An Argument for Cleopatra—the "Herculean Hero"—of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*

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William Shakespeare's play *Antony and Cleopatra* focuses on the fatal love affair of the titular characters, the queen of Egypt, Cleopatra, and the militant leader of the Roman triumvirate, Mark Antony. This play is a dramatization of an already familiar narrative from the centuries prior. Writers like Plutarch and Virgil as well as Chaucer and Horace had their own iterations of the drama. Shakespeare's play offers a re-centered vantage point of the political and romantic dynamics of this relationship between lovers and legends. This rendition complicates and humanizes the mythos of Antony and Cleopatra in ways that include new considerations for this audience. Additionally, Shakespeare veers away from some of his traditional approaches to writing in this text. I believe that Shakespeare goes further in his portrayal of the Egyptian queen than with most of the other women he writes and would like to offer a new reading of her lasting influence. This essay is primarily interested in the structures of power Antony and Cleopatra defend and display between them and seeks to further the discussion of a particular character archetype highlighted in the work of Bruce R. Smith's *Shakespeare and Masculinity.* By relying on close readings of the play, feminist theory, and Smith's argument, sufficient evidence can be provided for another contextualization of one of Shakespeare's most endearing characters.

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Smith's *Shakespeare and Masculinity* focuses on the ideals, character types, and themes of masculinity in the stage plays of William Shakespeare. When listing the character archetypes present in Shakespeare's dramas, Smith identifies the following variations: the chivalrous knight, the Herculean hero, the humanist man of moderation, the merchant prince, and the saucy jack. Smith concludes that the characters in *Antony and Cleopatra* display characteristics aligned with the archetype of the Herculean hero, who he defines as "a warrior of great stature who is guilty of striking departures from the morality of the society in which he lives."[1] Ultimately, Smith chooses Mark Antony as the character who exemplifies this position the most fully. He argues that the Roman military leader's departure from his responsibilities as a husband and an army leader show the ways in which his character has abandoned his duty in favor of love. However, I believe that the Herculean hero of the play is Cleopatra and not Antony.

While Smith's Herculean hero archetype assumes a masculine figure, the notions of masculinity applied do not seem to bar Cleopatra from this position. First, we'll need to take into consideration the role of masculinity in the work of our author. Smith writes, "Shakespeare's comedies often invite the conclusion that masculinity is more like a suit of clothes that can be put on and taken off at will than a matter of biologic destiny."[2] Plays like *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice* utilize cross-dressing as a humorous look at the construction of gender. Although our play is a tragedy and not a comedy, the play retains a fluid approach to understanding gender identity. In Act 2, Scene 5, this dynamic comes alive again as Cleopatra relives the story of getting Antony drunk, and convincing him to wear her clothes in exchange for his own, even going so far to convince him to give her his sword (2.5.18-23). Certainly, it is Cleopatra's charm that influences this decision, but it is also her cunning.

Cleopatra has to contest her own sense of power and the increased suspicions surrounding her love to a married man. Later in Act 2, Scene 5, when the Messenger brings news of Antony's marriage to Octavia, Cleopatra bursts into a rage and threatens the life of the Messenger, ultimately finding less shame in the act of adultery than murder. Cleopatra's role in the play is complicated further by the dynamics of gendered expectations. As political and

militant leaders in their respective lands, the ideals of masculinity are shifted for Antony and Cleopatra, and I would argue that this scene offers the first observable force that shifts the dynamic of their relationship. Romantic love and political power are often at odds with one another in *Antony and Cleopatra.* What's at stake for both characters is the public and private intimacy of their relationship in the face of military and political expectations. Mark Antony is expected to be the fearless leader of the Roman army, the leader that Caesar applauds eloquently and celebrates (1.4.56-72). As Antony's love and affection become apparent to Caesar, Antony becomes a burden that Caesar describes as the type of boy who would choose to "Pawn their experience to their present pleasure / And so rebel to judgement" (1.4.32-3). Caesar wishes a shame on Antony that would drive him back to Rome.

In his book, *Descriptions of England,* William Harrison describes the "orders" of citizens, including, "Nobility and other gentlemen whose wealth is in land, inhabitants of cities and towns who earn their living by practicing a profession or plying a trade, yeomen farmers who own or lease the land they work, and laborers who own nothing themselves and sell their services to others."[3] From this description, we can understand that Shakespeare's audience would have understood citizens to be divided by gender as well as class. To understand how Cleopatra could fit the character archetype of the Herculean hero, therefore, we must be aware of the author's approach to masculinity. Smith writes, "any discussion of [the] ideals of masculinity in early modern England must take into account, then, differences in social rank."[4] By getting Antony to agree to this gender-challenging swap, Cleopatra's actions challenge the ideas of class-based differences associated with masculinity and society. Cleopatra's character is intriguing in the ways she performs as a lover, a militant leader, and the destroyer of the Roman triumvirate. The queen is presented to the audience as the epitome of desire, intelligence, and jealousy, amongst other things. These capabilities allow her to possess a type of agency that many women in seventeenth-century England did not have. In this way, the choice to focus on the character of Cleopatra means having to open up an inquiry into a much wider conversation about women, power, and representation on the stage in seventeenth-century England.

M. Ayub Jaija asks what position women hold in Shakespeare's plays, and the first place to look for an answer comes at the beginning of the play.[5] *Antony and Cleopatra* begins with these lines by Philo, one of Mark Antony's followers:

> Nay, but this dotage of our general's
> O'erflows the measure. Those his goodly eyes,
> That o'er the files and muster of the war
> Have glowed like plated Mars, now bend, now turn
> The office and devotion of their view
> Upon a tawny front (1.1.1-5).

Editor John Wilders glosses "dotage" as "infatuation," in the 1995 edition of the text.[6] As Wilders reads it, Shakespeare differentiates this relationship as a lesser version of the love Antony has for "the files and muster of the war." This interpretation can be thought of as a way to show Cleopatra as inferior to Mark Antony because she cannot wholly occupy a space in his heart. In this introduction to the queen, we can see why Courtni Wright might claim that to show a fully liberated woman might be dangerous for Shakespeare, so instead he complicates the way the audience first comes to understand this heroine.[7]

The text brings in another aspect of difference by making reference to the queen's appearance—her "tawny front." This description of something akin to the dirt of the earth would mean Cleopatra had a very dark complexion compared to the Roman citizens. Philo's decree shows that Antony's affair with Cleopatra has belittled him and left him a mere mortal, despite his political position. While his eyes were once fixated on things above, like Mars, they are now cast down below, insinuating that the Roman general has sunk to a new low through this entanglement.

Philo continues the introduction by saying, "Take but good note, and you shall see in him / The triple pillar of the world transformed / Into a strumpet's fool" (1.1.11-13). If love be indeed a measure of power, in this way, Cleopatra retains power, though she is referred to as a whore or strumpet. The "triple pillar of the world" represents the Roman triumvirate, whose members include Mark Antony, Octavius Caesar, and Lepidus. Philo's warning serves as a precaution to not fall in love with a woman of another nation as well as not to fall for a powerful woman because she very well might be the folly and downfall of a powerful man or empire.

Later in act 1, Cleopatra asks, "Why did [Antony] marry Fulvia and not love her? / I'll seem the fool I am not. Antony / Will be himself" (1.1.42-4). Wilders's version, unlike earlier editions, glosses those as being spoken directly to Antony and not performed as an aside. Wilders states that Cleopatra's apprehension with regard to Antony's marriage is because his devotion to his Roman wife makes her look weak in the eyes of others and because she knows he will continue to "be the fool, or deceiver he is."[8] If Wilders is correct in suggesting that Cleopatra speaks those lines directly to Antony instead of in an aside to the audience, then readers should also conclude that Cleopatra is even bolder than might have initially been thought. If that is the case, then the position of power, at least on the stage, belongs to Cleopatra as she postulates that it is her name and esteem that will be the subject of judgement due to Antony's infidelity. Furthermore, she suggests that he will be a fool—indeed, that he already is.

Early on in Act 1, when Antony first hears that his wife Fulvia is upset with him and that Octavius Caesar has called him home, Antony mulls over the decision and rejects the idea of returning to Rome and leaving Cleopatra's side, saying, "Let Rome in Tiber meet and the wide arch / Of the ranged empire fall / Here is my space" (1.1.34-5). Antony is assuming the role of a provider or protector of his beloved, albeit in a tongue-in-cheek manner because his rightful duty should be to Fulvia, to whom he is married. Antony's choice to stay with his beloved might be seen as sincere, but his choice is also a representation of the power Cleopatra has over him.

When considering the staging of the play, the ways that one character introduces another or gazes into the eyes of a third brings into question who might literally be doing these things on stage, which is a question Sarah Beckwith asks in the article "Are There Any Women in Shakespeare's Plays?: Fiction, Representation, and Reality in Feminist Criticism." Beckwith's work is in conversation with Dympna Callaghan's book *Shakespeare Without Women* and begins to look closer to the historical representation of the stage for answers. Beckwith's scholarship seeks to "focus on wider problems in feminism about what it means to secure cultural capital and political representation in patriarchy for women and other oppressed groups."[9] Ultimately, because the stage was still a space

only gendered for men during this period, Cleopatra would have been played by a man. This leads to one of the first observations that Smith points out: that gender identity is closely connected to performance. Because of this, Cleopatra can be the hero of her own story.

The performance of masculinity was also imperative for the stage as Smith lays out the fear of men performing in feminine ways by writing that "Galen's one-sex theory of the human body located masculinity not in the possession of distinctive sexual organs (men's equipment was imagined to be an extruded version of women's) but of behavior," and that "to become effeminate was an ever-present possibility."[10] Therefore, in act four, scene two, when Enobarbus cries out, "Look, they weep / And I, an ass, am onion-eyed: for shame, / Transform us not to women!", he is voicing a living anxiety of actually being turned into a woman. The stage was a place where power and masculinity were displayed through performance and where transformations could happen.

The audience's apprehension about the potentially transformative nature of the body and of the performance of gendered acts was also supplemented with the idea that men's bodies were in some ways "perfected" while women's bodies were incomplete. The idea was that men's bodies, made distinct through their "extruding" genitals, were the completed versions of what female bodies were trying to become. Additionally, gendered identity was hard to locate because, "'gender' in early modern English was connected to the declension of masculine, feminine, and neuter nouns in Latin."[11] Enobarbus gives voice to this fear when he wishes, "Transform us not to women!" (4.2.35).

In love, Cleopatra overwhelms her beloved in the power dynamic early in the play. In act one, Antony declares of Cleopatra "She is cunning past man's thought" (1.2.152). Antony's declaration serves to remove the confinement typically placed around women's intellectual ability. While this does serve to show women as the intellectual equals of men, Shakespeare does not push the envelope to the extent of demonstrating a modern notion of gender equality. In the same conversation, when Enobarbus learns that Antony's wife Fulvia is dead, Enobarbus responds by saying:

> Why, sir, give the gods a thankful sacrifice.
> When it pleaseth their deities to take the wife of a

> man from him, it shows to man the tailors of the earth; comforting therein, that when old robes are worn out, there are members to make new. If there were no more women but Fulvia, then had you indeed a cut, and the case to be lamented. This grief is crowned with consolation: your old smock brings forth a new petticoat, and indeed the tears live in an onion that should water this sorrow. (1.2.160-8)

Wilders glosses the lines 170-171 as being full of sexual innuendo, much like the majority of this interaction with Antony. Additionally, Enobarbus makes a comparison that declares women to be like men's clothing, suggesting that they can simply be replaced like an old robe or piece of cloth. He further claims that women should only be seen as complementary to men's bodies and not as important in their own right. Shortly after Antony's consideration for his love's intelligence comes a series of jokes that work to undo this effect and to create a negative audience perception of women. If we follow Jajja's ideas about how women are represented, this section of the text does nothing to contribute to the way that women are viewed in the plot. In a space like this, it is especially hard to see how Shakespeare acts as an agent of change and promotion on behalf of women.

Smith explains the expectations of masculine performance in these plays by writing, "Shakespeare and his fellow actors replicated within the small space of the Globe's wooden O the very process whereby masculine identity was performed in the world of early modern England at large."[12] Additionally, "Shakespeare's male characters attest that masculinity is also a function of person as *agents,*" and that "Stage performances of masculinity entail all four senses of 'person.'"[13] Indeed, the stage was one of the two places that held the most cultural capital in the community and was also a place of education.

Not only does Cleopatra's relationship with Antony challenge ideals of marriage by the church, but it also challenges contemporary ideas of love. Love functions as a dynamic of power in the play, and Cleopatra's first lines are concerned with the dynamic of love. In her first line, she asks, "If it be love indeed, tell me how much" (1.1.14). David Hillman approaches love as a system of power and a dynamic that plays a large part in the understanding of *Antony*

and Cleopatra, writing "Cleopatra's opening salvo in *Antony and Cleopatra* is a provocation, a dare—not just to her Roman lover but to audiences and critics both within and without Shakespeare's late tragedy of love."[14] Love, in this play, becomes its own barrier against the progress of the characters as Antony is inhibited in his responsibilities by the call of love. Cleopatra has a much better grasp of this power and therefore wields this power over her beloved. Hillman writes that love, transference love, and infatuation are all gendered forms of power, with transference being one of the most moving parts of the drama. Because Cleopatra wields a better understanding of love, Antony is subjected to what would have been considered an effeminate role. Hillman cites Freud's "Observations on Love in Transference" from *Wild Analysis,* following up on the characteristics of transference love by stating:

> It is true that this infatuation [transference love] consists of reissuing old components and repeating infantile reactions. But this is always the essence of falling in love. Everybody repeats childhood patterns. . . . Perhaps love in transference has slightly less freedom than the love that occurs ordinarily in life and is called normal; it shows more clearly its dependence on its infantile predecessor, and it proves to be less adaptable and flexible, but that is all—the differences are not essential. . . . You have no right to deny the title of "genuine" love to an infatuation that makes its appearance during analytical treatment. If it appears far from normal, this is easily explained by the circumstance that falling in love even outside analytical therapy is more reminiscent of abnormal than normal mental phenomena.

Antony, the focus of Cleopatra's love, is subjected to these childlike features of his love. Because he is so infatuated, he leaves his post as part of the triumvirate to follow his love. These actions show how the queen performs a form of power over Antony, as he has to know that she is in better control of her will. However, Cleopatra is still subject to the difficulty of love, as is made very clear in her exchange with the messenger in act three, scene three, when the queen asks a series of questions about Octavia in a fit of jealousy and curiosity. Love proves to be a factor that does not care whom it subjects to its will.

At the end of the play, Cleopatra herself brings into question the focus of performance and gender in a moment that is rich in its dramatic irony. Just before her death, the queen declares:

> Nay, 'tis most certain, Iras. 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. (5.2.214-9)

In this way, the queen becomes her own orator and a playwright, rewriting the narrative on how she will be depicted. This moment in a drama is typically reserved as a place for the male hero to have his last attempt at a dramatic monologue, but instead, Cleopatra gets the focus on stage. She calls out those who will tell her story by declaring that those saucy (glossed as "insolent" or "lascivious") writers will cast her majesty as nothing more than a strumpet or loose woman. Cleopatra cries out against that perspective on both her behalf and the behalf of women in power in general. She seems to assert her authority and the value of understanding her role as a powerful individual, the Herculean hero of the text, that I would like to believe she is.

Because the stage was a place for only male performers, it is essential to remember that Cleopatra would have been played by a man even when delivering this speech. Relying once again on Rackin's research, it's important to think about how we might interpret the portrayal of women characters by young, male actors. In the chapter, "Boys Will Be Girls," Rackin mentions several of the potential reasons that influenced Shakespeare to rely on an all-male cast.[16] A large portion of the inspiration was seeped in patriarchic values as the performances were limited to male participation and were written for male audiences despite women's participation in and patronage of the arts. Another reason Shakespeare used an all-male cast was his intention to avoid any potential confusion about the sexuality of his productions. He did not want to put women on display for men's entertainment. In some ways, this could be seen as a potential honor, but that is only if one assumes that the virtue of a woman is steeped in her chastity and that having a multitude

of men seeing her would somehow lessen her value. Because it would be fine to have a man on stage, and this was not seen as lessening men's value, this view must be seen as another deterrent to equality.

By understanding the context of Shakespeare's characters, we can adapt our understanding of what they represented then and now. Though Smith's archetypes are good at identifying the characteristics that Shakespeare uses in his plays, there exists a need to critically inquire what those types represent not just in terms of historicity but also in terms of culture. In some ways, by refusing to see women as the heroines or provocateurs of the texts, the risk of continuing patriarchal values is still very high. Viewing Cleopatra as the Herculean hero of this text opens new understandings of women's ability to perform gendered roles and inspires the question of how other women might be leading the way in Shakespeare's other works.

Notes

1. Bruce R. Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 48.

2. Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity,* 3; For a larger view of women's position and engagement in the theater in Shakespeare's works, see also Jill Dolan, "Rehearsing Democracy: Advocacy, Public Intellectuals, and Civic Engagement in Theatre and Performance Studies," Theatre Topics 11.1 (2001): 1–17, doi:10.1353/tt.2001.0005; Robert I. Lublin, "Feminist History, Theory, and Practice in the Shakespeare Classroom," *Theatre Topics* 14.2 (2004): 397–410, doi:10.1353/tt.2004.0021; and Joshua Mabie, "The Problem of the Prodigal in *The Fair Maid of the West, A Christian Turned Turk,* and *The Renegado," Renascence* 64.4 (2012): 299–319, doi:10.5840/renascence201264431.

3. Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity,* 94.

4. Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity,* 43.

5. M. Ayub Jajja, "A Feminist Reading of Shakespearean Tragedies: Frailty, Thy Name Is Woman," *Pakistan Journal of Commerce and Social Sciences,* 8.1 (2014): 228–237.

6. John Wilders, ed., *Antony and Cleopatra* (Bloomsbury, 1995).

7. Courtni C. Wright, *The Women of Shakespeare's Plays: Analysis of the Role of the Women in Selected Plays with Plot Synopses and Selected One Act Plays* (University Press of America, 1993).

8. Wilders, *Antony and Cleopatra,* 93.

9. Sarah Beckwith, "Are There Any Women in Shakespeare's Plays?: Fiction, Representation, and Reality in Feminist Criticism," *New Literary History* 46.2 (2015): 246.

10. Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity,* 106.

11. Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity,* 11.
12. Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity,* 37.
13. Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity,* 37.
14. David Hillman, "'If It Be Love Indeed': Transference, Love, and Anthony and Cleopatra," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 64.3 (2013): 301.
15. Hillman, "Transference, Love, and Anthony and Cleopatra," 301-333.
16. Phyllis Rackin, "The Place(s) of Women in Shakespeare's World: Historical Fact and Feminist Interpretation," in *Shakespeare and Women* (Oxford University Press, 2012): 26–48.