

CLEOPATRA AS AN HISTORICAL AND LITERARY FIGURE:
CONCLUSION DRAWN FROM THE COMPARISON OF
SHAKESPEARE'S ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA AND
PLUTARCH'S LIVES

by

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By comparing the text of Plutarch's Lives to that of Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra, one is able to speculate upon Shakespeare's intent regarding his portrayal of Cleopatra. Shakespeare's interpretation of Cleopatra is less flattering than that of Plutarch.

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Deliberating on Shakespeare's relation to the feminist movement in literature has fascinated literary scholars for decades. Scholars support both the notions that Shakespeare was a strong supporter of women, and the opposite. To speculate for oneself, one must concentrate on each play separately, and have a clear definition of feminism. I will use the support of the ideal woman in the Renaissance society to define feminism for Shakespearean literature, due to the fact that he and others in his culture had no sense of modern feminism and this is as close as is realistic for such an author. To truly be feminist, Shakespeare would have had to write of an ideal woman who succeeds despite the patriarchy, by having independence and or power.

Examples of these women would be Christine de Pisan, Portia, and Viola. For Shakespeare to have written works that had feminist intentions, he would have had to choose plays with strong female characters without altering these characters to diminish their appeal, in order to present more powerful, intelligent, or multi-characteristic women. Although many readers believe that Shakespeare independently formed the ideas for his tragedy, Antony and Cleopatra, in reality Shakespeare found inspiration in Plutarch's Lives, a book chronicling the history of many famous world figures, such as Julius Caesar and Marcus Antonius. Antony and Cleopatra is based upon the "Antony" section of Lives. Using the historical work of Plutarch as a basis for comparison, a reader can begin to speculate on Shakespeare's intentions for writing the historical tragedy. The reader notices that, in contrast to Plutarch's account, in Shakespeare's version of Antony and Cleopatra, Cleopatra is more

submissive to the men, does not merit respect from the men, and follows set stereotypes for women.

Antony and Cleopatra portrays a queen with more power than most men of her time. Initially the tragedy looks as if Shakespeare made an attempt at empowering women. Cleopatra has great beauty, political power, sexual power, and wealth. Upon viewing Shakespeare's play alone, a reader could argue that the intention was to support the image of the ideal woman in society in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. However, when viewed in contrast to Plutarch's Lives, the reader notices that Plutarch's writings flatter Cleopatra considerably more than the writing of Shakespeare. Plutarch's writing attempts to chronicle the history of Antony and often speaks of the fourteen-year relationship the two historic figures shared. In my comparison between the two works I will use the material regarding the couple Antony and Cleopatra from the "Antony" section of Lives and the text from the tragedy.

My argument will be broken into multiple specific sections in order to facilitate easier understanding of the argument. To begin, the reader must attain a background in the history of feminist criticism of Shakespeare, the way in which women were treated during the time in which Shakespeare wrote, and the Renaissance image of the ideal woman. Next, because the analysis will focus specifically on the character of Cleopatra, this section will feature a historical description of the Queen of Egypt. In hopes of presenting a non-biased and historically accurate portrayal of the

Queen, I will present the information written by a number of authors who claim to write nonfiction biographies about Cleopatra. To facilitate the comparison of Lives and Antony and Cleopatra as pieces of literature, the historical section will not include Plutarch's account of the life of Cleopatra in her role in the "Marcus Antonius" section of Lives, but rather the works of other historians. The focal point will then shift to the similarities between Plutarch and Shakespeare's version of Antony and Cleopatra. In this section, specific scenes, or lines, will be analyzed that appear in both texts, and their importance to the plot of Shakespeare's work and Cleopatra as a character. Lastly, the concentration will shift from the similarities between the two works to their integral differences. Questions addressed will include: Why did Shakespeare omit these specifics regarding his heroine? With the inclusion of this information, would Cleopatra become a more influential or more sympathetic character? The analysis of these questions will lead to the concluding argument that, unlike many scholars believe, Shakespeare did not intend for his audience to view this play as a drama that supported the ideal female in society.

The image of the female character has changed over time. The way today's audience views Cleopatra bears little resemblance to that of the centuries past. Today, as a culture, we admire Cleopatra's power and her independence. Shakespeare's early audiences would not have viewed the heroine in the same manner. Without an historical background, a reader today will not be able to relate to the impact Shakespeare's lines had on his audiences. During the late sixteenth and early

seventeenth centuries, women not only played a second class role in society, but also faced oppression far worse than any present-day woman has faced. A level of familiarity with this historical topic will enhance our understanding of Cleopatra, and how she differed from the female audience members (remember, we all learned in high school that a large cross-section of society attended Shakespeare's plays). This section will emphasize the way in which the treatment of women differed from men in Shakespeare's society.

In the lower classes, a woman had little choice during the progress of her life. In fact, a young lady who began her life on the poverty line was unlikely to improve her status throughout her life (Mendelson, 260). As a child, she was subjected to the rule of her father, mother, and older brothers. In her young adulthood, she either married, or lived the rest of her life with her controlling family. This decision relied on the wealth of her family. A wealthy family could afford a dowry for more than one daughter, but many could only afford to marry away one daughter. The other daughter lived with her family, where she would forever remain subject to her parents' supremacy. When a daughter married, she got her first taste of personal autonomy. She now ran her household, obtained food, made clothes for her children, of which she had one about every two years, cared for the children, and taught her daughters all they would need to know to become good wives someday (Jankowski, 31).

Not only were these norms accepted throughout society, they were also enforced by the leaders of the people. According to Gouge, a writer in the early 1600s, a wife of any social class must submit herself to her husband as “king to governe and aid her, a Priest to pray with her and for her, a Prophet to teach and instruct her;” even “such tokens of familiarity as are not withal tokens of subjection and reverence are unbeseeming a wife” (Gouge, 345). Likewise, the Reverend William Whately boasted in his *A Bride-Bush* sermon published in 1617 that “The whole duty of the wife is referred to two heads. The first is to acknowledge her inferiority: the next to carry her selfe as inferior” (Whately, 36). These two authors directly advocate the power of the misogynist patriarchy.

Thus far no astonishing facts have been revealed. Most readers have been educated regarding the status of subordinate women in past societies, yet the shocking aspect of the women’s life relates to how the patriarchal society maintained these standards. Many women faced a darker side of life which hinged on the rules and regulations imposed upon their behavior and actions. Not only did men expect women to adhere to their social norms, but they had the legal right to punish women when they disobeyed. Women were subject to social restrictions regarding the way in which they talked to their husbands, and if a woman disobeyed, her husband imposed a “scold” or punishment. In this era, the scold developed from the notion that a woman could not keep quiet. This preoccupation with the punishment of women pervaded lower to middle-class society from 1560 to 1640 (Mendelson, 70).

These punishments included beatings, and a number of more inventive punishments, including the parading of a woman through town wearing a scold's bridle. This ordeal involved a bridle, similar to the device worn by a horse, an instrument with an iron framework to enclose the head and a metal gag or bit to restrain the tongue. The woman was then paraded through the streets of her town to be mocked by the townsfolk (Jankowski, 38). The impact of the bridle reflected the amount of public humiliation involved in the process. In spite of the fact that this punishment was not legally sanctioned, it became popular practice (Mendelson, 70). Various other punishments were available to an adventurous husband. These punishments consisted of the "cucking," where a woman was strapped to a chair to be jeered at by a crowd or pelted with rocks; "ducking," being plunged into water several times; or "carting," being strapped into a cart and paraded through town to be mocked. This punishment was usually accompanied by minstrels playing rough music (Jankowski, 39). The thought of a man punishing a woman with physical abuse and the government approving the activity seems ludicrous by today's standard, but for the lower-class woman of the late sixteenth century, these punishments were a part of daily life.

A woman's socio-economic class greatly affected how the men treated her throughout her life. Thus far, I have focussed primarily on how the lower classes were treated. The lives of upper-class women in early modern England offered more diversity than those of the women previously mentioned. A young woman received a

more extensive education than those of the lower classes. Some young ladies were taught Latin and possibly other foreign languages; they were well-versed in music, learning to play instruments, and learned fancy needlework, unlike the utilitarian skill of sewing taught to the lower-class women. These young ladies also learned games of skill such as archery. This learning could not be afforded by the lower-classes; there was no time for trivial games. Many upper class girls had an early introduction to rhetoric, court etiquette and religion (Hannay, 39-41). Parents geared these young women's education solely for marriageability. The marriage was arranged by the male head of family in order to consolidate power and preserve property. Upon marriage, the legal authority over the woman would transfer from the father to the husband (Ezell, 9).

Like a lower-class woman, the women of the upper-classes were trained for marriage, which was based on lineage, dowry, and beauty. These women learned how to manage a household, instruct servants, and oversee children. Upon marriage, they also began to learn about and participate in their husband's work. In Women in Early Modern England, Mendelson and Crawford claim, "aristocratic and middling wives actually performed a significant proportion of the labor for which their husbands were paid" (Mendelson, 341). These women gained a respectable position in their society, yet continued to play a submissive role to their husbands. The man to whom she was married defined the woman. In turn, the power of men, advocated by authors such as

Whately and Gouge, continued to influence society, no matter to which class a person belonged.

Though not all women faced the same oppression from men, the patriarchal theory of the Renaissance woman was applicable to women of all classes. It is understood that women of different socio-economic classes had different upbringings and levels of education. Strangely, Renaissance society maintained female stereotypes that defied class. I believe that these stereotypes influenced how Shakespeare adapted Plutarch's Cleopatra to the stage.

To gather an appropriate image of the "Renaissance woman," one may refer to the qualities often praised by the writers of this era. Women were praised for their beauty, sweetness, simplicity, modesty, piety, chastity, humility, constancy, prudence, and the more passive aspects of their nature, rather than those that were more aggressive. Above all, chastity was praised in this image of the ideal, and without chastity, even beautiful, witty, wealthy women could not be respected as an ideal (Kelso, 25-30). This value plays against the character of Cleopatra. Any audience member would know that sexuality plays a major role in defining her character, a more prominent role in Shakespeare than in Plutarch.

In this patriarchal and oppressive society, it was said that "women were said to be insubordinate, hypocritical, lustful, and garrulous by nature" (Mendelson, 62). Of course these qualities would be viewed as negative in nearly every human, yet the underlying belief that women were born this way and men should be conscious of

these defects greatly affected the treatment of innocent women (Kelso, 30-35).

Women were viewed as impressionable, and therefore more susceptible to “negative influence” (Kramer, 208). Religion also dictated that the woman was the “weaker vessel” and must therefore be subject to the tyranny of men (Mendelson, 33). All of the negativity related to the woman was said to stem from one basic truth, women were disobedient to male authority, referring to political, psychological, and sexual insubordination (Mendelson, 62). According to this argument all women since Eve had followed this pattern.

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, authors went so far as to debate whether women were in league with the devil, and whether men could beat their wives (Smith, 12). One of these writers was William Gouge, previously mentioned. The patriarchy so heavily influenced the image of woman in England, that the voices of those who disagreed were stifled. For a writer to stand up against these sexist norms would take courage and a willingness to face rejection. It seems that no author would voluntarily fight this battle, due to a fear of failing in his or her career. Yet authors defied the patriarchy for over two hundred years before Shakespeare penned his first play.

Fortunately, the battle against sexism began far before Shakespeare’s time. The battle began as early as the 1400s with writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer and Christine de Pisan who wrote stories depicting strong female characters. Other early feminist writers, before Shakespeare’s time were Louise Labe, Thomas More, Lucrezia

Marinella, and Mary Astell.

Considered by many critics to be the best writer before Shakespeare, Chaucer serves as an appropriate example of a male writer who wrote feminist texts. Chaucer serves as proof that in the 1300s, a writer could write feminist texts, making it logically possible for Shakespeare to have written feminist texts as well. Unlike Pisan, in his career, Chaucer wrote texts on many subjects, not only women's issues. Not all of Chaucer's works can be considered feminist. In fact, in works such as Troilus and Criseyde the portrayal of women is less than flattering. According to the author, his work made men distrust women who are 'true as steel' (Chaucer, 332-4). To redeem himself concerning gender relations, Chaucer wrote The Legend of Good Women, an outrightly feminist text (Brewer 243).

The Legend of Good Women, published in 1386, portrays classical heroines who have been deceived and mistreated by men, and all are similar in content and style. In his stories, Chaucer presents women who argue, "fiercely and effectively. They give a powerful image of a certain kind to women" (Brewer, 245). This text praises both religious and secular women, recounting stories of saints as well as figures such as Dido, Medea and Cleopatra. The inclusion of Cleopatra further supports the concept that Shakespeare could have easily turned his work into something feminist. Chaucer and Plutarch had already published such feminist works.

Chaucer made bold feminist assertions in his text. He did not hide behind a narrator's opinion, but took responsibility for the opinions as his own. Chaucer,

Pisan, and their feminist counterparts, made it possible for writers after them to assert their feminist opinions openly and honestly. True, due to their writings, the world did not immediately begin to change social norms, but these works did help readers become accustomed to feminist literature.

As the first example of a female writer with similar goals to Chaucer, Christine de Pisan, born in 1364, began her quest to end the mistreatment of women in literature. Due to the social status of her family, and their specific interest in education, Pisan was given a thorough education that she would use to enlighten others. Pisan began writing in 1399, and in 1404, in reaction to Matheolus' attack on women, Pisan took the opportunity to publicly defend women (Kelso, 5). From her first writings to 1429, she wrote courtly poetry, epistles, and didactic treatises, in both verse and prose. In these works, Pisan wrote about women, not as objects and secondary characters, but as heroines, both physically strong and intelligent. Pisan disregarded social norms when composing in L'Epistre d'Othea a Hector (circa 1400-1401), out of one hundred stories in this collection, sixty-seven gave principle importance to women. This number is astonishing considering the time and political environment in which she wrote.

A few years after L'Epistre d'Othea a Hector was published, Pisan published her most feminist work: Le Livre de la cite des dames. This work made history as the first work by a woman in absolute praise of women. In this piece, Pisan began her mission to defend women. In the work, the three main characters, Reason, Rectitude,

and Justice commission Pisan to honor the women who were unfairly forgotten or slandered in literature written by men, a similar goal to that of Chaucer in his The Legend of Good Women. By writing and publishing this work, Pisan made her intent to defend women clear. She did not mask her purpose with the use of symbolism.

Pisan wrote one of only a few homages written to Joan of Arc during the heroine's lifetime. In this poem, Pisan expressed her elation in a peace brought by the capable hands of a young woman from Lorraine. Her choice to write about a contemporary woman brought the issue of the roles and capabilities of women into present day culture for her readers. The heroism of this woman was apparent, thus supporting Pisan's ideas of a social structure with the less harsh treatment of women.

Like Shakespeare, Pisan's literature was available to both the aristocracy and bourgeoisie. Due to the enthusiastic patronage of figures such as Charles VI, Queen Isabella, Phillip and John of Burgundy, Louis of Orleans, and John Berry, Pisan's works became widely available (Wisman, xviii). Not only did her works have a wide socio-economic range of readers, but also her works took up concerns of women of all social classes. Christine de Pisan wrote for all readers. Because a large number of Pisan's manuscripts circulated, today's scholars are lucky enough to have many original manuscripts such as: over forty manuscripts of L'Epistre d'Othea a Hector, twenty-five of Le Livre de la cite des dames, and seventeen of Le Livre des trois vertus (Wisman, xviii). This wealth of information has led to many thorough studies of Pisan.

During her life, and after her death in 1430, many authors honored this pioneering feminist in their writings, proclaiming their support of feminist literature. In 1404, Pisan's contemporary Eustache Dechamps wrote a ballad in her honor. In the work, Dechamps writes to Pisan, "You have no equal that I know today; / You have acquired wisdom in all your learning" (Towner, 13). Dechamps does not praise Pisan for her feminine qualities such as emotion or eloquence, but for her intelligence and education. After her death in 1442, Martin Le Franc compared her to Cicero and Cato, in his "Champion des dames", declaring, "She was Tully and Cato: / Tully, since in eloquence / She had the rose and the bud; / Cato, because of her wisdom" (Pinet, 454). These are just a few examples of the praise Pisan received from her fellow authors. Authors and readers appreciated Pisan's attempts to honor women, and her readers.

Many, since Pisan, claim that this author was the first to hold modern feminist views. Pisan sparked a controversy that would later be known as the *querelle de Femmes*, whose roots date back as far as 1275 to 1280 (Lasch, 5). Writers such as Pisan became known as defenders or advocates for women, rather than today's term of feminists (Kelly, 66). In this "quarrel," women took a stand against the male defamation of the subject of women. Unlike many modern-day feminist issues, equal rights and pay, the work of Pisan and her counterparts had more elementary concerns. They wanted to stand up against the mistreatment of women. In her argument, Pisan claimed that sexes were more defined by social class rather than biological fact

(Lasch, 4).

Along with Pisan, many writers joined in the *querelle des femmes*. Generally, Renaissance culture defined women as much by their class as by sex, but the arguments of the *querelle des femmes* treated “woman” as a singular identity (Hannay, 38). Like today’s feminist arguments, many different views were represented. Some writers believed in an inherent difference between the sexes. Women were said to have a kinder temperament; they were more nurturing and were less quick to feel anger. Unlike the pervasive image of woman, this ‘feminist’ image allowed women positive aspects and thus a necessary position in society (Kelso, 16). Other advocates for women supported a much more modern view of women as equals of men (Lasch, 16). The most controversial view, taken by a number of advocates, was that of feminine superiority. These women made sweeping claims such as women’s superior fineness, delicacy, and softness. These women used Aristotle’s argument that men were more muscular and stronger to claim that men were naturally intended to be slaves of the more fair race of women, who were inclined to prudence, contemplation, and command (Kelso, 21).

These heated debates spawned an era where both women and men were engrossed in the art of verbal dialectics and repartee (Lasch, 14). This concentration also led to a higher level of education for women of the upper-classes. Unfortunately, the *querelle des femmes* remained an upper-class struggle; those of the lower-classes continued to live in an unquestionable patriarchy (Kelso, 31).

The controversy Pisan began empowered female writers. Women began to be both authors and critics. By the time Shakespeare's works began to be reviewed, male as well as female writers expressed their opinions. Women as early as the 1660s wrote criticisms of the works of William Shakespeare. Although opinions differed, most commended Shakespeare's writing and felt that his strong female characters enhanced his work. In a volume known as Shakespeare's Heroines, written in the late 1600s, Anna Bronwell Jameson writes, regarding the intentions of her volume:

To illustrate the manner in which the affections would naturally display themselves in women—whether combined with high intellect, regulated by reflection, and elevated by imagination, or existing with perverted dispositions or purified by the moral sentiments. I found all these in Shakespeare . . . his characters combine history and real life: they are complete individuals, whose hearts and souls are laid open before us—all may behold and for themselves (Jameson, 67).

Shakespeare offers female characters that not only please Jameson as a critic, but lead her to believe that many of her female counterparts may become inspired by merely reading the works of the amazing playwright.

Over two centuries after Jameson wrote her favorable criticism of Shakespeare, Mary Cowden Clarke made her living as one of the first, quite possibly the very first, woman to make her living in the field of Shakespearean criticism.

Clarke published throughout the 1840s and 1850s, claiming her father's support as inspiration for her career choice. This female critic cites "[Shakespeare] possesses keener insight than any other man-writer into woman nature—Shakespeare may well be esteemed a valuable friend of woman-kind" (Clarke, 101). This professional woman obviously views Shakespeare's work as expressing a compassion for women and the female ideal. She goes on to note that a young woman could learn and be guided by Shakespeare's heroines. Clarke and Jameson present clear views of Shakespeare the feminist; they portray the playwright as a crusader for the betterment of women through his writing. According to the portrayal, Shakespeare was a man who created characters to inspire women to excel.

Although most early female critics wrote regarding the merits of Shakespeare's plays and specific characters, as opposed to his support, or lack of support, for a positive female image, the faction of female critics between 1660 and 1900 spoke their mind and did not shy away from these difficult subjects. Many women focussed on how Shakespeare developed his female characters, exhibiting a specific interest in the subject of sexuality.

These same women differed in their opinions regarding the realism of Shakespeare's heroines. Some say that the fictional women were idealistic, realistic, or not fully developed. The question never became: Are these female characters likeable?, but rather became: What is the impact the character as Shakespeare has written her has on the women readers? Adjusting the focus from if the reader likes the

female character to if this same character is a positive role model for womankind. In the essays written by female critics before 1900, the topic of sex prevails, showing a desire to discuss not only gender, but the rights of woman both in the plays and in the society in which the critics themselves lived. This desire to discuss gender soon evolved into a willingness to discuss these issues in the public realm.

As time passed, women became more comfortable speaking about gender issues in society, and likewise in their criticisms of Shakespeare's writing. With an interest in the same subjects as many of Shakespeare's early critics, recent feminists have found a renewed interest in Shakespeare. In the last twenty to thirty years, critics have begun to question the impact writers have had by writing works considered feminist. Along with this surge of investigating feminist works and writers, the works of established and respected authors have come into question, including the works of William Shakespeare. Due to his extreme popularity as a writer, many articles have been written supporting both feminist and antifeminist interpretations of Shakespeare's works.

Shakespeare's comedic plays have often been considered feminist. Scholars supporting the theory of Shakespeare as a feminist, claim that the comedies aim at continuation and procreation. They concern themselves with the community rather than the individual. The comedy accepts rather than transcends. The goal of the comedy is transcendent in its promise of everlasting happiness, the moment of exaltation and community harmony, stemming from this union. Because these

qualities have been associated with the female sex, some of the feminist scholars believe that Shakespeare presents feminist comedies (French, 37). In these examples, Shakespeare writes of intelligent and powerful women, such as Portia and Viola. Jameson, an author focussing on early women critics, declares that Portia and Viola belong in two different groups of women who exhibit feminine attributes: Portia possesses true intellect, and Viola, imagination. These two attributes empower the female characters and make the women more appealing to the female audience (Jameson, 69). Portia controls an enormous amount of wealth and a wit that allows her to become a true heroine by the end of The Merchant of Venice. Both of these heroines must dress as men to achieve respect and power, but upon donning male clothing, are more than capable in the eyes of their fellow characters. In Shakespeare's comedies, what matters is not what society thinks of a woman in male dress, but why a woman would adopt male dress: in order to use her power and knowledge. If the woman's goal is 'feminine,' then the masculine dress does not compromise her natural feminine identity, allowing the comedy as a whole to remain feminine (French 2, 104).

Differing from the treatment of a number of comedies, the criticism regarding Shakespeare's tragedies is less decided as either supporting or rejecting feminism. There are strong factions both supporting and rejecting the theory of Shakespeare's tragedies as feminist. Some claim that in the tragedy the focus and weight is on power, a definitively masculine quality. This masculine quality can be viewed as

inherently supporting the patriarchy, and thus anti-feminist. Many critics extend this notion to Antony and Cleopatra, a tragedy that seems to focus on love more than power. Plays such as Macbeth and Hamlet exemplify this masculinity. In these two examples, nearly all of the characters are ruined in their quest for power or respect. In these two plays, the audience is offered two strikingly different females, Lady Macbeth, a woman determined to achieve a level of power denied to her because of her sex, and Ophelia, a woman who falls victim to the patriarchy imposed upon her by her family and her society. Many critics agree that Shakespeare's tragedies are far from feminist, yet Antony and Cleopatra tends to be seen as an exception to the rule.

This tragedy is a unique example because it alone presents the outlaw feminine principle embodied in a powerful female; the play does this in a surprisingly positive fashion (French 2, 253). The reader is offered a powerful woman, yet a woman who retains her feminine qualities, as opposed to a character like Lady Macbeth. By remaining feminine, the heroine remains ideal in the eyes of the society, the only way she could maintain power and respectability. Many critics consider Cleopatra's relationship with Antony as feminist, due to his recognition of her equality in their relationship and her great power as a monarch. The feminine aspect of the play, in conjunction with the male qualities exhibited by the heroine, lead many scholars to agree that of the tragedies written by Shakespeare, Antony and Cleopatra exhibits feminism in the writing. According to this argument, Cleopatra works within the

system, yet maintains her power, allowing her a status as close to equality, the goal of feminism, as any of Shakespeare's heroines.

Like many of the critics regarding Shakespeare's tragedies, I believe that Antony and Cleopatra follows the suit of the other tragedies as a misogynist, or anti-feminist text. Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra lessens the worth of her character, rather than either maintaining the character as Plutarch had written, or improving upon Plutarch's historical character. The Cleopatra in Antony and Cleopatra resembles the image of a negative Renaissance woman more than the Cleopatra of Lives. This less feminist Cleopatra offers the audience a disheartening female heroine, rather than an inspiration for the women in the audience. Her sexuality is emphasized, which directly contradicts the all-important value of chastity. Not only that, but Cleopatra speaks her mind, and refuses to be domineered by her male counterpart. I believe that Shakespeare altered Plutarch's Cleopatra to emphasize the qualities in the heroine that were directly applicable to the values of his Renaissance culture. By doing this, Shakespeare made Cleopatra an anti-heroine of sorts, rather than the proud woman that is portrayed in Lives.

Cleopatra: History

“Rome, who never condescended to fear any nation or people, did
her time fear two human beings: one was Hannibal, and the other
was a woman”----Sir William Tarn

To compile an accurate, or at least non-biased, description of Cleopatra’s life, I have selected multiple biographies that present a factually based look at the former Queen of Egypt, rather than a fictional “story of Cleopatra” approach to the influential woman’s life. Arthur Weigall, the primary author contributing historical references to this section has been referred to as the most reliable source published in the last one hundred years on the life and times of Cleopatra. For instance, Emil Ludwig, a fellow biographer of the famous queen, claims that he based his books partly on “Weigall’s fine studies of Cleopatra” (Ludwig, Preface). The other authors selected present clear historical descriptions of Cleopatra, referring to numerous historical sources for their works.

In the time before and during Cleopatra’s life, Egypt was matrilineal and women were prominent in the country’s culture, perhaps even dominant. Royalty and property were passed through the female lines, as seen in Cleopatra’s life. The tombs of Egyptians show the equality between men and woman, in the extravagance of the burial and the sites of the burials, although a stratification of classes seems to exist. Unlike the women of most other countries, Egyptian women could sell and administrate property, execute wills, sue at law, and officiate as witnesses of judicial

records. Women worked as “estate managers, physicians, architects, soldiers, musicians, scribes, poets, and priestesses” (French, 138). These women married by choice, divorced, and unlike the society we live in today, women were paid equally as men in Egypt. Cleopatra lived in a society open to the power of the female. Unfortunately, the world she dealt with on a daily basis, the Roman world, did not offer women the same respect and equal opportunity as her homeland.

Cleopatra VII, born in the winter of 69-68 BC, was to become the most powerful woman in her time. She and her two brothers, known as Ptolemy XIV and XV, succeeded her father Ptolemy XIII, derisively known as Auletes the flute player, to the throne of Egypt. Upon the death of Ptolemy XV, Cleopatra gained the throne, and all of the power this position entailed (Volkmann, 48). From an early age, she manifested an undeniable interest in politics and exhibited a powerful belief in the independence of the Egyptian state. Throughout her childhood, she made apparent that she desired to become the ‘Empress of the World’ (Franzoso, 17).

At fourteen, Cleopatra first met the man with whom she would spend much of her life. Marcus Antonius was a young Roman general leading his forces into Alexandria at the time the two met. Upon their first meeting, Cleopatra is said to have attracted the young military leader with her charm and quick wit. Franzoso notes, “In the course of his visits to the Palace . . . he thought she looked ‘an exquisite flower’” (Franzoso, 26). At the East end of the Mediterranean, where Alexandria is located, a young woman of fourteen was considered of marriageable age (Weigall, 62).

Although the relationship between the two famous lovers would not begin for a number of years, some speculate that their first meeting had a great impact upon both of the future lovers.

Cleopatra was the oldest sibling in her family, being about eighteen at the time of her father's death in 51 BC. Her sister Arsinoe was a few years younger; her brother, later known as Ptolemy XIV was, ten or eleven, and last Ptolemy XV, then seven years old (Weigall, 63). Auletes left specific instructions in his will regarding the succession of his four children. He had two copies of his will made, one kept in Alexandria, the other given to Pompey in Rome. In his will, Auletes decreed that his eldest son, Ptolemy XIV, and eldest daughter, Cleopatra VII, should jointly rule the lands. Furthermore, Auletes asked that the Roman people should act as guardians to the new king, he being eight years younger than the Queen (Weigall, 64). Historically for a sister and brother to reign simultaneously involved a royal marriage between brother and sister, due to the royal right of the female line in Egypt (Franzoso, 27), but there is no evidence of any such wedding between Cleopatra and Ptolemy (Weigall, 64). Weigall suggests that the marriage was postponed by Cleopatra's will not to marry the king due to his youthful age of ten. Albeit no one knows this reason to be fact, the lack of legal binds allowed both freedoms to which they would not have otherwise been privilege. Others believe that the two were married, without celebration, and Cleopatra quickly put it aside (Franzoso, 37).

Due to the extreme youth of the king, Cleopatra performed most of the official business required of a royal couple (Volkman, 59). Although no specific records exist, in 48 BC, when Cleopatra was twenty-one, the great political upheaval began in Egypt. Very little is known regarding this sequence of events, but scholars claim that the government split into two factions, those who supported Ptolemy (Ptolemy, his guardian, Theodotos, Achillas and others), and those who supported Cleopatra. Cleopatra ended up fleeing to Syria to save her life (Weigall, 69), much like the flight of her father in 58 BC (Franz, 24). Biographers speculate that the breach of state was based on both political disagreements and frustration over the continual failure of the Nile to flood, and the poor harvests that ensued (Volkman, 60). Years later, after Cleopatra and her forces had continued to battle with Ptolemy, Julius Caesar called the siblings into court in Alexandria to hear the case himself (Weigall, 85). Soon after, Cleopatra regained the throne, likely due to the love affair that ensued between the Emperor and the Queen.

Although the literature recounting the reign of Cleopatra and her brother may be patchy and incomplete, documents regarding Cleopatra as a person contain surprisingly well-detailed descriptions of the Queen of the Nile. Cleopatra had a first rate education from her early childhood. Unlike the rest of the Ptolemys, she spoke Egyptian, the language of their land. She also spoke Greek, Latin, Ethiopian, Hebrew, Arabic, Syrian, Persian, Median, Parthian, Aramaic, and the language of the Troglodytes; all by the age of eighteen (Franz, 17 and Volkman, 67). It is said

that her voice was like a “lyre of many strings,” which she used for many languages, all with equal ease (Volkman, 67). Cleopatra was said to speak all of these languages so well she rarely had a need for an interpreter. Dion Cassius claimed, “She was splendid to hear and to see . . . and was capable of conquering hearts which had resisted most obstinately the influence of love and those which had been frozen by age” (Weigall, 7). Cleopatra was of strong opinions and sound judgement, specifically in contrast to her other Ptolemaic counterparts.

Unlike most historical figures, the physical characteristics of Cleopatra, above most other characteristics, have been significantly documented. Cleopatra’s doctor, Olympus, kept a journal citing the Queen’s appearance; many of these citations are listed below. Contrary to what one may expect, Cleopatra bore the image of a Macedonian, rather than a Grecian. Her skin was naturally golden, her hair neither fair nor dark, but a natural amber. Her eyes were said to change color with her changing mood, ranging from gray to a violet color. Cleopatra was petite and her features delicate (Franz, 15). Her nose was prominent and aquiline; her nostrils were said to be sensitive, a sign of good breeding. Her lips appeared to be expertly sculpted, as a part of her extraordinary fully formed mouth (Weigall, 7).

Many historical references lead scholars to believe that Cleopatra had a petite build. Many noted that when Cleopatra needed admittance into the palace for her meeting with Ptolemy XIV and Caesar, she was wrapped in bedding and thrown over the shoulder of an attendant so that no one would recognize her as the former Queen

of Egypt. He picked the woman up with no trouble and carried her to the palace with ease, as if she were a piece of luggage. Not only does history offer the scholar many citations of the daintiness of the Queen, but the bust in the British Museum seems to depict the head of a small woman. Although all physical descriptions of Cleopatra remark on her beauty, most admit that she was by no means the most beautiful woman around. In fact, many believed Octavia, Mark Antony's second wife in the course of Shakespeare's tragedy, to be a greater beauty than his mistress.

Other than the information Olympus, Cleopatra's doctor, left for those interested in Cleopatra, the art of her time reflects the beauty of the Queen. The British Museum houses a bust of Cleopatra considered the most accurate account of the beautiful young ruler. The bust highlights her large and well-placed eyes and her rounded cheeks and chin, considered attributes of beauty in her lifetime. Other guides include the coins made in her lifetime; it was tradition to put the rulers of the time on currency. In one particular copper coin from Alexandria, the artist includes bits of Cleopatra's regal dress, further emphasizing her royalty. Much of the art of Cleopatra's lifetime is either too obscure to form a solid image of the Queen, or has been lost throughout time.

Comparison of Plutarch and Shakespeare

As stated earlier, Shakespeare borrowed from Plutarch when creating his Antony and Cleopatra. One can find both texts in a local library, compare the ancient with the modern, an advantage that few if any other authors offer his or her readers. Because Shakespeare drew directly from one source, one can surmise which passages he felt deserved entry into his story, and which of Plutarch's comments he preferred to dismiss. In regards to Cleopatra, a reader can deduce which aspects of her personality and physicality Shakespeare felt he needed to create his version of the heroine.

The first major section Shakespeare borrowed from Plutarch that focuses on both the hero and the heroine relates to the two falling in love, logical due to the subject matter of Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra. This section is coupled with a detailed description of Cleopatra, the first in Plutarch's "Marcus Antonius." In this passage in "Marcus Antonius," Plutarch describes the original courtship of the two, years after their first meeting when Cleopatra was only fourteen. Early in the description, Plutarch points out, "Caesar and Pompey knew her when she was but a young thing, and knew not then what the world meant: but now she went to Antonius at the age when a woman's beauty is at the prime, and she is also of best judgement" (Plutarch, 33). Shakespeare uses this information as a foundation for his characters. In the tragedy, many Romans comment on the Cleopatra of the past, before the action of the play, they speak of her as the woman who loved Caesar and Pompey. The former Cleopatra remains in question as the present Cleopatra makes decisions and

lives her life with Antony. During the first speech of the tragedy, Philo comments about Antony, saying, “Take but good note and you shall see in him / The triple pillar of the world transform’d / Into a strumpet’s fool” (I.i., 11-13). Although, as Shakespeare makes clear in the rest of the play, Cleopatra now has the maturity and hindsight to be a strong and loving woman, Philo continues to question if the Queen is anything more than a woman who seduces men until they lose their judgment. Philo sees that Antony has become a ‘strumpet’s fool’ and seems to blame Cleopatra for the change, rather than noting that the military wonder can make decisions for himself. This constant reminder of the Queen’s legendary sexuality serves as a reminder that she could have never been a respected Renaissance woman, due to the culture’s fixation on chastity.

Next, Plutarch remarks on Cleopatra’s mocking behavior. He claims that she mocked Antony to the point that to act otherwise would be nearly unthinkable (Plutarch, 33). As discussed earlier, in the Renaissance society, the scold was based on the theory that a woman could not keep quiet. This inclusion by Shakespeare directly supports the theory that Cleopatra exemplified a scold. Shakespeare portrays this attitude in various scenes in his play. He must have felt that this element of Cleopatra’s personality played an important part in what made her a unique female character, particularly for a tragedy rather than a comedy, or he desired to portray the Queen as an anti-heroine. In the first scene, shortly after Philo’s monologue, Cleopatra teases Antony as Plutarch suggests:

Cleo: If it be love indeed, tell me how much.

Ant: There's beggary in the love that can be reckon'd.

Cleo: I'll set a bourn how far to be beloved.

(I. i. 14-16)

No answer Antony offers will be acceptable to the Queen. She desires to make her lover uncomfortable and desirous to please his mate, thus submissive. The dominance of Cleopatra would likely be appalling to some members of Shakespeare's audience. In the first scene of Antony and Cleopatra, the Queen's desire to be in power has already been brought to light. Although power seems to concern Cleopatra, this scene also highlights her wit. In Renaissance society, wit was one of the few intellectual attributes admired in a woman. Thus, in the first scene, Cleopatra has already become difficult to label as either a positive or negative female character.

Plutarch uses examples of the couple's life together to illustrate the humor Cleopatra uses from day to day. Plutarch pens an account of an incident that transpired during a fishing trip. One day the lovers went fishing, Antony had not been able to catch a fish and accordingly he had a diver attach a fish to his line, in hopes of impressing his lover. Cleopatra, being a quick wit, noticed the discrepancy, in the situation. Plutarch documents the event:

Cleopatra found it straight, yet she seemed not to see it, but wondered at his excellent fishing: but when she was alone by herself among her own people, she told them how it was, and bade them the next morning to be on the water to see the fishing. A

number of people came to the haven, and got into the fisher-boats to see this fishing. Antonius then threw his line, and Cleopatra straight commanded one of her men to dive under the water before Antonius' men, and to put some old salt-fish upon his bait, like unto those that are brought out of the country of Pont

(Plutarch, 39)

Antony pulled up the line and realized that he had been duped. Cleopatra's jest became legendary; it not only promotes her wit, but also shows Antony's ability to laugh at himself. Shakespeare's inclusion of Cleopatra's wit complicates her character. Wit was one of the few strong qualities that was admired in a woman. In an upper-class marriage, wit would be included in the qualities that made a more desirable wife. Although this scene does not support Shakespeare's negative Cleopatra as do the other scenes, the fishing scene is one of a few scenes that had become legendary, along with the barge scene where Cleopatra first greeted Antony in Egypt.

Shakespeare borrows this fishing scene directly from Lives. Although Shakespeare does not offer his readers the background information regarding the couple's first fishing trip, as does Plutarch, the playwright highlights Cleopatra's wit with an approach similar to that of Plutarch.

Shakespeare fits the fishing scene into his play as a recollection of Cleopatra and Charmian's. The women revel in a fishing adventure Cleopatra and Antony shared:

Char: 'T was merry when
You wager'd on your angling; when your diver
Did hang a salt-fish on his hook, which he
With fervency drew up.

Cleo: That time—O time!
I laugh'd him out of patience, and that night
I laugh'd him into patience. (II. V. 15-20).

The Queen and her lady in waiting greatly enjoyed watching the legendary figure fight to retrieve a salt-fish from the depths of the water. The frenzy of the two women's reminiscence is written in a somewhat sinister tone. Cleopatra begins the last two lines of this section with the words "I laughed," this repetition, changing the tone from one more jovial to a tone of mocking. It no longer seems as if the two laughed together, as in Lives, but as though Cleopatra laughs because Antony has been duped.

Along with the humorous aspect of her personality, Plutarch comments on the mundane activities in the couple's life. Plutarch suggests that Cleopatra made herself 'one of the boys.' He declares, "For she would play at dice with him, drink with him, and hunt commonly with him, and also be with him when he went to any exercise or

activity of body (Plutarch, 38). Shakespeare does not emphasize this aspect of Cleopatra as he does her humorous side, but in certain scenes, a reader may understand how this passage influenced the playwright. The fishing scene with the two lovers is one example of how Cleopatra, a queen, could enjoy mundane, and possibly manly, activities with Antony. Cleopatra often drinks in the course of the drama; she has no concern for how a proper woman would act, only how she herself desires to act. In the ideals of the Renaissance, a woman was expected to act “lady-like,” this did not include drinking and being bawdy with the boys.

Shakespeare notes Cleopatra’s will to be ‘one of the guys’ in her attempts to participate in nearly all of the aspects of her lover’s life. Nearing the major battle at the end of the drama, in Act IV, Scene iv, Cleopatra and Antony prepare to say goodbye before battle. In an attempt to be closer to her partner, Cleopatra decides to aid Antony in donning his armor. Eros enters the room housing both Antony and Cleopatra, carrying the armor of the hero:

Ant: Come, good fellow, put mine iron on:

If fortune be not ours to-day, it is

Because we brave her: come.

Cleo: Nay, I’ll help too.

What’s this for?

Ant: Ah, let be, let be! Thou art

The armourer of my heart: false, false; this, this.

Cleo: Sooth, lo, I'll help: thus it must be.

(IV, iv 3-8)

Cleopatra has no knowledge of armor. Antony notes Cleopatra's incompetence, yet humors her. In Lives, Plutarch discusses Cleopatra's inclination toward manly activities as a positive quality of the Queen. Shakespeare seems to portray Cleopatra differently. This scene suggests that the Queen only desires to be near her lover before his battle and is willing to let her incompetence impede his performance. The playwright makes Cleopatra's shortcomings clear. She does not tightly buckle the armor, and at times does not know what piece of armor belongs on which part of her lover's body. In this scene, Shakespeare portrays Cleopatra as a pitiful lover striving for acceptance rather than a woman so comfortable with herself that she can participate in all aspects of her lover's life.

Thus far, Shakespeare's portrayal of the Egyptian Queen leaves little doubt of the author's intent to characterize Cleopatra as the antithesis of the Renaissance ideal. Contrary to this portrayal, Shakespeare includes a few positive images of Cleopatra, although upon further investigation, even these images seemed skewed by a misogynist speaker. Antony's confidant Enobarbus remains Cleopatra's advocate throughout the tragedy. A reader can easily discount an Egyptian's support of the Queen due to their political loyalty, but Enobarbus has no reason to favor the pagan beauty.

Upon Fulvia's death, Enobarbus defends Cleopatra to Antony, pleading, "Alack, sir, no. Her passions are made of / nothing but the finest part of pure love. We cannot call her winds and waters sighs and tear; they are greater/ storms and tempests than almanacs can report. This / cannot be cunning in her; if it be, she makes a shower of rain as well as Jove" (I., ii 139-144). Enobarbus defends the Queen with honor, citing her purity of love and hinting to her powers of passion. Although Cleopatra's passion would not be considered an admirable quality by many of Shakespeare's readers, this character balances the image with purity, an undeniably positive image. The balance of emotion in this description reflects positively on Cleopatra's character, thus leaving the audience with a less negative view of the Queen. Obviously this scene was not a part of Lives, but Enobarbus becomes the narrator of an important scene that the two texts share, the barge scene.

In the second act, the viewer sees another positive view of Cleopatra, an image that seems incongruent with the play as a whole. In this scene, Enobarbus relays the story of the majestic Cleopatra's first visit with Antony to Agrippa and Maecenas.

Enobarbus narrates:

The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne
Burned on the water. The poop was beaten gold;
Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
The winds were love-sick with them. The oars were
silver,
Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,

It beggared all description. She did lie
 In her pavillion—cloth of gold, of tissue—
 O'er-picturing that Venus where we see
 The fancy out work nature. On each side her
 Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
 With divers-coloured fans whose wine did seem
 To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
 And what they undid did. (II, ii 197-212).

Cleopatra inspires all those who look upon her. Dressed like the goddess Isis, Cleopatra is elevated above humanity. Enobarbus describes this scene as if it had happened upon Olympus, and not in Egypt. The goddess incarnate defies any Renaissance classification. The audience has no grounds on which to pass judgement; Cleopatra has been removed from the realm of reality. In addition to being non-mortal, Cleopatra has been clearly labeled a pagan, like the Romans, thus a more base creature than the Christians viewing the play, and therefore removed from the audience. For these reasons, this scene is exempt from the feminist versus misogynist argument. Cleopatra is not a woman in this scene, but the goddess Isis, or Venus to the Roman Enobarbus. Although I do believe that one may choose to view this scene as exempt, one may also argue the opposite. According to this argument, Cleopatra has been elevated beyond the ideals. She has been blessed by priests, thus insinuating that her sensuality is not a hindrance, but an advantage. This empowered Cleopatra is

not congruous with the Renaissance ideal, yet Enobarbus seems to feel that Cleopatra can be ideal even if she does not meet all of the qualifications for an ideal woman.

The fact that this meeting scene between Antony and Cleopatra is one of the most famous in their history together further explains Shakespeare's inclusion of this scene from Plutarch's text. Plutarch, along with nearly every biographer of the couple, has included this lush scene in their accounts of their life.

If the reader continues to question the feminist implications of this scene, the interaction between the couple clarifies the author's intent. In Lives, Plutarch describes the couple's decision to dine at Cleopatra's, rather than Antony's as he had suggested, as an example of the Queen's power and influence. As Shakespeare describes the incident, Antony's character is insulted, and Cleopatra receives no credit to her character. Enobarbus explains, "Our courteous Antony, / whom ne'er the word of 'No' woman heard speak, / ... goes to the feast" (II, ii 229-231). Enobarbus describes Antony as a submissive pushover, and fully dismisses Cleopatra's legitimate influence. Once again Shakespeare belittles the power of the great Queen and distorts Plutarch's image of the couple's relationship. Through the use of Plutarch, Shakespeare has made it possible to use the same instances to portray the Queen as a strikingly different person. This scene brings Antony's masculinity into question for the first time in the tragedy. Shakespeare portrays both Antony and Cleopatra as powerful politicians of questionable merit. Again the question of feminism becomes complicated.

One cannot view this problem as clear cut, yet the majority of evidence suggests that Shakespeare wrote an anti-feminist play. This same play portrays Antony poorly at times, yet nearly always portrays Cleopatra poorly. Shakespeare seems to go as far as to favor Antony, excusing his action with the claim that Cleopatra's love had blinded him, or that he could not help but be taken by her beauty.

Toward the end of the tragedy, Shakespeare classifies Cleopatra as beyond sex when she enters the battles that Caesar and Antony fight. She will not allow the men to pass her forces up because they are led by a woman: "Sink Rome, and their tongues rot / That speak against us! A charge we bear I' the 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.15-19). Cleopatra makes her stand. How can she be expected to govern a kingdom when she does not have the power to fight a war for the betterment of her people? The Queen and the playwright make it clear that as a true leader, she must fight in order to maintain the authority to rule. At this point, Cleopatra seems to be thinking more clearly than her experienced counterpart. Cleopatra desires to promote her nation, whereas Antony now fights a battle of pride, which ends by ruining him. With the addition of this feature, Cleopatra now has heroic qualities. Shakespeare may have included Cleopatra's willingness to break the mold of sex due to the historical facts supporting his decision. Another explanation is that some members of his audience would have been familiar with the history of the Roman Empire, and in turn with Cleopatra's part in the history. For whatever reason, Shakespeare included

Cleopatra's desire to be a member of a group that, before her entry, had been men only. Cleopatra stands on her own as a powerful woman and ruler, yet this position leads to her husband's demise. Unfortunately, this portrayal cannot be attributed to Shakespeare as much as historical reality. For the two lovers to lose their empires and commit suicide, both Cleopatra and Antony must take this stand.

Throughout the entire tragedy, Shakespeare makes it a point to include the couple's most famous scenes dictated by Plutarch, yet seems to write the same scenes with a contrasting tone. Shakespeare recalls famous reality-based battles, such as those with Pompey and Caesar. Various other historical information Shakespeare offers, such as the title Antony requested and received for Cleopatra and their children, find their basis in Plutarch's Lives. Shakespeare recounts Cleopatra and the children's titles in Act III, Scene iv:

Caesar: He gave the stablishment of Egypt; made her
Of lower Syria, Cyprus, Lydia,
Absolute Queen . . .

His sons he there
Proclaim'd the kings of kings:
Great Media, Parthia and Armenia
He gave Alexander; to Ptolemy he assign'd
Syria, Cilicia and Phonecia

(III. vi. 8-16)

It seems that Shakespeare had a greater interest in accuracy regarding the inclusion of well-known scenes rather than accuracy regarding the personality of the main character. Shakespeare recalls nearly all of the important historical scenes that Plutarch offers his readers, including scenes such as Cleopatra's birthday, Caesar demanding that Cleopatra run Antony out of Egypt, and the swallow infested boat, to strengthen his historical interpretation of Plutarch as legitimate, rather than fictional. Due to the interest in scenes of historical significance in the tragedy, for instance the inclusion of the scene where Cleopatra suggests that Antony fight by sea and that of the fishing trip between the two lovers. Shakespeare's documentation of the factual history of the couple makes the omissions of aspects of the heroine's personality, documented clearly by Plutarch, all the more significant. The omission of the positive aspects of the heroine's personality, and beauty, makes the reader question the motives of this great playwright. Perhaps Shakespeare felt that the two characters, Antony and Cleopatra had become so well documented that their images had become that of folklore rather than history, and therefore open to interpretation.

Shakespeare's Omissions from the Text of Plutarch's Lives:

Many aspects comprise the overall image of Cleopatra: her beauty, her intelligence, her power, and her sexuality. Nearly every historical document describing this Queen mentions all of these aspects and more. The reader of historical documents learns that Cleopatra became famous, not because of her famous lovers, but because she broke female stereotypes and became a legitimate ruler.

Unfortunately, Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra only includes a few aspects of Cleopatra as a person, rather than portraying her as many historians have chosen. Shakespeare highlights Cleopatra's sexuality and, at times, her beauty, but nearly ignores her intelligence and education, giving the reader an incomplete Cleopatra.

As noted earlier, Plutarch portrayed a positive image of Cleopatra. Very few negative comments exist in the document regarding the Queen, as opposed to the work by Shakespeare, where many characters speak against the Queen. In Plutarch's first description of Cleopatra, the reader envisions a nearly perfect woman. She is a vision of beauty, intelligence, and grace; certainly not the Cleopatra portrayed in Antony and Cleopatra. The implications of these differences between the texts may alter a person's reading of Shakespeare's tragedy. Like many readers of Shakespeare, I originally read the text as a feminist work. The text portrays a strong female lead, not only strong as an individual, but strong as the leader of a wealthy nation. Cleopatra seems to have power in the relationship that, at times, surpasses Antony's.

Thus far the work appears quite feminist, but upon reading the work of Plutarch, Shakespeare pales in comparison. The reality of Cleopatra is more similar to the Renaissance ideal than Shakespeare's play aspires to be. Not only did Cleopatra rule a country, but she did so with grace and skill.

Certain passages stand out when reading Plutarch's descriptions of Cleopatra. He maintains a respect for the heroine that Shakespeare only makes apparent at times during his interpretation. The first description of the woman concerns her beauty:

Now her beauty (it was reported) was not so passing as unmatchable of other woman, not yet such as upon present view did enamour men with her: but so sweet was her company and conversation, that a man could not possibly but be taken. And besides her beauty, the good grace she had to talk and discourse, her courteous nature that tempered her words and deeds, was a spur that pricked to the quick (Plutarch, 35).

This Cleopatra nears perfection. Perhaps if Plutarch claimed she was the perfect beauty as well, the description would not be believable. As the great historian leaves the description, one has trouble believing that Cleopatra could ever be as Shakespeare portrays her. Shakespeare's omission of Cleopatra's beauty may be attributed to the fact that the audience had a level of familiarity with the beauty of the Queen. Unfortunately, this does not explain his glaring omissions of other aspects of the Queen's presence and personality.

Plutarch's Cleopatra has grace and dignity; this is not the same Cleopatra seen

in the scene in Antony and Cleopatra where Antony learns of Fulvia's death. In this scene Cleopatra seems nearly mad, and not in the least composed:

Ant: Now, my dearest queen, --

Cleo: Pray you, stand farther from me.

Ant: What's the matter?

Cleo: I know, by that same eye, there's some good news.

What say the married woman? You may go:

Would she had never given you leave to come!

Let her not say 't is I that keep you here,

I have no power upon you; hers you are.

Ant: The gods best know—

Cleo: Why should I think you can be mine and true,

Though you in swearing shake the throned gods,

Who have been false to Fulvia? Riotous madness,

To be entangled with those mouth-made vows,

Which break themselves in swearing! (I. iii. 17-31)

The Cleopatra seen here is unsure of herself. She believes that Antony loves Fulvia more than he loves her. Historically, Antony was married to Cleopatra in Egypt; the two shared the throne. According to Plutarch, "he denied not that he kept Cleopatra, neither did he confess that he kept her as his wife: and so with reason he did defend

the love he bare unto this Egyptian Cleopatra” (Plutarch, 179). Although this passage does not make Antony out to be the most honorable man, he does defend his relationship, and Plutarch makes it clear that the two were married. In this scene, Shakespeare has the two acting as if they are taking part in an illicit affair, an unacceptable relationship for a Renaissance woman more than for the man. The two shared a relationship spanning fourteen years. The Cleopatra in Plutarch has enough self-confidence that she does not need to throw tantrums to get assurance from her lover. Shakespeare certainly does not use the sweet company and conversation that Plutarch describes in the earlier passage.

Next, Plutarch goes on to speak of Cleopatra’s beautiful voice and her use of language. The Historian felt that Cleopatra’s education and her use of intelligence merited an emphasis in his description of the Queen. Plutarch declares, “her voice and words were marvelous pleasant: for her tongue was an instrument of music to divers sports and pastimes, the which she easily turned into any language that pleased her” (Plutarch, 35). He goes on to boast that this royal woman rarely needed an interpreter due to her knowledge of language. This gracious description exalts Cleopatra to a level hardly realistic, yet many historians agree with Plutarch’s description. Unfortunately, this Cleopatra barely resembles the bumbling politician present in Shakespeare’s tragedy. Cleopatra never has a chance to prove her intelligence in the tragedy. Instead, she spends her time pining for her Antony, and failing in her military endeavors.

Shakespeare offers his audience a love-starved Cleopatra, one willing to do whatever it takes to keep her lover at home, whereas Plutarch portrays the relationship in the exact opposite terms. Shakespeare's Cleopatra begs for a drink of mandragora, an herb that induces sleep, when her Antony leaves for Rome. Cleopatra wishes to sleep her time away while her lover is gone. In her dreams perhaps the two will be reunited. This Cleopatra is pitiful, yet this dedication is the closest Cleopatra gets to resembling an acceptable Renaissance woman. She lacks nearly all of the qualities Plutarch describes.

Beyond being pitiful, this Cleopatra has a jealous streak that makes her seem even more desperate for the attention of her lover. Whenever Antony leaves, Cleopatra becomes moody and downright cruel. When Cleopatra discovers that Antony has been wed to Octavia, Cleopatra attacks the messenger, eventually drawing a knife in her anger, claiming, "Rogue, thou hast lived too long" (II.v. 73). The innocent man receives a sound beating from the Queen. Cleopatra forces the messenger to lie about Antony's new wife just to save himself from being beaten further. This Cleopatra has no concern for truth; she pays the messenger to lie. She merely desires to hear what would make her the most happy.

Soon after learning of her husband's marriage, Cleopatra decides that she must know how Octavia looks. Plutarch mentions that Octavia is the greater beauty. Apparently, the Queen feels that to keep her lover, she must look better than his new wife. Again, the poor messenger is a victim of Cleopatra's questioning. In this scene,

the messenger has learned that Cleopatra has little concern for the truth, and is more interested in hearing what she desires to hear. The messenger answers all of Cleopatra's questions as he believes she would like to hear, and when he does not know what the Queen desires, he adds a comment that will save him from another beating:

Cleo: He hair, what color?
 Mess: Brown, madam: and her forehead
 As low as she would wish it. (III.iii.32-34)

A low forehead was considered a deformity in the age of Cleopatra. Shakespeare's Cleopatra has little concern for truth. The Queen merely wants to feel good about herself, and more importantly, better than all of Antony's other women. Most of Cleopatra's countrymen seem to be afraid of the Queen and have become little more than "yes" men.

Plutarch's description of the couple's relationship places Antony in the submissive and destructive role. Plutarch begins his section describing the relationship by stating, "[Cleopatra] did waken and stir up many vices yet hidden in him, and were never seen to any: and if any spark of goodness or hope of rising were left in him, Cleopatra quenched it straight, and made it worse than before" (Plutarch, 32). In this passage, Plutarch does not place blame on Cleopatra. He states that the relationship between the two brought out Antony's true self, which eventually led to the death of both Antony and Cleopatra. Antony's love ruined him, but this defect in

Antony did not reflect poorly upon Cleopatra in Lives; instead it illustrated the power of the Queen. Plutarch claims that Antony gave Cleopatra “unmeasurable honors,” to the point that Romans were quite offended” (Plutarch, 48-49). Plutarch makes sure that his readers know that not only did Antony play the submissive role in private, but also in the public realm.

In Cleopatra’s most impressive show of power over Antony, in both texts, she influences his military decisions. In his time, Antony had proved himself as one of the most brilliant military men in the world, yet a considerably less experienced woman influences his military decisions. Cleopatra convinces Antony to battle Caesar by sea rather than land. Cleopatra claims that Caesar expects Antony to fight by land because of his great strength by land. In turn Cleopatra feels that Caesar dares Antony to fight by sea. In Antony’s life, he had not made a worse decision. How could he listen to a female with little military experience for tips on fighting a battle against his fiercest opponent? The answer is simple: Antony truly believed that Cleopatra would offer sound advice, due to her vast political experience. Some would like to blame the Queen for this unfortunate decision, but that would be ridiculous. Logically, only a fool would take advice from someone not fit to give advice. For this reason, Plutarch portrays Antony as a man with poor judgement, but not a victim of Cleopatra’s seductive powers.

In Plutarch’s discussion of Antony’s decision to listen to Cleopatra, he places no blame. The author explains that “[Antony] could see not king of all the kings their

confederates that Cleopatra was inferior unto, either for wisdom or judgement, see that long before she had wisely governed so great a realm as Egypt; and besides that, she had learned to manage great affairs” (Plutarch, 78). Plutarch believes that Antony made an educated decision rather than being swayed by the love he had for Cleopatra. Historically, Cleopatra had extensive governmental experience, making her a well-educated leader, one that deserves respect, which is what Antony gave her in this particular situation. Plutarch concludes his discussion of this incident by noting that Antony was predestined to “fall into Octavius Caesar’s Hands” (Plutarch, 78). This statement is one of the reasons I chose not to include Plutarch’s text in the section of the history of Cleopatra.

William Shakespeare includes this scene in his historical tragedy, but portrays the decision differently. In the drama, Antony listens to Cleopatra yet turns on her the moment his quest ends unsuccessfully. Initially, Antony fully agrees with Cleopatra’s advice. Candidus asks why Antony has decided to fight by sea and the hero answers: “For that he dares us to ‘t” (III.vii. 29). Nowhere, before the battles, does Antony mention that the decision to fight by sea came for Cleopatra. He assumes all of the credit. Once the battles begin, Antony turns on his lover and the insults mount, until Antony claims, “All is lost; / This foul Egyptian hath betrayed me: . . . Triple-turn’d whore! . . . O this false soul of Egypt! This grave charm, / Whose eye beck’d forth my wars and call’d them home, / Whose bosom was my crownet, my chief end” (IV. Xii. 9-26). When Shakespeare’s Antony turns on Cleopatra, he refuses any responsibility

for his actions. Whether Shakespeare intended to use this incident to make Antony or Cleopatra look badly in the opinion of the readers is not clear. Antony ends the play without the maturity with which he began, and Cleopatra ends her life after being insulted by nearly every Roman character in the play. In turn, where Plutarch used Cleopatra's intelligence to explain a decision, Shakespeare offers no true explanation, only a negative outcome.

Shakespeare does not write of Cleopatra's education and intelligence. In the only instance where Shakespeare considers Cleopatra in intellectual terms, she sends Antony's troops into a doomed battle. For Antony and Cleopatra to be a feminist work, Shakespeare would need to portray Cleopatra as more than a seductive lover. This needed addition to the heroine does not appear in this tragedy. Plutarch discusses the Queen's intellectual capacity, proving that Shakespeare was fully aware of what he wrote, and therefore chose to omit this aspect of the Queen.

Plutarch describes Cleopatra's education as intense, and more extensive than any of the Ptolemys throughout time. In Plutarch's first reference to Cleopatra's cognitive capacity, he mentions that, "she spake unto few barbarous people by interpreter, but made them answer her self, or at the least the most part of them: as the AEtheopians, the Arabians, the Troglodytes, the Hebrews, the Syrians, the Medes, and the Parthians, and to many others also, whose languages she had learned" (Plutarch, 35). Cleopatra learned enough languages that she could discuss politics with both her geographic neighbors and other political powers. This knowledge allowed Cleopatra

an independence that the rest of her family had lived without. Plutarch notes this fact, saying, “the kings of Egypt, could scarce learn the Egyptian tongue only, and many of them forgot to speak the Macedonian” (Plutarch, 36). This note merely alludes to the incompetence of the Ptolemys before Cleopatra. Her family had been a political laughing stock for generations. Cleopatra had overcome this obstacle to triumph as a politician, giving any author an incentive to focus on the educationally determined aspect of this woman.

Plutarch uses Cleopatra’s intelligence to explain why Antony trusted her when making important decisions. When Antony decides to battle by sea, at the suggestion of his lady, Plutarch explains that her intelligence, rather than her sexuality, influenced the decision. Antony had known no better ruler, according to Plutarch, and the hero felt that Cleopatra had given sound advice. Cleopatra has proved herself as an experienced and efficient ruler. During the rule of this famous Queen, Egypt had great wealth and a sound government.

In another example of superior intelligence, Cleopatra uses the captives of her government, for ‘medical testing.’ The ethics of this practice will not receive focus, the importance is on Cleopatra as a tactician. Cleopatra knows that a great knowledge of poisons may prove advantageous for a woman of her power. Cleopatra decided to gather data on the effects of different poisons on men. Plutarch describes her as, “very careful in gathering all sorts of poisons together, to destroy men. Now to make proof of those poisons which made men die with least pain, she tried it upon

condemned men in prison” (Plutarch, 99). Cleopatra then monitored the prisoners’ deaths and focused on the speed of death and amount of pain involved. The Queen discovered that the bite of the asp, “cause[d] only a heaviness of the head” and brought death quickly (Plutarch, 99). This scientific approach to testing poison highlights not only Cleopatra’s intelligence, but her forethought as well. With all of this data collected, the decision of how to commit suicide seemed simple to the Queen. This experiment proved advantageous in many respects, the prison population was reduced, an efficient means of killing enemies was discovered, and in the end, also the most efficient way of killing oneself. Plutarch notes these experiments as important data gathering events and does not cast doubt on either Cleopatra’s motives or practices, thus showing his support for her intellectual endeavors, whereas Shakespeare fails to do more than allude to this important scene.

Lastly, Plutarch emphasizes Cleopatra’s intelligence through her actions. In Cleopatra’s relationship with Antony, many times the Queen found herself in a position to lose all that she had worked for. Though all of this uncertainty, she gained Roman recognition of her reign over Egypt, Cyprus, Lydia, and Lower Syria. Cleopatra took advantage of her situation and became a legitimately respected governor. Cleopatra exudes intelligence when she gains the throne of Egypt for her son Caesarion. After she and Antony lose all they have to Caesar, Cleopatra and Caesar meet privately. In this meeting Caesar agrees to allow Caesarion to rule as king of Egypt, permitting the legacy of the Ptolemys to continue. In a time of turmoil,

Cleopatra thinks of those who depend on her, and argues her case. Unfortunately, after the Queen's death, most of her children are killed, and no Ptolemy would rule Egypt. Shakespeare chooses not to emphasize this scene that illustrates Cleopatra as a maternal and responsible woman, two 'ideal' qualities.

Both texts include Cleopatra's last well planned act, she manages to commit suicide while being heavily guarded. Cleopatra has the asps smuggled to her in captivity and furthermore convinces her guards to allow her into her tomb. Once she and her two ladies in waiting enter the tomb, the asps allow the women to fall painlessly into death. In Plutarch's description of the scene, he claims that Caesar's men, "found the soldiers standing at the gate, mistrusting nothing, nor understanding of her death" (Plutarch, 115). Cleopatra and her women succeeded in their last goal without any difficulties. Only a woman of superior intelligence could fool a number of guards and the most powerful man in the world, Caesar.

Shakespeare chose to include all of these scenes that rely on the intelligence of the heroine. As discussed earlier, Shakespeare maintained an interest in historically set scenes, scenes that correspond to the actual events that take place in Lives. For this reason, it is not clear if Shakespeare desired to alert his readers to the caliber of this woman, or rather desired to relay the events that Plutarch had described. Due to the omissions of the other important examples of Cleopatra's intelligence, it seems more likely that Shakespeare had more interest in historical, scene-for-scene, accuracy.

Another aspect that may influence the argument regarding Shakespeare's omissions is the format in which he wrote. Did the play-format in which the author wrote have an effect on the content? Possibly, Shakespeare would have had to focus more on Cleopatra than he did for the final draft of Antony and Cleopatra. To show Cleopatra speaking many different languages may have been difficult, yet she did converse with both her own countrymen and those of Antony. To note Cleopatra's gift with language would not have been impossible.

The scene that would have been the easiest and most influential to include would have been that of testing poisons on captives. During any of the scenes where Cleopatra worries about the outcome of the battles, or plans her suicide, the playwright could have mentioned the diligence of the Queen in finding a cure for life. The inclusion of the fishing scene can be used as further proof that Shakespeare could have included this scene, and others like it. Thus, the omissions of these scenes seem to be calculated decisions, illustrating Shakespeare's interest in scene inclusion, rather than accuracy regarding the intricacies of the characters. In the end it seems that either Shakespeare did not want to portray Cleopatra as the intelligent queen that she was, or overlooked quite a few aspects of the Queen's personality. Either way, with the exclusions made, the play cannot aptly be described as feminist.

Conclusion:

The juxtaposition of Lives and Antony and Cleopatra allows the reader an understanding of the significance of Shakespeare's omissions from Plutarch's text. By choosing to omit the noted aspects of the author's heroine, Cleopatra, Shakespeare makes his intent clear. Not only did he not intend to write a piece of feminist literature, but even made his final product less feminist than the original. The argument of the patriarchal social norms during the time in which the play was produced keeping the playwright form including the original feminist features of Cleopatra in his text is unrealistic. Shakespeare produced comedies contemporary to this play that many critics characterize as feminist. In these feminist texts, the female lead exudes all of the qualities of an admirable Renaissance woman. In addition, Plutarch produced his work far earlier than Shakespeare did, and his work did not face ridicule for portraying a strong female character. Thus, the omissions were calculated, and affected the final product.

The next logical question is, would the inclusions of all of Plutarch's aspects of Cleopatra have had a positive effect on Shakespeare's drama? Yes. If Shakespeare had allowed Cleopatra to be a more complete character, the reader would have been more informed about the relationship between her and Antony and between her and the other characters in the play. Cleopatra would have been a more acceptable example of an ideal woman if her relationship seemed more legitimate, and she exuded more of the positive qualities that Plutarch admired. If Shakespeare had

included information about Cleopatra's intelligence, the reader would have understood Antony's decision to listen to Cleopatra for military advice. The questions regarding Cleopatra's motives for offering advice would have been remedied as well. Not only that, but in the scenes where Cleopatra stays alone in Egypt, without Antony, the Queen would not have appeared so pitiful, as in the scene where she begs for a drink of mandragora. In Antony and Cleopatra, it seems that Cleopatra has nothing to do with herself when her lover departs. With the inclusion of the "entire" Cleopatra, the reader would realize that Cleopatra was busy ruling a nation, researching weapons (poisons), and making an effort to learn to rule more efficiently. This Cleopatra can be viewed in both Plutarch's Lives and in any historical biography of the Queen. This "entire" Cleopatra would have undeniably altered Shakespeare's work. This altered text would have been a strong feminist piece of literature, making Shakespeare's original manuscript look far from feminist in comparison.

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