

Frailty, Thy Name is Cleopatra!

Prof. L. Lakshmanan & Ms. N. Karpaha, M.A., M.Phil. NET



Julius and Cleopatra

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Abstract

Cleopatra's sexuality is not a thing to be locked up, but it is celebrated as a positive force.
"Age cannot wither her
Nor custom stale her infinite variety. Other women cloy

The appetites they feed , but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies”.

Antony’s Lieutenant **Enobarbus** describes the character of Cleopatra. A highly attractive woman who once seduced **Julius Caesar**. **Cleopatra**, is a **beautiful queen of Egypt**, with charm and passion, and is a complex character of constantly changing moods. The hasty decision of Cleopatra in the battle field brings disgrace to Mark Antony. At the end, she killed herself by making the poisonous snake “asp” to bite her. In this paper the true colour of Cleopatra will be shown with internal and external evidences in the play *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Key Words: *Antony and Cleopatra*, Queen of Egypt, Infinite variety, Asp,

1. Introduction

Of all the characters of William Shakespeare found in his drama, the most enchanting, full- fledged and well chiseled character is Cleopatra – the queen of Egypt. Shakespeare has portrayed her as having “**Infinite variety**”, and as one of the most complex and fully developed female character. She was a woman of surpassing beauty and a most charming personality (1). Julius Caesar followed Pompey into Egypt, where he met and eventually fell in love with Cleopatra (Fig.1.). Cleopatra had herself wrapped inside a rolled rug which was smuggled into Alexandria and delivered to Caesar. When the rug was opened, Cleopatra rolled out and immediately charmed Caesar. Cassius Dio (1916) describes Cleopatra's charisma this way, "For she was a woman of surpassing beauty, and at that time, when she was in the prime of her youth, she was most striking; possessed a most charming voice and knowledge of how to make herself agreeable to every one (1).

In 47 B.C. Cleopatra gave birth to a son, whom she names Caesarion. However, Caesar never acknowledged the boy was his offspring, and historical debate continues over whether he was indeed his father. Cleopatra went to Rome with Caesar, but returned to Egypt in 44 B.C., following his assassination.

2. Royal Wench

Agrippa (a minor character) comments about Cleopatra as “Royal Wench” (seductress).
“She made great Caesar Lay his sword to bed. He plowed (Lured) and she cropped”

3. Lecherous - Often Given to Sexual Desires

Following the assassination of Julius Caesar, Mark Antony defeats Brutus and Cassius and becomes one of the three rulers of the Roman Empire, together with Octavius Caesar and Lepidus, and is responsible for the eastern part of the empire. He falls in love with Cleopatra, the Queen of Egypt. Antony saw eternal bliss in Cleopatra’s lips and eyes, bliss in the arch of her eye brows. All her parts seemed angelic to him.

Antony & Cleopatra is a tragedy written by William Shakespeare. This tragedy is mainly set in Rome and Egypt. The plot is based on the relationship between Mark Antony and Cleopatra. Antony describes Cleopatra as a woman of “**Infinite variety**” as one of the most complex and fully developed female characters. She is frequently **vain** and **histrionic** enough to provide an audience material almost to scorn her, and yet at the same time, Shakespeare invests her and Antony with tragic grandeur.

4. Cleopatra through the Eyes of the Other Characters

In this write up, we try to find out the true colour of Cleopatra through the other characters of the play and bring to conclusion our views about Cleopatra.

Octavius Caesar finds Cleopatra as
“ But all the charms of Love
Salt Cleopatra, soften thy manned Lips.
.....
Ever still a ‘lethe’d dullness”.
-Act II , scene.11 -19-27.

5. A Moody Food

Antony begs Cleopatra: ‘Cleopatra, gave me some music, moody food of us that trade is love.

(Music feeds the melancholy moods of us, lovers)

(Act II, sec 11-1-2).

6. An Entertainer

“She (Cleopatra) did hang a salt fish on his hook which he with fervency drew up”.

My bluest reins to kiss – a hand that kings have lipped and tremble kissing’. – (II sec.6.)

7. A Brave Warrior

Cleopatra replies to Enobarbus when she was told not to go to war in which Antony’s attention would be diverted.

Cleopatra: **Like a brave warrior...**

She says, “And as the president of my kingdom will appear there for a man, speak out against it’ I will not stay behind” – Act III, sc.7. 11-18 -20.

8. Flirting Becomes Fatal

Cleopatra sends a false message that she is dead when she comes back from the battle field. Gullible Antony believes the message.

9. Triple Turned Whore

Antony: All is lost! This treacherous Egyptian has betrayed me. My fleet has surrendered to the enemy. You can see them over there throwing their hats up in the air and drinking together like long lost friends. Three-time traitor and whore! It’s you who have sold me to this youth, Caesar. Now my war is only with you. Tell the army to flee. Revenge on Cleopatra will be my last act. Order them to escape. Go!

I am conqueror of myself – Act IV scene, 12.

10. Importune Death

“I am dying, Egypt, dying. Only

I here importune death awhile, until
Of many thousand kisses the poor last
I lay upon thy lips”.

11. Welcome Death

The death is welcomed by Antony to ease his melancholy.

12. Antony

And welcome, welcome! Die when thou hast lived.
Quicken with kissing. Had my lips that power,
Thus would I wear them out?

(Act Iv. Scene. 15.)

13. The Death of Half the World

This isn't the death of one man. It's the death of half the world; therefore, the world should have been fractured & confused, sending lions into the streets and citizens into lion dens.

14. Filial love of Cleopatra to Her Son Caesarians

If your master wants a queen to beg from him, you should tell him that a queen will beg for no less than a kingdom.

-Act V, scene 2.

15. Envious

In Egypt, Cleopatra learns of Antony's marriage to Octavia and takes her furious revenge upon the messenger that brings her the news.

16. All for Love

The story of Antony & Cleopatra is one that is incredibly famous in English Literature. Antony sacrificed everything he had, sending the Roman Empire into complete turmoil, all for

love of Cleopatra - the queen of Egypt and Antony's lover - a highly attractive woman who once seduced Julius Caesar. She caught Antony like a fish.

17. Volatile Personality

In matters of love as in all things Cleopatra favours high drama; her emotions are volatile as they are theatrical, and regardless of whether her audience is her hand maid or the emperor of Rome, she always offers a top-notch performance.

18. Genuine Nature

Although she has conflicting emotions she has a genuine love for **Antony**. He becomes mad after Cleopatra and neglects his legitimate duty.

Antony: "Let Rome in Tiber melt and the wide arch of the ranged empire fall. Here is my space. Kingdoms are clay, our dungy earth alike feeds beast as man"

- (-Act 1 sc.1-L-34-36)

19. Egyptian Whore

Philo (a silhouette character) comments about Antony:

"His heart used to burst the buckles on his breast plate in great fights, but now he's lost all Temperance and delegates his heart to satisfying the lust of an Egyptian whore.

And is become the bellows and the fan

To cool a gypsy's lust" (Act.1 sc.1 ll.9-10)

20. T. S. Eliot

The famous poet saw her as "no wielder of power "but rather that her "**devouring sexuality**" diminishes her power –a temptress - she is an object rather than a person - calls her a "thing"

21. Cowardice - Cleopatra

In the battle of Actium, Cleopatra flees in a barge. She pledges her fleet to aid Antony. However during the battle of Actium she flees with her sixty ships and Antony follows her

leaving his forces to ruin, ashamed of what he has done for the love of Cleopatra. The cowardice of Cleopatra has made Antony a coward.

22. Betrayal

Antony loses the battle as his troop's desert *en masse* and denounces Cleopatra. "This foul Egyptian hath betrayed me". Antony resolves to kill her for the treasury.

23. Flirting Fetches Fatal Day

To win back the love of Antony, Cleopatra sends him word that she killed herself, dying with his name on her lips. She locks herself in her monument and awaits his arrival. Her plan becomes fateful. Antony decides that his own life is no longer worth living after the death of Cleopatra. He kills himself. He is hoisted up to her in her monument and dies in her arms.

24. The Pathetic Death of Cleopatra - a Cruel Way to Die

She has asked her maid to bring the most poisonous snake "asp". She puts her hand in the basket and allows it to bite her. The bite of an asp (Fig.2) is slow and painful, but her death is peaceful and quick. Two of her handmaidens had also committed suicide along with her. One of her handmaidens was still alive and engaged in arranging the queen's crown on her head before succumbing to poison - not a description which accords with the effects of an asp bite when Cleopatra's suicide was discovered. Both lovers are buried nearby, together.

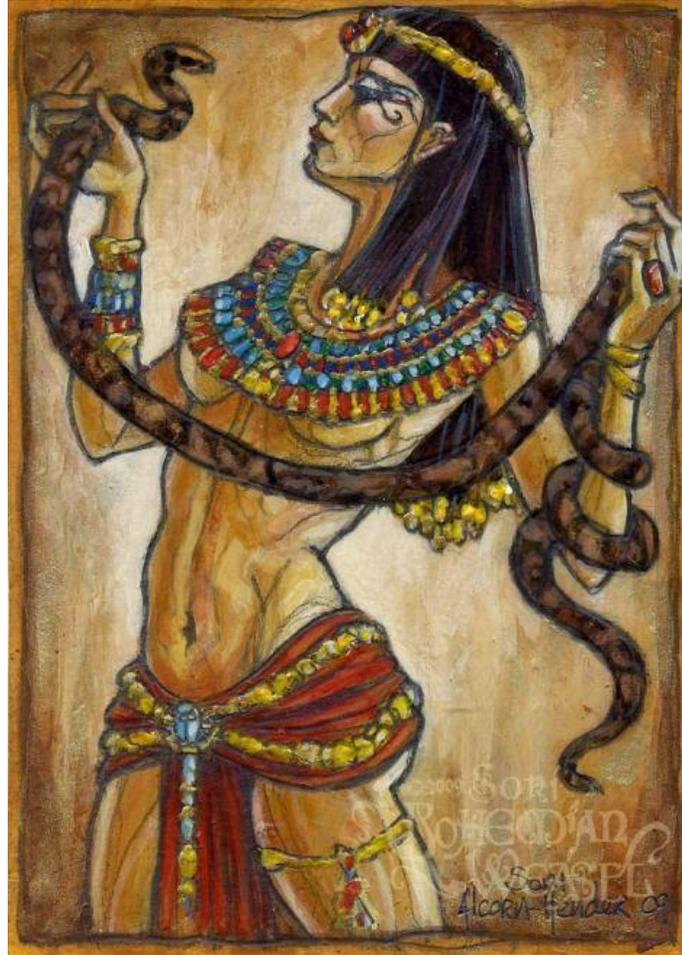


Fig. 2. The death of Cleopatra with the bite of an Asp

Courtesy: <https://i.pinimg.com/736x/8e/e5/6e/8ee56edaac221135a85aa957de857a16--egyptian-beauty-egyptian-queen.jpg>

25. Conclusion

Of all the female characters portrayed by William Shakespeare, the strongest, most awe-inspiring female character is Cleopatra. But the other characters declare Cleopatra a ‘lustful gypsy’, ‘a wrangling queen’, an ‘Egyptian dish’, (II.vi..123) and a ‘whore’,(III.vi..67), ‘salty Cleopatra’ (II.vi.21.), ‘an enchantress’, and the ‘noble ruin of her magic’(III.x..18).

However, she is the embodiment of all things - beauty and ugliness, virtue and vice. Cleopatra leaves her onlookers tearful and breathless.

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Prof.L. Lakshmanan, &
English Department /HOD
Annai Dora College of Nursing
Seva Nilayam, Theni– 625 512
Tamilnadu
India
laxmanmegalai@gmail.com

Ms. N. Karpaha, M.A., M.Phil., NET
Assistant Professor Department of English
Holy Cross College
Tiruchirappalli - 620 002
Tamilnadu
India
karpaha.anusiya1993@gmail.com