and of the embeddedness of culture in the contingencies of history. (*Practicing New Historicism* 230-31)

To conclude, it may be said that Shakespeare was a genius in delineating the character of Cleopatra with dreamlike fantasy, but he slandered her to satisfy the contemporary society’s masculinist urges. However, his valorisation in the final act unsettles the placid waters. The glorious image of Cleopatra in the last act is unpredictable as well as disturbing as it does not proceed logically. Hence, it is not a confusion of stylistic or generic frameworks that leads to ambiguity of the heroine’s character, rather, it is a cultural manoeuvring and a historical wish on the part of a male dramatist not to acknowledge a woman’s greatness to which Shakespeare ultimately succumbed. Still, the artistic perfection is achieved through objective correlative in the various sets of images, situations and series of events through the genius of Shakespeare.

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