

To what extent is
shakespeare's
portrayal of cleopatra
accurate?



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While some individuals remember Cleopatra as a queen of Egypt with leadership skills better than any man, others emphasise her seduction of Julius Caesar and Mark Antony (Harold et. al, n. d). In his play *The Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra*, William Shakespeare manages to portray both these aspects of Cleopatra's personality, which has contributed to debates over whether Shakespeare intended the play to be read as the betrayal and subsequent fall of a great general, or as an epic love story (Fitz, 1997). Shakespeare highlights Cleopatra's power as a seductress and demonstrates how she was able to use her attractiveness to manipulate powerful men. He also portrays her as a strong woman through poetic descriptions of her personality, but contrasts these with moments of insecurity and weakness which emphasises her humanity to appeal to a patriarchal audience.

Shakespeare chooses to emphasise Cleopatra's power as a seductress right from the beginning of the play. It opens with soldiers Demetrius and Philio discussing how Antony's love for Cleopatra has turned him into "strumpet's fool" (Shakespeare, *Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra*, Scene 1 Line 2) "his goodly eyes, that o'er the files and musters of war, have glowed like plated Mars, now bend, now turn, the office and devotion of their view upon a tawny front. His captain's heart, which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst the buckles on his breast, reneges all temper and is become the bellows and the fan to cool a gypsy's lust" (act 1, scene 1, lines 2-10). It is clear that they believe that Cleopatra has ruined Antony by manipulating him to focus on her, rather than his duties as a general. Biographer Plutarch supports this idea by writing that "for someone of Antony's nature, the love of Cleopatra that befell him was the final ruin that aroused and stirred up many feelings

that had been hidden and dormant in him and, if anything good or protective remained, obliterated and destroyed it" (Plutarch, Life of Antony).

Cleopatra's hold on Antony was so substantial that in the play Antony compares it to "strong Egyptian fetters" (act 1, scene 2, line 128).

Shakespeare describes the first time the couple met to emphasise that Antony was captivated with Cleopatra right from the start, and his description is very similar to Plutarch's recount. Shakespeare insinuates that Cleopatra's beauty was a large part of why she was able to seduce Antony so quickly. For example, in the play Cleopatra says that she was once "a morsel for a monarch" (act 1, scene 5, line 36) with "a hand that kings have lipped and trembled kissing" (act 1, scene five, lines 35-36) and Enobarbus describes her as "a wonderful piece of work" (scene 2, line 170) with "delicate cheeks" (act 2, scene 2, line 241). However, ancient sources indicate that it was Cleopatra's personality, rather than her looks, that seduced Antony. While historian Cassius Dio describes her as "was a particularly beautiful woman...she also had an elegant voice and she knew how to use her charms to be attractive to everyone" (Cassius, 202AD) Plutarch says that Antony was "struck by her intelligence as well as her appearance, was captivated by her as if he were a young lad...for indeed her own beauty, as they say, was not, in and of itself, completely incomparable, nor was it the sort that would astound those who saw her; but interaction with her was captivating, and her appearance, along with her persuasiveness in discussion and her character that accompanied every interchange, was stimulating" (Plutarch, Life of Antony).

As well as showing Cleopatra's seduction of Antony, Shakespeare references her relationship with Caesar to show her promiscuity, such as when Pompey teases Antony by saying "but first, or last, your fine Egyptian cookery shall have the fame. I have heard that Julius Caesar grew fat with feasting there" (act 2, scene 6, lines 81-83). Throughout the play, Cleopatra is referred to as a "whore" (act 2, scene 6, line 76) (act 4, scene 12, line 15), and even Cleopatra's lady-in-waiting insinuates that she is promiscuous by responding with "I sing but after you" (act 1, scene 5, line 87) when Cleopatra becomes annoyed at her for praising Caesar rather than Antony. The emphasis on Cleopatra's promiscuity indicates that Shakespeare was heavily influenced by Romans who wrote of Cleopatra during her lifetime and in the century after her death. Instigated by Octavian, Roman propaganda portrayed her as a "dangerous harlot who employed sex, witchcraft and cunning as she grasped for power beyond what was proper for a woman" (Crawford, 2007). This is referenced in the play itself when Pompey says "let witchcraft join with beauty, lust with both, tie up the libertine in a field of feasts, keep [Antony's] brain fuming" (act 2, scene 1, lines 27-29). Further evidence is found in Horace's Ode XXXVII, more commonly referred to as The Ode to Cleopatra, where he describes her as a "maddened queen...plotting the Capitol's and the empire's ruin, with her crowd of deeply-corrupted creatures sick with turpitude, she, violent with hope of all kinds, and intoxicated by Fortune's favour" (Kline, 2003). It is evident from this extract that the Romans were fond of portraying Cleopatra not just as promiscuous, but as violent and power-hungry. Shakespeare does the same, adding to the theory that The Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra is based mainly on Roman recounts.

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When describing Cleopatra's personality, Shakespeare likens it to a great force of nature through the use of descriptions such as "we cannot call her winds and waters sighs and tears, 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 the Jove" (act 1, scene 2, lines 163-167). One of her most prominent attributes in the play is her hunger for power, which Shakespeare demonstrates through placing emphasis on Antony's status as a general and showing how he can give her large pockets of land. In the play, this is heavily contrasted with moments of weakness and insecurity for Cleopatra, particularly concerning Antony's wife Fulvia and her fears around whether Antony truly loves her. Cleopatra's very first line in the play is "if it be love indeed, tell me how much" (act 1, scene 1, line 15), demanding Antony to tell her how much he loves her. She fears that marrying Antony will make her "seem the fool [she] is not" (act 1, scene 1, line 48), since Antony married Fulvia without being in love with her. Plutarch places heavy emphasis on Cleopatra's personality, saying that throughout her reign she relied on "herself and the charm and magic that attended her" (Plutarch, Life of Antony) to get what she desired, and according to Cassius her awareness that "she was beautiful to look at and to listen to" (Cassius, 202AD) meant that she "thought it appropriate for her to meet with Caesar" (Cassius, 202AD). This contradicts Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra in her insecure moments; however Shakespeare may have chosen to include them as commentary of Cleopatra's struggles being a female Pharaoh in a patriarchal world and to humanise her. This contradicts Roman propaganda which aimed to portray Cleopatra "as a great enemy to make [her defeat] look like a great victory" (Tyldesley, 2008), however it may have appealed to <https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-is-shakespeares-portrayal-of-cleopatra-accurate/>

audience of Elizabethan England which was a greatly patriarchal society (Shepard, 2000). Portraying Cleopatra solely as a strong, independent woman would likely have been controversial during this time, so Shakespeare chooses to insinuate that Cleopatra's business "wholly depends on [Antony's] abode" (act 1, scene 2, line 191). This sentiment is echoed by historians who affirm that if Cleopatra had not seduced Antony and Caesar they would not have "discussed foreign policy with her...due to her second class status as a female leader" (Harold et. al, n. d), but the alliances formed with Antony and Caesar throughout their relationship with Cleopatra were beneficial to Egypt as a whole.

It is evident that Cleopatra is surrounded by "fog of fiction and vituperation which has surrounded her personality from her own lifetime onwards" (Brown, 2011). Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra* demonstrates this due to Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra, which is accurate to a medium extent. While some of what Shakespeare says is supported by ancient sources, such as the recount of Cleopatra's and Antony's first meeting which is strongly supported by Plutarch, it is evident that *The Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra* was greatly influenced by Roman propaganda with a strong bias. Subsequently, Shakespeare portrays Cleopatra as promiscuous and power-hungry while showing her weak moments in an attempt to appeal to the audience of a patriarchal Elizabethan England. This warped Cleopatra's true character and results in a portrayal that is not entirely accurate.

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