

Cleopatra: merely a  
"morsel for a  
monarch?"



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Cleopatra, "Egypt's Queen," is arguably Shakespeare's most resilient and enchanting female protagonist. She is personified as the embodiment of her country, 'the soul of Egypt', and defies the reductive Jacobean "most monster-like" perspective of women. The Renaissance stereotype of the subordinate and inferior female is in total juxtaposition to the possessive and shrewd characteristics that Cleopatra possesses, as she is in fact "a wonderful piece of work."

Cleopatra manipulates her associates and subordinates through her alluring sexuality and 'infinite variety,' transforming Antony into a 'strumpet's fool' and a metaphorical 'doting mallard.' Antony is irrevocably devoted to and captivated by her, exposed through entrapment imagery, 'tied to thy rudder.' In turn, he neglects his Roman duties. Antony, like many of Cleopatra's inferiors, is ultimately a victim of Cleopatra's insatiable lust and magnetic personality, since 'her passions are made of nothing but the finest part of pure love'. The superlative of "finest" also exposes that, through her divine beauty, 'that beggared all description' and "breathless" enticement, she exercises complete domination over her subordinates. Consequently, Cleopatra is most emphatically not a "morsel for a monarch' but an "enchanting queen."

Firstly, through the choric commentary of Philo in the opening scene, Cleopatra's ability to emasculate Antony is captured through the mythological imagery of "Mars." Antony embodies "Mars" as he fought valiantly in battle; however, he has transformed his military past into lustful enthrallment, as a result of his "dotage" for "Egypt's Queen." Philo despairs of Antony neglecting his Roman duties, and reveals his captive existence

under Cleopatra's command. His "goodly eyes" that "glow'd like plated Mars, now bend, now turn," upon the "tawny front" of his "captains heart." Accordingly, this paradoxical simile is evocative of Antony's fatal flaw and is prophetic of his demise due to the life of decadence that has now become fundamental to his existence. The universal imagery of Antony's association with Mars foreshadows his submission to Cleopatra, as she is a physical representation of Venus, and reincarnation of "sweet Isis," "the fancy outwork of nature." Philo and Demetrius' choric function and classical allusions draw attention to Antony's oscillation from "this Herculean Roman" to a disparaging "warrior," who has been deprived of all military qualities to metaphorically become "the bellows and the fan/ To cool a gipsy's lust."

Furthermore, Antony's humiliation is portrayed through stage directions, as Cleopatra "enters alongside [eunuchs fanning her]," indicating his effeminized status. Cleopatra admits through a bawdy, phallic innuendo that she has "no interest in anything a eunuch can do," and that it is "a good thing being Castrated" so they can "concentrate better on her needs." Therefore, the depiction of this "Eastern Star" as "a morsel for a monarch" is utterly unjust, as her excessive power challenged the patriarchal society. Furthermore, Cleopatra's sovereignty is exemplified in "Alexandria," a predominantly feminine sphere, where she can establish her omnipotence. Elizabeth I, the "virgin queen of England," herself employed phallogocentric imagery to express power and supremacy. In the famous "Tilbury Speech," Elizabeth confessed that although she had the "body but of a weak and feeble woman" she had the "heart and stomach of a King and a King of

England too." Comparable to Cleopatra, the two domineering female leaders use the imagery of a masculine transfiguration to symbolize supremacy.

Consequently, Shakespeare's antithetical structure allows the audience to interpret the heavily contrasted empires of Rome and Egypt. Cleopatra's incredible emotional vicissitudes and at times barbaric style, "I will give thy bloody teeth," allow Cleopatra to embody the stereotypical attributes of a wanton Egyptian. Furthermore, the employment of the plosive "bloody" indicates her loquacious speech, which Shakespeare created to represent her antithetical nature. Her satirical scorning of Antony challenges his military ability through the paradoxical use of the superlative of "the greatest soldier in the world," who she claims has "Art turn'd the greatest liar." Cleopatra's hyperbolic language and imperative questioning "where is he?" force Antony to speak in short, succinct, stichomythic sentences - "Most sweet queen" - evocative of his failure to express any form of political conviction. Furthermore, he depicts himself as "thy soldier servant" using sibilance to draw attention to Cleopatra's political and emotional domination, as she actively tries to usurp Antony's control.

In even more ways, Cleopatra can be compared to Elizabeth I, who manipulated the prospect of royal alliance and internal leverage to her convenience. Elizabeth remained constantly alert to the frequently changing European instability, and furthermore capitalized on opportunities that arrived, such as Queen Mary Stuart's papal opposition to the Anglican Church. Elizabeth I transformed Catholic England into a more reformed, Protestant country. Yet Cleopatra's shrewdness supported a very different values system, at least for Shakespeare: the Egyptian culture of decadence,  
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self pleasure and unfettered passion is viewed as a threat by Caesar and his disciplined army of political strategists. Cleopatra's passionate rage challenges Caesar's militant ability, and ironically she alludes to his effeminacies, undermining his authority in a satirical tone by describing " the scarce bearded Caesar." This metaphorical language is also characteristic of her scathing stratagem to " play one scene/ Of excellent dissembling." Cleopatra uses the imperative language " do this, and this", employing repetition as a means of primarily conveying negative connotations surrounding the inferior and subsidiary leader.

Cleopatra is unquestionably not a " morsel for a monarch." Contrastingly, she possesses the power to " overtop them all," influence her fellow rulers, and subsequently control the audience through her unrelenting tenacity and emphatic character. Her subversive nature contrasts to the docile and obedient women constituted in the " Homily of the State of Matrimony," the Elizabethan central statement on the duties of Husbands and Wives, in which women are erroneously ridiculed as the " weakest vessel", " for the woman is a weak creature, not endued with like strength and mind" of a man. Moreover, Cleopatra is a metaphorical " thunderbolt," whose lack of temperance and moderation simply conveys her deceptive and cunning political personality. Ultimately, Cleopatra is precocious actress who uses her emotions as a metaphorical weapon as a means of gaining control.