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Source: *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Summer, 1977), pp. 297-316

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2869080>

Accessed: 06-05-2019 12:02 UTC

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# Egyptian Queens and Male Reviewers: Sexist Attitudes in *Antony and Cleopatra* Criticism

L. T. FITZ

And of Cleopatra what shall be said? Is she a creature of the same breed as Cato's daughter, Portia? Does the one word woman include natures so diverse? Or is Cleopatra . . . no mortal woman, but Lilith who ensnared Adam before the making of Eve?

(Dowden)

**M**OST CRITICS ARE UNITED IN PROCLAIMING that *Antony and Cleopatra* is a magnificent achievement; unfortunately, they are not united on the question of exactly what the play achieves. It is difficult to think of another Shakespearean play which has divided critics into such furiously warring camps. A. P. Riemer describes, fairly accurately, the positions defended by the two main critical factions: "*Antony and Cleopatra* can be read as the fall of a great general, betrayed in his dotage by a treacherous strumpet, or else it can be viewed as a celebration of transcendental love."<sup>1</sup> Derek Traversi also speaks of this interpretive impasse: "The student of *Antony and Cleopatra* has, in offering an account of this great tragedy, to resolve a problem of approach, of the author's intention. Sooner or later, he finds himself faced by two possible readings of the play, whose only difficulty is that they seem to be mutually exclusive."<sup>2</sup> A significant difficulty indeed; however, I would suggest, not the "only difficulty."

Both the reduction of the play's action to "the fall of a great general" and the definition of the play's major interest as "transcendental love" make impossible a reasonable assessment of the character of Cleopatra. There is a word for the kind of critical bias informing both approaches: it is "sexism." Almost all critical approaches to this play have been colored by the sexist assumptions the critics have brought with them to their reading. These approaches, I believe, have distorted the meaning of what Shakespeare wrote.

Before I take up the sexist criticism in its particulars, I have one general

<sup>1</sup> *A Reading of Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra"* (Sydney, Australia: Univ. of Sydney Press, 1968), p. 82. Throughout this essay, I shall discuss critics as their views are pertinent to each topic I take up, rather than attempting any chronological overview of critical development. The reason for this will become apparent as I proceed: there has been no real critical development on this issue, and modern critics are just as sexist in their views as nineteenth-century critics. All quotations from Shakespeare are from Sylvan Barnet, gen. ed., *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare* (New York: Harcourt, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> *Shakespeare: The Roman Plays* (London and Stanford: Bodley Head and Stanford Univ. Press, 1963), p. 79.

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observation. I have noticed, in male critical commentary on the character of Cleopatra, an intemperance of language, an intensity of revulsion uncommon even among Shakespeare critics, who are well enough known as a group for their lack of critical moderation. I do not think it would be going too far to suggest that many male critics feel personally threatened by Cleopatra and what she represents to them. In Cleopatra's case, critical attitudes go beyond the usual condescension toward female characters or the usual willingness to give critical approval only to female characters who are chaste, fair, loyal, and modest: critical attitudes toward Cleopatra seem to reveal deep personal fears of aggressive or manipulative women. Alfred Harbage, in his *Conceptions of Shakespeare*, looked at the personal lives of some anti-Stratfordians and found evidence of persistent neurotic delusions of the sort Freud had labeled "family romance fantasies";<sup>3</sup> perhaps it would be revealing to examine the lives of anti-Cleopatra critics for evidence of difficulties in relationships with women.

## I

But to the particulars. Obviously, most of the sexist distortion has centered on Cleopatra, and it is most revealing to observe with whom Cleopatra has been compared. A favorite game among Shakespeare critics has always been to compare characters from one play with characters from another; so Hamlet is said to have more "inner life" than Othello, King Lear is said to die less self-centeredly than Hamlet, and so forth. With whom is Cleopatra compared? Lear? Macbeth? Othello? No, Cleopatra is compared only with female characters—Viola, Beatrice, Rosalind, Juliet.<sup>4</sup> Juliet is most frequent, and it must be confessed that there are certain similarities. Both appear in tragedies (the rest of the women used for comparison are comic heroines); both are allegedly in love; and they share the distinction of being two of the three women to have made it into the titles of Shakespeare plays. Otherwise, the two are as apt for comparison as Mae West and St. Cecilia. Critics do not compare King Lear with Osric, Bottom the Weaver, or Sir Toby Belch because they are all men, but they persist in comparing Cleopatra (usually unfavorably) with female characters because they are all women. Clearly, Cleopatra is cut off at the outset from serious consideration as a tragic hero by being relegated to consideration alongside various heroines, most of whom inhabit the comedies.

Related to this habit of discussing female characters as a group is the critical tactic of describing Cleopatra as "Woman." Cleopatra is seen as the archetypal woman: practitioner of feminine wiles, mysterious, childlike, long on passion and short on intelligence—except for a sort of animal cunning. Harold C. Goddard, referring to the end of the play, states, "Now for the first time she is a woman—and not Woman."<sup>5</sup> S. L. Bethell informs us, "In Cleopatra [Shakespeare] presents the mystery of woman."<sup>6</sup> Swinburne sees Cleopatra as Blake's "Eternal Female."<sup>7</sup> Georg Brandes calls her "woman of women, quint-essentiated Eve."<sup>8</sup> E. E. Stoll says, "Caprice, conscious and unconscious is her

<sup>3</sup> "Shakespeare as Culture Hero" in *Conceptions of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 101–19.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., "If she were a Juliet she would kill herself immediately for love of Antony, not merely talk about suicide" (Laurens J. Mills, *The Tragedies of Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra* [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1964], p. 48).

<sup>5</sup> *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1951), II, 199.

<sup>6</sup> *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition* (London: Staples, 1944), p. 128.

<sup>7</sup> *A Study of Shakespeare* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1902 [first published 1880]), p. 189.

<sup>8</sup> *William Shakespeare. A Critical Study*, trans. William Archer and Diana White (New York: F. Unger, 1963 [first published 1898]), p. 144.

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nature. . . . She is quintessential woman.”<sup>9</sup> Harley Granville-Barker enlightens us: “The passionate woman has a child’s desires and a child’s fears, an animal’s wary distrust; balance of judgment none, one would say. But often . . . she shows the shrewd scepticism of a child.”<sup>10</sup> And Daniel Stempel brings us up to date on the alleged Elizabethan attitude:

Here our knowledge of Elizabethan mores can come to our aid . . . . Woman was a creature of weak reason and strong passion, carnal in nature and governed by lust. She could be trusted only when guided by the wisdom of her natural superior, man. . . . The misogyny of Octavius Caesar is founded on right reason.<sup>11</sup>

It is surely questionable whether there is such a thing as a “typical woman” or even a “typical Elizabethan woman.” And if there is such a thing as a “typical Shakespearean woman,” Cleopatra is not the woman. In particular, she is almost unique among Shakespeare’s female characters in her use of feminine wiles—by which I mean her deliberate unpredictability and her manipulative use of mood changes for the purpose of remaining fascinating to Antony.

If you find him sad,  
Say I am dancing; if in mirth, report  
That I am sudden sick

(I. iii. 3–5)

It is ironic that her use of feminine wiles has been one of the only Cleopatra features to have proven appealing to critics. Dowden writes:

At every moment we are necessarily aware of the gross, the mean, the disorderly womanhood in Cleopatra, no less than of the witchery and wonder which excite, and charm, and subdue. We see her a dissembler, a termagant, a coward; and yet ‘vilest things become her’. The presence of a spirit of *life* quick, shifting, multitudinous, incalculable, fascinates the eye, and would, if it could, lull the moral sense to sleep.<sup>12</sup>

Schlegel writes: “Cleopatra is as remarkable for her seductive charms as

<sup>9</sup> “Cleopatra” in *Poets and Playwrights* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1930), p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (London: Batsford, 1930), III, 91.

<sup>11</sup> “The Transmigration of the Crocodile,” *SQ*, 7 (1956), 63, 65. Stempel bases his whole argument on Renaissance misogynistic writings, which represented only one attitude (among many) toward women in the Renaissance. It is gratifying to note that one male critic takes Stempel to task for so glibly characterizing Elizabethan attitudes, which he remarks is “surely as difficult as characterizing The Twentieth Century American’s Attitude toward the Poles” (Philip J. Traci, *The Love Play of Antony and Cleopatra* [The Hague: Mouton, 1970], p. 19). Stempel’s argument runs this way: Romantic and many post-Romantic critics idealize Cleopatra because they have been in the habit of placing Woman on a pedestal, failing to understand that many misogynistic Renaissance writers denigrated Woman. Stempel fails to realize, however, that neither generalized view of Woman does justice to the individuality of Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, who is represented not as Woman, but as a person, partly good and partly bad, like most persons. That Stempel has little feeling for the individuality of female characters might be guessed from his description of Chaucer’s Wife of Bath as “a scholar’s wife blessed with a retentive memory” (p. 63).

<sup>12</sup> Edward Dowden, *Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957 [first published 1875]), pp. 313–14.

Antony for the splendor of his deeds.”<sup>13</sup> Philip J. Traci defends the feminine wiles on the grounds that such behavior is prescribed for courtly lovers by Andreas Capellanus and Ovid.<sup>14</sup>

It is ironic, I say, because it seems probable that Shakespeare disapproves of such behavior. With the exception of Cressida,<sup>15</sup> no other woman in Shakespeare’s plays practices it. Indeed, Shakespeare’s women for the most part actively resist it, preferring instead to woo their men, straightforwardly, themselves. It is Miranda’s father, in *The Tempest*, who tries to put obstacles in love’s way “lest too light winning / Make the prize light” (I. ii. 454–55), while Miranda forthrightly approaches the man she has known for about an hour with “Hence, bashful cunning . . . I am your wife, if you will marry me” (III. i. 81–83).

Of course, if I am to claim that Shakespeare treated his women as individuals, I can hardly postulate that he criticizes Cleopatra for behaving differently in this respect from other Shakespearean women. But there is evidence in the play that Shakespeare sees such behavior as humanly undesirable: he has Cleopatra herself try, in the latter part of the play, to overcome her deliberately inconstant behavior<sup>16</sup>—behavior which she (not Shakespeare) sees as being quintessentially female:

My resolution’s placed, and I have nothing  
Of woman in me: now from head to foot  
I am marble-constant: now the fleeting moon  
No planet is of mine.

(V. ii. 238–41)

But while Shakespeare may disapprove of feminine wiles, he understands why Cleopatra feels (perhaps rightly) that she must practice them: she is getting old, and Shakespeare understood that women, unlike men, are valued only when they are young and beautiful. Cleopatra’s famous self-portrait—

<sup>13</sup> Augustus William Schlegel, *Lectures on Dramatic Literature*, trans. John Black (London: J. Templeman, 1840), p. 220.

<sup>14</sup> Traci, pp. 113–14.

<sup>15</sup> Cleopatra’s only real fellow in the use of feminine wiles, Cressida, is at best an inconsistent practitioner: her defense of feminine wiles is suspect, even though it occurs in soliloquy, insofar as the same soliloquy insists on her love’s firmness (I. iii. 320); and she abandons coquetry in the second scene in which she appears (III. ii). Just as her downright faithlessness contrasts with Cleopatra’s final faithfulness, so *Troilus and Cressida* is much more clearly a play of conventional antifeminism than is *Antony and Cleopatra*, which I believe introduces misogynistic convention, through Enobarbus and others, only to repudiate it.

<sup>16</sup> It might be argued that giving up inconstancy (changing moods for effect) is no great effort for Cleopatra once Antony, on whom she has practiced this brand of feminine wiles, is gone; but her inconstancy, in a larger sense, has involved changing lovers as well (although it should not be forgotten that her lovers have had a way of getting themselves murdered through no fault of her own). She might, had her “resolution” not been “placed,” have made a play for Caesar, and some critics (Stempel, Mills) have argued that she does, on such slender evidence as her calling Caesar “my master and my lord.” An actress who interpreted the “Seleucus” scene this way, however, would undercut the validity of everything Cleopatra says in Act V, scene ii, and change the entire play from tragedy to satire. The several critics who have suggested this interpretation have changed the play drastically, with little or no warrant in the text of the play. Indeed, Mills’s characterizing of Cleopatra’s tone in the “Seleucus” scene as “quaveringly piteous” and Octavius’ tone in the same scene as “blunt” (Mills, p. 54) seems to me perverse, and clearly evidence of a theatrical tin ear.

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Think on me,  
That am with Phoebus' amorous pinches black  
And wrinkled deep in time

(I. v. 27–29)

—comes at the point where she has just characterized her fantasy of Antony (“He’s speaking now, / Or murmuring, ‘Where’s my serpent of old Nile?’ ” [I. v. 24–25]) as “delicious poison”—delicious in its confirmation of Antony’s loyalty, poisonous in its contrast with the fact of Antony’s absence and the fact of her decaying beauty. This passage is immediately followed by a reverie on sexual successes of her youth. The scene is, I think, too often read with attention only to Cleopatra’s rejoicing in her own sexuality, to the neglect of its clear undercurrent of fear and insecurity.

The feminine fear of aging had been introduced early in the play, with Charmian’s “Wrinkles forbid” (I. ii. 21). That Shakespeare well understood the danger of a woman’s losing the affection of her lover as she loses her looks to age is clear from the discussion between Duke Orsino and Viola (masquerading as a boy) in *Twelfth Night*:

DUKE               Let still the woman take  
An elder than herself: so wears she to him,  
So sways she level in her husband’s heart;  
For, boy, however we do praise ourselves,  
Our fancies are more giddy and unfirm,  
More longing, wavering, sooner lost and worn,  
Than women’s are . . .  
Then let thy love be younger than thyself,  
Or thy affection cannot hold the bent;  
For women are as roses, whose fair flow’r,  
Being once displayed, doth fall that very hour.

VIOLA   And so they are; alas, that they are so.  
(II. iv. 29–40)

There is no evidence in Shakespeare (or in Plutarch, his source) that Cleopatra employed feminine wiles when she was younger. It seems more reasonable to conjecture that in Shakespeare’s interpretation, she has adopted desperate measures to compensate, by being fascinating, for the ravages of age.

## II

Although many critics see Cleopatra as the archetypal woman, others more magnanimously recognize that there are, in fact, two types of woman in the world, both of which appear in *Antony and Cleopatra*: the wicked and manipulative (Cleopatra), and the chaste and submissive (Octavia). This dipolar view usually results in an overemphasis on Octavia, who after all speaks only thirty-five lines in the play,<sup>17</sup> as a viable alternative to Cleopatra. These critics seem to

<sup>17</sup> Cordelia, too, speaks very few lines and yet is considered a major character; but Shakespeare manages to convey a sense of strength with Cordelia’s few lines, in contrast to the sense of insipidity he conveys with Octavia’s. Although both women, when given the floor, decline to speak, there is a world of difference between Cordelia’s “I cannot heave my heart into my mouth” and Octavia’s “I’ll tell you in your ear.” Octavia is often praised by critics for her becoming silence (women are to be seen and not heard?), but surely one would regret the loss to English poetry had

be united in their belief that the love of a good woman could have saved Antony and prevented the whole tragedy. A. C. Bradley complains bitterly of Antony's mistreatment of Octavia.<sup>18</sup> Charles Bathurst feels that "The character of Antony [Shakespeare] meant to elevate as much as possible; notwithstanding his great weakness in all that concerns Cleopatra, and unmistakable misconduct with regard to his wife."<sup>19</sup> Laurens J. Mills regrets that "after the seeming cure during his marriage to Octavia, he falls more and more inextricably into the coils of the Egyptian."<sup>20</sup> Harley Granville-Barker, who places Octavia third, after Antony and Cleopatra, in his group of character studies for the play,<sup>21</sup> says "How should we not, with the good Maecenas, trust to her beauty, wisdom, and modesty to settle his chastened heart?"<sup>22</sup>

Leaving aside these touching encomia and turning to the play, one notes that Antony calls his marriage to Octavia "the business" (a term favored by the Macbeths in reference to the murder of Duncan). It is very likely that had Antony lived in connubial bliss with Octavia from the time he first remarked "Yet, ere we put ourselves in arms, dispatch we / The business we have talked of" [III. ii. 167–68], the remaining three-and-a-half acts would have been very different, less concerned with disaster and death, although perhaps somewhat lacking in those qualities we have come to associate with drama. Nevertheless, it is a fact that in Shakespeare Antony treats Octavia better than he does in Plutarch, where he turns her out of his house.<sup>23</sup> And Shakespeare much reduced Octavia's importance: Plutarch's account ends with a vision of Octavia bringing up all of Antony's children, including one named Cleopatra.<sup>24</sup>

Another sexist response to the play has resulted from a distaste for the play's overt sexuality. Traci claims that Shakespearean critics, even bawdry expert Eric Partridge, have been loath to acknowledge the extent of sexual double entendre in the play, and that when they have acknowledged it, they have been disgusted by it.<sup>25</sup> Traci gallantly takes up the challenge by declaring that the whole play is structured in imitation of the sex-act, starting with foreplay in the first several scenes, proceeding to pre-sex drinking and feasting, and finally culminating, after the significant entrance of the character Eros, in intercourse itself—represented, according to Traci, by twenty-one uses of the word "Eros," twenty-three uses of the word "come," and sixteen puns on "dying." Traci's theory may be a little far-fetched, but it brings a whole new world of meaning to passages like "What poor an instrument may do a noble deed," "The soldier's pole is fallen," and "Husband, I come."<sup>26</sup>

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Cleopatra said "I'll tell you in your ear" when *she* had the chance to speak. Shakespeare does draw subtle contrasts (as well as the obvious contrasts) between Cleopatra and Octavia—for example, through mythological allusion: Octavia prays for aid from a powerful male god ("The Jove of power make me, most weak, most weak / Your reconciler!" [III. iv. 29–30]), while Cleopatra is always associated with female gods—Isis, Venus, Thetis. But if Shakespeare designed the play along the lines of a love-triangle, it was hardly meant to be equilateral.

<sup>18</sup> *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1909), p. 294.

<sup>19</sup> *Remarks on the Differences in Shakespeare's Versification in Different Periods of His Life* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1857), p. 131.

<sup>20</sup> Mills, p. 29.

<sup>21</sup> Granville-Barker, p. 97.

<sup>22</sup> Granville-Barker, p. 73.

<sup>23</sup> Plutarch, "The Life of Marcus Antonius," trans. Sir Thomas North, in T. J. B. Spencer, ed. *Shakespeare's Plutarch* (London: Penguin, 1964), p. 246.

<sup>24</sup> Plutarch, p. 294.

<sup>25</sup> Traci, p. 81.

<sup>26</sup> Traci, pp. 136–60.

Traci feels that critical neglect of the naughty bits in the play has been prompted by prudery, from which he, fortunately, does not suffer. "Drink . . . like lechery," he declares, "is a universal manly, social sin. . . . Indeed, they are surely heroic sins, when compared to gluttony and sloth, for example."<sup>27</sup> What Traci fails to account for is the oddity of encountering critical prudery in *this* day and age. After all, the days of Bowdlerizing are over; nobody blanches any more at "an old black ram is tugging your white ewe." I submit that what bothers critics about the bawdy remarks in *Antony and Cleopatra* is that so many of them are made by Cleopatra—like "O happy horse, to bear the weight of Antony!" (I. v. 21), or "Ram thou thy fruitful tidings in mine ears, / That long time have been barren" (II. v. 23–24). The prudery is of a sexist variety: what appalls the male critic is that a *woman* would say such things. It is, to a certain extent, Cleopatra's frank sexuality that damns her. Robert E. Fitch, writing from his post at the Pacific School of Religion, observes, "It is altogether incredible that the Shakespeare who . . . early and late in his career rejoiced in innocence, loyalty, and love, before lust with all its cruel splendors, could have presented Cleopatra as a model of the mature woman in mature emotion."<sup>28</sup> J. W. Lever tells us that "Her wooing of Antony is comic and sensual, immoral and thoroughly reprehensible."<sup>29</sup>

One might expect Cleopatra to appeal at least to the closet prurience of a few readers. And indeed there are a number of grudging and embarrassed tributes to the power of Cleopatra's sexuality. Schlegel writes: "Although the mutual passion of herself and Antony is without moral dignity, it still excites our sympathy as an insurmountable fascination."<sup>30</sup> Coleridge writes, "But the art displayed in the character of Cleopatra is profound in this, especially, that the sense of criminality in her passion is lessened by our insight into its depth and energy, at the very moment that we cannot help but perceive that the passion itself springs out of the habitual craving of a licentious nature."<sup>31</sup> Traci sums up the attitude of several modern Cleopatra apologists: "From beneath the exuberance of the adjectives . . . there emerges the critic's apology for having himself become a slave of Passion."<sup>32</sup>

*Antony and Cleopatra* has never been admitted to the holy circle of the "big four" Shakespearean tragedies—*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. Many reasons for this have been adduced. Perhaps the most popular reason, as stated by A. P. Reimer, is that *Antony and Cleopatra* "deals with issues intrinsically much less important than those of the great tragedies."<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, Cleopatra's first line, "If it be love indeed, tell me how much" (I. i. 14), is strikingly similar to *Lear*'s opening question to his daughters. Both *Antony and Cleopatra* and *King Lear* are, as far as I can see, concerned with love and its relationship to public issues like proper ruling, as well as love's place in the individual's hierarchy of values. If *Antony and Cleopatra* deals with "much less important issues," it would seem to follow that love between the sexes, as in *Antony and Cleopatra*, is "much less important" than familial love, as in *King Lear*. This is an argument one might expect of Victorian critics, perhaps, but

<sup>27</sup> Traci, pp. 41–42.

<sup>28</sup> "No Greater Crack?" *SQ*, 19 (1968), 12.

<sup>29</sup> "Venus and the Second Chance," *Shakespeare Survey*, 15 (1962), 87.

<sup>30</sup> Schlegel, p. 220.

<sup>31</sup> W. G. T. Shedd, ed. *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1884), IV, 105–6.

<sup>32</sup> Traci, pp. 4–12.

<sup>33</sup> Reimer, p. 105.



why should we find it today? And if love between the sexes is an unworthy topic for tragedy, why is *Othello* permitted to stand as one of the "big four," while *Antony and Cleopatra* is not? The unavoidable answer, I believe, is that *Othello* focuses uncompromisingly on a male hero.

## III

Another way in which sexism rears its head in *Antony and Cleopatra* criticism is that in assessing the respective actions of Antony and Cleopatra, critics apply a clear double standard: what is praiseworthy in Antony is damnable in Cleopatra. The sexist assumption here is that for a woman, love should be everything; her showing an interest in anything but her man is reprehensible. For a man, on the other hand, love should be secondary to public duty or even self-interest. Almost every scene in which either character appears has been subjected to this double-standard interpretation. I will focus on three examples.

First, in the Thidias scene, where Cleopatra apparently makes some political overtures to Caesar after Caesar has defeated Antony in the battle of Actium, Cleopatra has repeatedly been damned by critics for trying to save her political skin, and perhaps her actual skin, at the expense of her love for Antony. At the beginning of the play, when Antony follows his fervent protestations of love for Cleopatra by leaving Egypt to patch up his political situation in Rome through marriage to the sister of Octavius Caesar, he receives nothing but critical praise—for putting first things first and attempting to break off a destructive relationship with Cleopatra. According to the critics, men may put political considerations ahead of love; women may not.

Second, while Antony is roundly criticized when he neglects public affairs, critics never take seriously Cleopatra's desire to play an active part in great public enterprises. Cleopatra's participation in the battle of Actium, it must be confessed, is less than an unqualified success, but there is no warrant in the play for doubting her motives for being there in person:

A charge we bear i' th' war,  
And as the president of my kingdom will  
Appear there for a man. Speak not against it,  
I will not stay behind.

(III. vii. 16-19)

Nevertheless, Julian Markels infers, on no evidence, that "the entire function of the president of her kingdom is to become the object of universal gaze and wonder. . . . Her business at Actium was to cavort upon that stage where Antony made war."<sup>34</sup>

Third, a double standard is almost always applied in discussions of Antony's and Cleopatra's respective motives for suicide. Cleopatra is repeatedly criticized for thinking of anything but Antony: this would seem to follow from the sexist precept that nothing but love is appropriate to a woman's thoughts. "Does she kill herself to be with Antony or to escape Caesar? It is the final question," Mills tells us, after explaining to us the difference between Cleopatra's unworthy death-bed thoughts and Antony's noble ones:

<sup>34</sup> *The Pillar of the World: "Antony and Cleopatra" in Shakespeare's Development* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1968), p. 47.

In her final moments, as she carries out her resolution, Cleopatra has "immortal longings," hears Antony call, gloats over outwitting Caesar, addresses Antony as "husband," shows jealousy in her fear that Iras may gain the first otherworld kiss from Antony, sneers at Caesar again, speaks lovingly to the asp at her breast, and dies, with "Antony" on her lips and a final fling of contempt for the world. But, it should be noted, she does not "do it after the high Roman fashion," nor with the singleness of motive that actuated Antony.<sup>35</sup>

Stempel, coming upon the lines, "He words me, girls, he words me, that I should not / Be noble to myself" [V. ii. 191–92], is indescribably shocked that Cleopatra speaks two whole lines without reference to Antony: "No word of Antony here. Her deepest allegiance is to her own nature."<sup>36</sup>

If, however, we look at the play, we see that Cleopatra adduces the following reasons for taking leave of the world: (1) she thinks life is not worth living without Antony;<sup>37</sup> (2) she sees suicide as brave, great, noble, and Roman;<sup>38</sup> (3) she wants to escape the humiliation Caesar has planned for her, and desires to have the fun of making an ass of Caesar;<sup>39</sup> (4) she sees suicide as an act of constancy which will put an end to her previous inconstant behavior and to the world's inconstancy which has affected her;<sup>40</sup> and (5) she wants to be with Antony in a life beyond the grave.<sup>41</sup> Antony adduces the following reasons for his suicide: (1) he has lost his final battle, and he thinks Cleopatra has betrayed him;<sup>42</sup> (2) he (later) thinks Cleopatra is dead, and feels that life is not worth living without her;<sup>43</sup> (3) he wants to be with Cleopatra in a life beyond the grave;<sup>44</sup> (4) he thinks Cleopatra has killed herself, and he cannot bear to be

<sup>35</sup> Mills, p. 55.

<sup>36</sup> Stempel, p. 70.

<sup>37</sup> "Shall I abide / In this dull world, which in thy absence is / No better than a sty?" (IV. xv. 60–62); "It were for me / To throw my scepter at the injurious gods, / To tell them that this world did equal theirs / Till they had stol'n our jewel. All's but naught. . . . then is it sin / To rush into the secret house of death / Ere death dare come to us?" (IV. xv. 78–85).

<sup>38</sup> "We'll bury him; and then, what's brave, what's noble, / Let's do't after the high Roman fashion, / And make death proud to take us" (IV. xv. 89–91); "It is great / To do that thing that ends all other deeds" (V. ii. 4–5); "Methinks I hear / Antony call; I see him rouse himself / To praise my noble act" (V. ii. 283–85).

<sup>39</sup> "This mortal house I'll ruin, / Do Caesar what he can. Know, sir, that I / Will not wait pinioned at your master's court / Nor once be chastised with the sober eye / Of dull Octavia. Shall they hoist me up / And show me to the shouting varletry / Of censuring Rome? Rather a ditch in Egypt / Be gentle grave unto me!" (V. ii. 51–57); "Mechanic slaves / With greasy aprons, rules, and hammers shall / Uplift us to the view. In their thick breaths, / Rank of gross diet, shall we be enclosed, / And forced to drink their vapor" (V. ii. 209–13); "O, couldst thou speak, / That I might hear thee call great Caesar ass / Upoliced" [V. ii. 306–8].

<sup>40</sup> "It is great / To do that thing that ends all other deeds, / Which shackles accidents and bolts up change" [V. ii. 4–6]; "What poor an instrument / May do a noble deed! He brings me liberty. / My resolution's placed, and I have nothing / Of women in me: now from head to foot / I am marble-constant: now the fleeting moon / No planet is of mine" (V. ii. 236–41).

<sup>41</sup> "Methinks I hear / Antony call. . . . Husband, I come" (V. ii. 283–87); "If she first meet the curled Antony, / He'll make demand of her, and spend that kiss / Which is my heaven to have" (V. ii. 300–303).

<sup>42</sup> "She, Eros, has / Packed cards with Caesar, and false-played my glory / Unto an enemy's triumph. / Nay, weep not, gentle Eros, there is left us / Ourselves to end ourselves" (IV. xiv. 18–22).

<sup>43</sup> "I will o'ertake thee, Cleopatra. . . . So it must be, for now / All length is torture, since the torch is out" (IV. xiv. 44–46).

<sup>44</sup> "I come, my queen . . . / Where souls do couch on flowers, we'll hand in hand, / And with our sprightly port make the ghosts gaze: / Dido and her Aeneas shall want troops, / And all the haunt be ours" (IV. xiv. 50–54).

outdone in nobility by a mere woman;<sup>45</sup> (5) he wants to escape the humiliation Caesar has planned for him;<sup>46</sup> and (6) he sees suicide as valiant and Roman.<sup>47</sup> It is thus apparent that the “singleness of motive” which Mills thinks “actuates Antony” is a myth: Antony has six motives to Cleopatra’s five, and four of Cleopatra’s five motives are identical with Antony’s. Yet although Cleopatra is constantly taken to task for the multiplicity of her suicide motives (we all know that women cannot make up their minds), I have yet to see the critic who complained of the multiplicity of Antony’s motives.

This double standard, arising from the critics’ own sexist world view—that is, that love, lust, and personal relationships in general belong to a “feminine” world that must always be secondary to the “masculine” world of war, politics, and great public issues—can seriously distort the play. Some critics see the tragedy as growing out of the finally irreconcilable conflict between public values and private values, but many critics come down unequivocally on the side of public values—assuming, of course, that these public values belong to a world of men. Symptomatic of this tendency is the fact that Enobarbus, a boringly conventional antifeminist who voices just such a view in the play, is almost always taken to be a mouthpiece for Shakespeare. E. C. Wilson, for example, writes:

Antony, sobered by news of Fulvia’s death, declares that he must from “this enchanting queen break off.” Enobarbus banteringly cries, “Why, then we kill all our women. We see how mortal an unkindness is to them. If they suffer departure, death’s the word.” But in his next speech, a reply to Antony’s “I must be gone,” his clear sense of Antony’s folly pierces through his banter. “Under a compelling occasion, let women die. It were pity to cast them away for nothing, though, between them and a great cause they should be esteemed nothing.” Nowhere in the play is there a more incisive judgment on Antony’s conduct.<sup>48</sup>

Because these interpretations of the play are slanted in favor of the “rightness” of public, Roman values (in spite of the unsavory character of almost all the Roman activities which appear in the play, from the bride-bartering of Octavius and Antony, to the cut-throat scramble for political ascendancy, to the unctuous hypocrisy of Octavius in the closing scenes),<sup>49</sup> Cleopatra, who after all shares top billing with Antony in the play’s title, is demoted from the position of co-protagonist to the position of antagonist at best, nonentity at worst.

<sup>45</sup> “Since Cleopatra died, / I have lived in such dishonor that the gods / Detest my baseness. I, that with my sword / Quartered the world and o’er green Neptune’s back / With ships made cities, condemn myself to lack / The courage of a woman” (IV. xiv. 55–60).

<sup>46</sup> “Eros, / Wouldst thou be windowed in great Rome and see / Thy master thus: with pleached arms, bending down / His corrigible neck, his face subdued / To penetrative shame, whilst the wheeled seat / Of fortunate Caesar, drawn before him, branded / His baseness that ensued?” (IV. xiv. 71–77).

<sup>47</sup> “A Roman, by a Roman / Valiantly vanquished” (IV. xv. 57–58).

<sup>48</sup> “Shakespeare’s Enobarbus,” in James G. McManaway et al., eds. *Joseph Quincy Adams: Memorial Studies* (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1948), pp. 392–93.

<sup>49</sup> If Shakespeare believed the Romans were noble, he surely did not inherit this notion from his source, which only too realistically draws a picture of the pervasive military mentality of the Romans with their might-makes-right ethic of political expediency. Plutarch, of course, was a Greek whose own grandfather had been incommoded by the battle of Actium—it is only to be expected that his attitude toward the Egyptians and Romans would be “a plague o’ both your houses.”

## IV

The most flagrant manifestation of sexism in criticism of the play is the almost universal assumption that Antony alone is its protagonist. The following are only a few critical pronouncements on the subject, which I have culled from a mass of interpretive writings that make the same point. Oliver Emerson: "the dramatic movement of the play is the ruin of Antony under the stress of sensual passion."<sup>50</sup> Georg Brandes: "Just as Antony's ruin results from his connection with Cleopatra, so does the fall of the Roman Republic result from the contact of the simple hardihood of the West with the luxury of the East. Antony is Rome. Cleopatra is the Orient. When he perishes, a prey to the voluptuousness of the East, it seems as though Roman greatness and the Roman Republic expires with him."<sup>51</sup> Harley Granville-Barker: "Antony, the once-triumphant man of action, is hero. . . . [The play's theme] is not merely Antony's love for Cleopatra, but his ruin as general and statesman, the final ascension of Octavius, and the true end of 'that work the ides of March begun'. . . . If but in his folly, [Antony] has been great. He has held nothing back, has flung away for her sake honour and power, never weighing their worth against her worthlessness."<sup>52</sup> Lord David Cecil: "the play would have been better entitled *The Decline and Fall of Antony*."<sup>53</sup> S. L. Bethell: "Antony's position is central, for the choice between Egypt and Rome is for him to make."<sup>54</sup> Willard Farnham: "Shakespeare does not organize his tragedy as a drama of the love of Antony and Cleopatra, but as a drama of the rise and fall of Antony in the struggle for world rulership that takes place after he has met Cleopatra."<sup>55</sup> John F. Danby: "The tragedy of *Antony and Cleopatra* is, above all, the tragedy of Antony."<sup>56</sup> Austin Wright: "The main theme" of *Antony and Cleopatra* is "the clash between Antony and Octavius."<sup>57</sup> Julian Markels: "*Antony and Cleopatra* focuses upon the conflict within Antony between public and private claims."<sup>58</sup> A. P. Reimer: "On a strictly formal level, *Antony and Cleopatra* fulfils the requirements of orthodox tragedy in its depiction of Antony's fall (and, incidentally, Cleopatra's) in reasonably decorous terms."<sup>59</sup> Janet Adelman: "Antony is the presumptive hero of the play."<sup>60</sup>

When, in 1964, Laurens J. Mills set out to find critics who agreed with him that Antony and Cleopatra were co-protagonists, he could find only two other

<sup>50</sup> "Antony and Cleopatra," *Poet Lore*, 2 (1890), p. 126.

<sup>51</sup> Brandes, p. 158.

<sup>52</sup> Granville-Barker, pp. 1, 23, 79.

<sup>53</sup> "Antony and Cleopatra," W. P. Ker Memorial Lecture (Glasgow: Jackson, 1944), p. 21.

<sup>54</sup> Bethell, p. 124.

<sup>55</sup> *Shakespeare's Tragic Frontier: The World of His Final Tragedies* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1950), p. 175.

<sup>56</sup> *Poets on Fortune's Hill: Studies in Sidney, Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952), p. 146.

<sup>57</sup> "Antony and Cleopatra," *Shakespeare: Lectures on Five Plays* by Members of the Department of English, Carnegie Institute of Technology (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Press, 1958), p. 39.

<sup>58</sup> Markels, p. 52.

<sup>59</sup> Reimer, p. 88.

<sup>60</sup> *The Common Liar: An Essay on "Antony and Cleopatra"* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1973), p. 30. Adelman is the only female critic in this list. However, it should not be overlooked that hers is the only study of the play which attempts to establish, on a scholarly basis, that Shakespeare's audience might have viewed positively the sex-role reversal exemplified by Cleopatra and Antony's exchange of clothing, as well as Cleopatra's association with serpents—almost all other critics see these two aspects of the play as particularly damning to Cleopatra. On the whole, I have found Adelman's study the most useful and responsible that I have read.

critics who “agreed.” One of these was Virgil Whitaker, who I find once remarked that “the tragic action of the play is centered upon Antony, who has so yielded himself to the passion of love that it has possessed his will and dethroned his reason.”<sup>61</sup> And Mills’s own study does little to advance the cause. His summary of the two tragic falls is that the tragedy of Antony consists of the “pathetic picture” of a man who “by love for a thoroughly unworthy object comes to a miserable end,” whereas the tragedy of Cleopatra “cannot be a ‘tragic fall’, for there is nothing for her to fall from.”<sup>62</sup> The critical camp that sees Antony and Cleopatra as co-protagonists does not muster impressive forces.<sup>63</sup>

The critical consensus, then, is that Antony is the protagonist. There is a small catch, however. Antony dies in Act IV, and Cleopatra has the whole of Act V to herself, during the course of which she speaks some of Shakespeare’s greatest poetry. How have the pro-Antony forces dealt with this embarrassment? A substantial number of them have chosen the stalwart expedient of ignoring it altogether. For the rest, the critical contortions to which they have been forced to resort are instructive and amusing.

## V

Some feel that Shakespeare knew what he was doing when he gave Cleopatra the last act to herself. For example, Daniel Stempel says, “If . . . the major theme is the safety of the state, then the death of Antony does not remove the chief danger to political stability—Cleopatra: she has ensnared Julius Caesar, Pompey, and Antony—how will Octavius fare? This last act shows us that Octavius is proof against the temptress, and the play ends, as it should, with the defeat and death of the rebel against order. The theme is worked out to its logical completion, and the play is an integrated whole, not merely a tragedy with a postscript.”<sup>64</sup> Robert E. Fitch says, “Naturally Antony, the middle-man in the generic tension of values, must be disposed of by the end of Act IV, so that the last act may be given to the stark confrontation of pleasure and of power in the persons of Cleopatra and Octavius.”<sup>65</sup> Julian Markels says, “the grand climax of the whole action is reserved for Cleopatra, who now learns the lesson of Antony’s life . . . and by her loyalty to him

<sup>61</sup> *Shakespeare’s Use of Learning: An Inquiry into the Growth of His Mind and Art* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1953), p. 315.

<sup>62</sup> Mills, pp. 35, 39.

<sup>63</sup> A bevy of critics give Cleopatra a measure of favorable treatment as representative of Egyptian values, which according to these critics are set by Shakespeare in opposition to Roman values—Egyptian values are sometimes seen as triumphing, and sometimes as co-existing with the Roman values in a perpetual state of tension. These opposed values have been described as Reason and Intuition by Bethell (p. 122), Power and Pleasure by Fitch (p. 6), the World and the Flesh by Danby (p. 145), Power and Love by Goddard (p. 185), Reason and Impulse by Paul L. Rose (“The Politics of *Antony and Cleopatra*,” *SQ*, 20 [1969], 377–89), and “workaday world” values and “holiday” values by J. L. Simmons (“The Comic Pattern and Vision in *Antony and Cleopatra*,” *ELH*, 36 [1969], 495). The effect of this kind of interpretation is to reduce Cleopatra to an allegorical figure, representing one set of values. Octavius Caesar is usually seen as representing the other set, and the Everyman left to choose between these alternatives is always Antony, who then becomes the hero of a kind of morality play, but remains the hero, nonetheless.

The Romantic admiration of Cleopatra as rebel—analogue to the Romantic view of Satan as hero of *Paradise Lost*—depended on the trick of extracting her from the play altogether. Even Romantic admirers were loath to give Cleopatra primacy in the context of the play.

<sup>64</sup> Stempel, p. 63.

<sup>65</sup> Fitch, p. 6.

confirms Antony's achieved balance of public and private values."<sup>66</sup> John Middleton Murry says, "Up to the death of Antony it is from him that the life of the play has been derived. . . . He is magnificent: therefore she must be. But when he dies, her poetic function is to maintain and prolong, to reflect and reverberate, that achieved royalty of Antony's. . . . We [watch] the mysterious transfusion of his royal spirit into the mind and heart of his fickle queen."<sup>67</sup> Harley Granville-Barker says, "The love-tragedy . . . is not made the main question till no other question is left. . . . Antony dead, the domination of the play passes at once to Cleopatra. . . . But Antony's death leaves Shakespeare to face one obvious problem: how to prevent Cleopatra's coming as an anticlimax."<sup>68</sup> Peter Alexander says, "Antony dies while the play still has an act to run, but without this act his story would be incomplete. For Cleopatra has to vindicate her right to his devotion."<sup>69</sup> Other critics feel that in giving Cleopatra Act V to herself, Shakespeare simply made a dreadful mistake, one which destroyed the whole structure of the play. As Michael Lloyd quite rightly points out, "If we see Antony's tragedy as the centrepiece of the play, its structure is faulty."<sup>70</sup>

Cleopatra is present throughout the whole of the play,<sup>71</sup> she has Act V to

<sup>66</sup> Markels, p. 140.

<sup>67</sup> *Shakespeare* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936), pp. 372, 377. Murry's essay has been much admired and is often quoted, notwithstanding the fact that his application of the adjective "royal" to the republican Antony and only by extension to the technically royal Cleopatra ("She has yet, crowned queen though she is, to achieve her 'royalty'; and she will achieve it by her resolution to follow her 'man of men' to death") is a little bizarre. Cleopatra is often called "royal" in the play; Antony never is.

That Cleopatra is the queen of Egypt, considering how much it is harped upon in the play, is a fact that critics seem remarkably willing to forget. Several critics, for example, interpret Antony's calling her "Egypt" as evidence of his subliminal association of all things Egyptian (serpents, slime, fecundity, decadence) with her. Such an interpretation overlooks the conventional use of names of nations as titles for monarchs: Cleopatra is called "Egypt" in *Antony and Cleopatra* much as the King of France is called "France" in *King Lear*; both titles bring to mind the political position of the character.

Finally, as regards the royalty of Cleopatra, much critical scorn has been heaped upon Cleopatra for the queenly decking-out of her death scene, which is often seen as one last instance of her manipulative histrionics. Critics seem to have been lulled, by phrases like "Show me, my women, like a queen," into forgetting the fact that she is the queen. Few complain of "I am Duchess of Malfi still" (perhaps because the Duchess is, at least arguably, respectably married), but Cleopatra's last act is often denied this dignity. To my way of thinking, the "infinite variety" of Cleopatra's last scene is not the deliberate changefulness of feminine wiles (Antony, after all, is dead), but rather a variety arising out of a real complexity of character. In her last moments Cleopatra thinks of herself as lover, sybarite, mother, politician, and queen. Being queen of Egypt gives Cleopatra a great opportunity for splendor, to which she is not averse; but it is also (let it not be forgotten) her career. The irreconcilability of political life and private life has always been emphasized in Antony's case, but the conflict is there in Cleopatra as well. There have been few enough Cleopatras in history, but with passing time the conflict between a career and private life has become more and more a woman's conflict. Nor were contemporary examples completely lacking for Shakespeare: Henry VIII did not, as it turned out, have to forego marriage (to the woman of his choice) in favor of his political career; but his illustrious daughter did. I cannot help feeling that had Elizabeth lived to see Shakespeare's play, virgin queen that she was, she might have amended her famous statement to "I am Cleopatra, know ye not that?"

<sup>68</sup> Granville-Barker, pp. 4, 38-39. What Philip Traci might do with that last line of Granville-Barker's boggles the imagination.

<sup>69</sup> *Shakespeare's Life and Art* (London: J. Nisbet, 1939), p. 178.

<sup>70</sup> "Cleopatra as Isis," *Shakespeare Survey*, 12 (1959), 94.

<sup>71</sup> When she is absent from the stage, dialogue and action continually remind the audience of her. Shakespeare departs from Plutarch several times by introducing references to Cleopatra in the midst of Roman scenes: for example, he changes the position of the barge description so that it

herself, and she dies at the end. Thus, she would seem to fulfill at least the formal requirements of the tragic hero. One might think that in the verbose history of Shakespearean criticism, at least one critic would have suggested that she is the protagonist—the sole protagonist—of the play. As a matter of fact, one did. A critic named Simpson—Lucie Simpson—wrote in a forgotten article in 1928 that “the play, in fact, might have been called *Cleopatra* as appropriately as *Hamlet* is called *Hamlet* or *Othello Othello*.”<sup>72</sup> Although *Antony and Cleopatra* critics as a rule refer to each other’s works more often than to the play, I have seen Lucie Simpson’s work referred to only once, and then with a summary dismissal.<sup>73</sup> (Such heretical works are hard to get hold of; for example, an intriguing book by a critic named Grindon—Rosa Grindon—which advances the delightful and provocative thesis that “the men critics in their sympathy for Antony, have treated Cleopatra just as Antony’s men friends did, and for the same cause”<sup>74</sup> has been out of print for over fifty years.) In fact, it is for the most part only the occasional female critic who dares to suggest that a women might be the protagonist of any Shakespearean tragedy.<sup>75</sup>

## VI

But changes Shakespeare made in using his source, Plutarch’s *Life of Marcus Antonius*, indicate that he had a much greater interest than had Plutarch in Cleopatra as a human being. He elevated her position in the play by paying more attention to her motivation, allowing her to speak in her own defense, and making numerous small alterations in Plutarch’s story, the effect of which is almost always to mitigate Cleopatra’s culpability. That exonerating and elevating Cleopatra was a conscious intention is suggested by the fact that the changes are consistently in that direction. It is also notable that except for these changes, Shakespeare adheres quite closely to his source.

In Plutarch, Antony embarks on his Parthian campaign with 100,000 men.

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enters the Roman context, and he has the soothsayer advise, “Hie thee to Egypt,” where in Plutarch the soothsayer had contented himself with remarks on the respective luck of Caesar and Antony.

<sup>72</sup> “Shakespeare’s ‘Cleopatra,’ ” *Fortnightly Review*, NS 123 (March 1928), 332.

<sup>73</sup> Traci, p. 36.

<sup>74</sup> *A Woman’s Study of “Antony and Cleopatra”* (Manchester: Sherratt and Hughes, 1909), p. 68.

<sup>75</sup> I would not like to leave the reader with the notion that Cleopatra is entirely devoid of male defenders. Credit must be given, for example, to Ralph Behrens, who in an essay promisingly entitled “Cleopatra Exonerated” (*Shakespeare Newsletter*, 9 [November 1959], 37) declares that “all apparent lapses in her love for Antony can be accounted for by . . . ‘feminine frailties.’ It is true that she teases Antony . . . and feigns illness, but these are simply feminine wiles. . . . It is true that she flees too early with her ships . . . but [this] is a case of feminine fear.” Such a defense would warm the cockles of the sternest feminist heart, were it not for the fact that it is prompted less by a desire to demonstrate that Cleopatra is a significant character in her own right than by a more urgent desire to redeem Antony. As Behrens puts it, “If the object of Antony’s overpowering love were a totally unworthy one, it is likely that his character would be greatly weakened in its command of the reader’s sympathy.” The usual forms that “defenses” of Cleopatra take are these: critics admire her for the wrong reasons (appreciating her use of feminine wiles); offer in defense of her questionable actions the fact that she is only a woman and therefore does not really know any better; seek to exonerate her only for the purpose of exonerating Antony; or (often under the guise of countering Bradley’s pernicious character-based approach) argue that she is not a real character at all but an embodiment of certain values. Such defenses almost never take the form of arguing that Cleopatra is the protagonist of the play, and therefore to be blamed *and* empathized with, like other tragic protagonists.

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He loses 45,000 of them, we are told, mainly because “the great haste he made to return unto Cleopatra”<sup>76</sup> caused him to abandon heavy artillery and put his men to forced marches: “the most part of them died of sickness.”<sup>77</sup> In Plutarch, then, 45,000 men lost their lives because Antony was in haste to meet Cleopatra by the sea-side—and then *she* was late! This distasteful episode, which provides Plutarch with ample occasion to revile Cleopatra, is omitted altogether by Shakespeare.

In Plutarch, Cleopatra is given a reason for wanting to appear in person at the battle of Actium: she fears “lest Antonius should again be made friends with Octavius Caesar by means of his wife Octavia,”<sup>78</sup> and the reasons she gives Antony for wanting to appear are spurious. In Shakespeare, there is no hint of this personal reason; Cleopatra simply declares “A charge we bear i’ th’ war, / And, as the president of my kingdom, will / Appear there for a man” (III. vii. 17).

Antony’s reason for fighting the battle of Actium by sea is reported twice by Plutarch. “Now Antonius was made so subject to a woman’s will that, though he was a great deal the stronger by land, yet for Cleopatra’s sake he would needs have this battle tried by sea.”<sup>79</sup> “But . . . notwithstanding all these good persuasions, Cleopatra forced him to put all to the hazard of battle by sea.”<sup>80</sup> One very frequently finds critics adducing this as one of the charges against Shakespeare’s Cleopatra.<sup>81</sup> But in fact the sea battle is not Cleopatra’s idea in Shakespeare’s play. Shakespeare instead introduces a different motive, not mentioned in Plutarch: Caesar’s dare.<sup>82</sup>

ANTONY           Canidius, we  
                   Will fight with him by sea.  
 CLEOPATRA       By sea; what else?  
 CANIDIUS       Why will my lord do so?  
 ANTONY           For that he dares us to’t.  
 ENOBARBUS      So hath my lord dared him to single fight.  
 CANIDIUS       Ay, and to wage this battle at Pharsalia,  
                   Where Caesar fought with Pompey: but these offers,  
                   Which serve not for his vantage, he shakes off;  
                   And so should you.  
 ENOBARBUS      Your ships are not well manned;  
                   Your mariners are muleters, reapers, people  
                   Ingrossed by swift impress. In Caesar’s fleet  
                   Are those that often have ’gainst Pompey fought;  
                   Their ships are yare, yours, heavy: no disgrace  
                   Shall fall you for refusing him at sea,  
                   Being prepared for land.  
 ANTONY           By sea, by sea.

(III. vii. 27–40)

<sup>76</sup> Plutarch, p. 239.

<sup>77</sup> Plutarch, p. 238.

<sup>78</sup> Plutarch, pp. 244–45.

<sup>79</sup> Plutarch, p. 250.

<sup>80</sup> Plutarch, p. 254.

<sup>81</sup> E.g., Bradley: “He fights by sea simply and solely because she wishes it” (p. 297).

<sup>82</sup> In Plutarch, Caesar challenges Antony to fight him on land, and offers to withdraw his army “from the sea as far as one horse could run, until [Antonius] had put his army ashore and had lodged his men” (p. 251).



In Shakespeare, the emphasis is entirely on Caesar's dare. Cleopatra finds the choice of sea-battle a natural one, since Egypt's military strength is in its navy,<sup>83</sup> but she does not initiate the disastrous plan.<sup>84</sup>

Cleopatra's departure from the battle of Actium, which prompts Antony to follow her and results in the loss of the battle, Shakespeare could hardly have omitted from the play, as it eventuates in the tragic deaths of Antony and Cleopatra. Nor would one wish this changed, since, despite Enobarbus' disclaimer (III. xiii. 3–4), it leaves Cleopatra with a large share of the blame for the ensuing tragedy—an important consideration, in view of the fact that in Shakespeare's mature plays the chain of events culminating in tragedy is initiated by the protagonist. In Plutarch, the focus in this scene is entirely on Antony—Cleopatra's leaving the battle is seen only in relation to its effect on Antony. In Shakespeare, Cleopatra considers whether she is to blame ("Is Antony, or we, in fault for this?" [III. xiii. 2]), indicates fear as her motivation ("Forgive my fearful sails" [III. xi. 55]), offers as her excuse that she acted in ignorance of the consequences ("I little thought / You would have followed" [III. xi. 55–56]), and apologizes profusely ("Pardon, pardon" [III. xi. 68]). Plutarch does not present Cleopatra's reactions to this crucial turn of events at all.

After the Thidias scene, Plutarch gives no hint of Cleopatra's impassioned declarations of innocence and love for Antony, declarations that do appear in Shakespeare's text. And although Shakespeare includes in the Thidias scene (as Plutarch does not) the imputation that Cleopatra has stayed with Antony out of fear, not love (III. xii. 56–57), this piece of dialogue is a transmutation of a much more damning passage in Plutarch—where *after* Antony's death, "Cleopatra began to clear and excuse herself for that she had done, laying all to the fear she had of Antony."<sup>85</sup> Shakespeare has removed this imputation of disloyalty from the latter part of the action, putting it in the mouth of Caesar's messenger, not Cleopatra. And while Cleopatra acquiesces in the interpretation, she prefaces her acquiescence with the very-likely ironic "He is a god, and knows / What is most right" (III. xiii. 60–61).

As to Antony's suspicion, after the final aborted battle, that Cleopatra "has / Packed cards with Caesar" (IV. xiv. 18–19), neither Plutarch nor Shakespeare includes any evidence that she has. But Shakespeare has her messenger issue a denial (IV. xiv. 120–23), whereas Plutarch leaves the question entirely open.

In Plutarch, Cleopatra betakes herself to the monument "being afraid of [Antony's] fury."<sup>86</sup> Shakespeare gives her much stronger reasons for her fear, since Antony declares four times, very convincingly, that he is going to kill her (IV. xii. 16; IV. xii. 39–42; IV. xii. 47, 49; IV. xiv. 26). This is not in Plutarch.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. "Let the Egyptians and the Phoenicians go a'ducking" [III. vii. 63–64].

<sup>84</sup> Canidius, of course, attributes Antony's decision to the fact that "our leader's led / And we are women's men" (III. vii. 69–70), but this is interpretation, not fact. Canidius, like Bradley and most critics, is hypothesizing an offstage conversation between Cleopatra and Antony in which Cleopatra suggests (or demands) a sea-battle. Critics have often questioned the Bradleyan tactic of speculating on offstage or even pre-play events, but I do not recall that they have questioned it in this particular case. Interpreting the scene on the basis of Canidius' conclusions is a chancy business as well, in a play which (as Adelman and others have observed) consistently offers various perspectives on the same action. The point is arguable. My objection, however, is that critics have not bothered to argue it, but have instead imported Plutarch's conclusions into the play—in spite of the fact that Shakespeare has so clearly departed from Plutarch in his dramatization of the incident.

<sup>85</sup> Plutarch, p. 287.

<sup>86</sup> Plutarch, p. 276.

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In both authors, Antony's suicide is a result of Cleopatra's sending word that she is dead. But again, Shakespeare takes pains to mitigate this action. First, he makes the death-message Charmian's idea (IV. xiii. 4), not Cleopatra's. Second, he has Cleopatra foresee the possible effect of her message and send an emissary to revoke it; unfortunately, the emissary arrives too late (IV. xiv. 119–26). This is a significant departure from Plutarch.

In Plutarch, Cleopatra will not open the gates of the monument to Antony, and no reason for this refusal is given. In Shakespeare, Cleopatra gives a reason and apologizes: "I dare not, dear; / Dear my lord, pardon: I dare not, / Lest I be taken" (IV. xv. 21–23).

Plutarch gives three reasons for Antony's suicide, but none at all for Cleopatra's, apart from the implication that her wits were distracted "with sorrow and passion of mind." She is reduced to a babbling, self-mutilating neurotic: "She had knocked her breast so pitifully, that she had . . . raised ulcers and inflammations, so that she fell into a fever. . . . her eyes sunk into her head with continual blubbering, and moreover they might see the most part of her stomach torn in sunder."<sup>87</sup> Shakespeare gives Cleopatra's suicide full motivation, and allows her to die with dignity and even triumph.

Finally, Plutarch reports simply, "Her death was very sudden."<sup>88</sup> The great dying speeches of Cleopatra are Shakespeare's addition.

Shakespeare's greater interest in Cleopatra first manifests itself in his changing Plutarch's title from *The Life of Marcus Antonius* to *The Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra*,<sup>89</sup> and continues to manifest itself throughout the play.

## VII

Although Shakespeare's departures from Plutarch are consistently in the direction of mitigating the harshness of Plutarch's view of Cleopatra, they do not by any means amount to a whitewash. By granting Cleopatra motivation and the chance to speak in her own defense, Shakespeare lifts her from the level of caricature, which would be appropriate for satiric treatment, to the level of fully developed individuality, which qualifies her for treatment as a tragic figure. To be treated as a tragic protagonist, Cleopatra need not—indeed should not—be absolved of every failing; after all, no one tries to prove that Macbeth did not really commit murder before granting him the stature of tragic hero.

The most significant difference between Shakespeare's mature tragic practice and Aristotle's tragic theory is that while Aristotle at one point says that "pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune," Shakespeare insists on eliciting audience sympathy for characters who, to a greater or lesser degree, have brought their misfortunes on themselves. Shakespeare seems to ask his audience to understand, to empathize—even to forgive. In the later tragedies, Shakespeare seeks audience sympathy for inherently unsympathetic figures—a stubborn and mentally infirm octogenarian, a murderer, a misanthrope, a mama's boy, and (most difficult of all) a disreputable woman. As Willard Farnham points out in *Shakespeare's Tragic Frontier*, such an attempt involves great risks—what is gained in granting characters some say in their own

<sup>87</sup> Plutarch, pp. 286–87.

<sup>88</sup> Plutarch, p. 291.

<sup>89</sup> Although I find the addition of Cleopatra's name to Plutarch's title somewhat significant, I do not think that the fact that Antony's name remains in the title is clear evidence that the two were meant to be co-protagonists. Shakespeare's titles are not always clear indications of who the play's major figures are to be: witness *Julius Caesar*, *Henry IV*, *Henry VI*, or *Cymbeline*.

destiny might easily be lost in diminution of audience sympathy. It seems to have been a risk that Shakespeare deliberately elected to take. In his last few tragedies, he made increasing demands on the humane tolerance (or perhaps on the Christian charity, in the most radical sense) of his audience. We are not expected to agree, in every case, that the protagonist is more sinned against than sinning; we are expected, on the basis of our common humanity with the offending protagonist, to offer sympathy unqualified by the necessity for exoneration. It is a demand too radical for Aristotle, for Farnham, for most audiences. Most are too ready to rue the absence of less deeply-flawed heroes, too ready to accuse Shakespeare of having sat down to eat with publicans and sinners. But although this is a tendency in the criticism of all the late tragedies, the fact remains that critics have been readier to sympathize with the murderer than with the wanton woman.

## VIII

Any attempt to reach a canonical decision on the identity of a single hero in a play of such generic unorthodoxy as *Antony and Cleopatra*<sup>90</sup> is probably foolhardy and possibly distorting in itself. Nevertheless, since so many critics before me have unblushingly insisted on establishing Antony as the play's sole protagonist, for the sake of argument I will suggest that there are good reasons for considering Cleopatra to be the play's protagonist—or, shall we say (ignoring the usual deprecatory sex-designation "heroine"), the hero. Not only does the play culminate in Cleopatra's death scene, but she has (according to the statistical evidence of the Spevack Concordance) more speeches than Antony; indeed, the most in the play (although, giving the lie to the received opinion that women talk too much, her speeches contain fewer total lines than Antony's). But most important, she learns and grows as Antony does not.

A. C. Bradley declares that the play is not a true tragedy because he cannot find the tragic hero's inner struggle in Antony.<sup>91</sup> But Cleopatra has that inner struggle. She struggles against her own artificial theatricality (as Richard II never does): she who so often threatens to die that Enobarbus credits her with a "celerity in dying" (I. ii. 145) finally does truly kill herself. She who in a self-dramatizing gesture had sent word to Antony that she was dead and asked the messenger to "Say that the last I spoke was 'Antony' / And word it, prithee, piteously" (IV. xiii. 8–9), finally really dies with the words "O Antony" on her lips. She struggles against her own inconstancy—the inconstancy that had previously led her to change moods and to change lovers—and approaches death with the words

My resolution's placed, and I have nothing  
Of woman in me: now from head to foot  
I am marble-constant: now the fleeting moon  
No planet is of mine.

(V. ii. 238–41)

<sup>90</sup> I have, for lack of space, sidestepped the knotty genre question. If the play is seen, for example, as a history play, the search for *one* protagonist becomes irrelevant. Even earlier tragedies had co-protagonists (*Romeo and Juliet*) or lacked a clearly-defined single hero (*Julius Caesar*). It is a fact, however, that all the tragedies from *Hamlet* on have clearly-defined single heroes. I am arguing for Cleopatra as sole hero to show that it can be done, and with as much basis in the play as the argument for Antony as hero. If counterarguments can be produced, well and good. I only ask that their basis be textual, not sexual.

<sup>91</sup> Bradley, pp. 286–87.

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As Lear learns that he is a man before he is a king, so Cleopatra learns that she is a woman before she is a queen:

No more but e'en a woman, and commanded  
By such poor passion as the maid that milks  
And does the meanest chares.<sup>92</sup>

(IV. xv. 76–78)

The composition of *Antony and Cleopatra* followed close upon that of *King Lear*, that great play of self-knowledge.<sup>93</sup> Surely, then, it is no coincidence that while Antony simply fears his own loss of self-knowledge, Cleopatra actually admits to her less-than-admirable actions (“I . . . do confess I have / Been laden with like frailties which before / Have often shamed our sex” [V. ii. 121–24]) and tries, however late, to change—to “be noble to myself.” Surely after watching what Lear was and what Lear became, we should not be too ready to damn what Cleopatra has been while ignoring what she becomes.

Of the critics I have discussed, A. P. Riemer comes the closest to declaring that Cleopatra is the hero of *Antony and Cleopatra*. Rehearsing all the reasons for not considering Antony the hero, he trembles on the verge—and then withdraws, unwilling to take the final step. He tells us that “Her death (and this assumption must be faced squarely) is not offered in any sense as the play’s structural culmination. . . . The play does not share [her] feelings and ideas, and the audience does not participate in [her] emotional state to the extent that it partakes of Hamlet’s, Othello’s or Lear’s emotions at the climactic points of the tragedies in which these characters appear. . . . It is not possible for us to share her emotions.”<sup>94</sup>

I find this statement very odd. Is Cleopatra such an aberrant being that her emotions lie outside the pale of human comprehension? Is her practice of the tawdry old game known as feminine wiles really sufficient to render her forever as mysteriously and darkly inscrutable as male critics suggest? Is it really true that in contrast to the great universal audience which participates with no difficulty in the emotional state of a man who is troubled by incest, court drinking, the feasibility of revenge, and the authenticity of ghosts, there are no readers and no audiences who can participate in the emotions of a woman who dies thinking of politics, wine, her lover, and her baby?

## IX

The persistent idea that Cleopatra cannot be understood, underlying as it does so many of the sexist responses I have discussed, owes much to the notion that women in general are impossible for men to understand. But, *pace* Dowden and others, one might ask exactly what she does that is so dazzlingly

<sup>92</sup> Of this passage, Stempel remarks, “The death of a queen is leveled to the death of a woman, an exceptional woman, but still only a woman” (p. 71). Goddard, more graciously, makes the comparison with Lear, and also with Othello. In so doing he is one of the few critics to have granted Cleopatra the dignity of comparison with Shakespeare’s male heroes. Unfortunately, Goddard concludes that although the final transformation of Cleopatra is “a miracle,” Antony’s “devotion to her, even unto death, is what does it” (p. 198).

<sup>93</sup> Cf. Paul A. Jorgensen, *Lear’s Self-Discovery* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1967).

<sup>94</sup> Riemer, p. 100.

mysterious. True, she engages in unqueenly activities such as hopping forty paces through the public street or wandering about incognito to observe the qualities of people. But then, Hal drinks in taverns and takes part in robberies as prince, and later wanders incognito among troops as king; there is disagreement over his motives, of course, but at least critics assume that he *has* understandable motives. I cannot recall anyone describing Hal as “quick, shifting, multitudinous, incalculable.” And as for feminine wiles, Cleopatra’s behavior here, far from being incomprehensible, is so obvious as to be almost crude: having bound herself to performing, not what is unexpected, but what is exactly the opposite of the expected, she has allowed herself no scope for creativity whatsoever. Milton’s Satan, by vowing to oppose whatever God initiates, renders himself dependent on God’s will; similarly, Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, by obliging herself to determine what Antony expects and then to do the opposite, will very soon forfeit the element of surprise in all her actions. “If you find him sad, / Say I am dancing; if in mirth, report / That I am sudden sick”—this is not the statement of a Woman of Mystery: it is a blueprint for action which, for the reader if not for Antony, renders the unpredictable predictable.

Shakespeare has taken pains to let Cleopatra explain her contrary behavior and give the reasons for it (I. iii). He has created a complex but far from inscrutable being. Cleopatra’s variety is, at last, finite. In short, Cleopatra needs to be demythologized. What she stands to lose in fascination she stands to gain in humanity.

Cleopatra may or may not be the protagonist of *Antony and Cleopatra*. At the very least, however, it should now be clear that her part in the play needs to be reassessed with more fairness—without the sexist bias that has so far attended most efforts to come to terms with her, without the assumption that readers and theatregoers will never be able to treat her as anything more than an exotic and decadent puzzle, inaccessible to rational thought, remote from human feeling.

I find it hard to believe that there are no readers and audiences who find it possible to share Cleopatra’s emotions, or even simply to concede to Cleopatra the attributes of a human being. It seems, after all, that Shakespeare did.