

# The Tempest of Tempting a Temptress: An Analysis of Cleopatra's Growing Dominance With Antony's Shrinking Masculinity Present in William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*

Amanda M. Rogus

Mary Baldwin University, Staunton, VA

When analyzing the early modern dramatic canon, power and dominance often are viewed as masculine traits. Most men have the powerful position of the household and women serve to be their subservient wives. However, Shakespeare enjoys putting pressure of this notion in many of his dramas. Working to break the demeaning mold of women, he tends to situate female characters in such a way that challenges the social norms of the time. Specifically, looking at the world through Cleopatra's eyes, she completely confronts societal expectations, as her behavior in Shakespeare's play challenges early modern gender normativity. The best way to acknowledge this gender role swapping of sorts is to analyze the texts from which Shakespeare obtained these ideas. In the following essay, I will seek to expand on the elements that break gender expectation in literature, specifically utilizing the contents of works that somehow inspired or compliment Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Using Cleopatra and Antony as the main characters to analyze, I will use the work of Plutarch and Milton to survey the themes of temptation and female dominance. I will then further examine these feminist ideals through a close reading of a passage from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. The conclusion of this piece will take the literary analysis and close reading into account as a pair to justify an analysis of Cleopatra's more masculine stance seen throughout Shakespeare's work.

*Keywords:* Cleopatra, Shakespeare, temptation, gender normativity, Plutarch, Milton

## A Brief Introduction—Dominance and Power: A Breakdown of the Central Concepts in This Shakespeare Analysis

The Oxford English Dictionary defines dominance as “paramount influence or power, ascendancy, dominion, and sway” (OED, 2017). Throughout many of the literary explorations present in the early modern canon, power and dominance have often been placed into the hands of the masculine heroes with subservient women serving as their wives. However, some of the most fascinating female characters refuse to follow this demeaning picture, selecting to explore the temptations around them. Cleopatra, for instance, is one of the most intriguing and complex characters in Shakespeare's canon due to her choice to behave in a manner that challenged gender norms; thus discovering the deep power resonant in the feminine form. Throughout this

---

Amanda M. Rogus, MLitt candidate, Department of Shakespeare and Performance, Mary Baldwin University, Staunton, VA.

analysis, I will seek to expand on this concept, showing the clever nature of her character to suggest that sometimes what is thought to truly represent masculine strength can present itself in the petite stature of the female body—as seen in Cleopatra’s suggested small figure, juxtaposed amidst the manly powerful sexual essence she utilizes for her own gain. To clarify these points, I have split my argument up into three sections. Throughout part one of this piece, I will utilize the arguments present in other works of literary scholarship, to survey these themes of temptation and female dominance. In part two, I will strive to illustrate these ideas through a close reading of a passage from Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*. Finally, I will conclude my argument discussing these first sections in a literary argument to tie these various ideas together.

### **Part I: Survey and Summary—Plutarch’s Views of Roman Masculinity and Female Dominance in Milton’s *Paradise Lost***

Throughout the following survey section, I will seek to outline the female evolvment that occurs in Eve’s change in characterization present in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, while also commenting on Plutarch’s *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, which many early modern scholars feel was one of the main sources with which Shakespeare formulated his play of *Antony and Cleopatra*. By examining these two works in the following collection of scholarly sources, one may gain insight into the background of the dominant female identity and the foreground, by which, Shakespeare may have sculpted his tragedy, through the Roman view of masculinity described in Plutarch’s work.

To begin, Plutarch’s text, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, commonly shortened to “Parallel Lives”<sup>1</sup> is comprised of twenty-three biographies of famous men. In Plutarch’s discussion, he takes the time to examine the qualities that each man possesses, placing them in a numeric order according to these masculine qualities.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the text, these qualities seemed to be measured primarily by experience and leadership skill, though there is no scale present to clarify this specifically, so this is merely conjecture. Within Plutarch’s examination of these infamous men, he takes the time to examine the strength shown in battle or the guidance shown through his leadership to expand upon the gentleman’s masculine essence. Looking specifically at the Sir Thomas North’s edition, which was translated from a former French translation of Plutarch’s masterpiece, the text describes Marcus Antonius, as “embodying the abilities of a weaker gendered [...] vessel [...] by carrying only the weight that supported his own burden” (North, 2015, p. 356). After examining the footnote on this page, specifying that the term “gendered” was in fact claiming him to present the lack of strength of the female sex, I became intrigued by Plutarch’s gendering ideology (North, 2015, p. 357). From this claim, I viewed Marcus Antonius’ characterization as selfish and immature for selecting to only take on masculine strength of his personage when he needed to support himself. Thus showing Antonius to embody not only a weaker physique with regard to the examination of masculine strength, but also a lack of power from a leadership stance. Due to these being the two primary qualities present throughout Plutarch’s hierarchy of masculinity, it is no wonder he is positioned towards the beginning of the set of men discussed throughout the text, as they are ordered from least to most masculine within the document.

Moreover, Plutarch’s work also provides a historical basis framing the story by which many other literary pieces were molded. In these sections, subdivided in the order placed by the masculine hierarchy described

<sup>1</sup> For the remainder of this article, this shorted title will be used in reference to this text.

<sup>2</sup> Please note that the translation referenced in this section is Sir Thomas North’s translation of the text, selected after viewing several versions of this portion of text this phrasing helped to best explain Plutarch’s masculine hierarchy.

above, each individual's family tree is tracked and the evolvement of the character is spelled out. In Dryden's version of the text, each individual is further judged according to the structure of Roman masculinity with regard to familial growth and previous leadership in the bloodline. Essentially, prior to defining the qualities of the man during his life achievements, he gets initially framed by the men that came before him. In Mark Beck's book, *A Companion to Plutarch*, an entire section is dedicated to male familial stance, followed immediately by male eroticism. In the transition from one section to another, Beck elucidates on this pairing of ideas claiming, "the stance from which the men gained their masculinity frames the sexual nature of the offspring" (Beck, 2014, p. 13). Basically, this enables the father and son argument of similarities to sculpt the idea of what a man is in the individual's mind when examining the familial similarities that genetically connect father and son.

Furthermore, throughout Beck's book, the sexual section makes several interesting comments regarding Marcus Antonius's sexuality. Suggesting him to be both "equipped with the legacy of sexual strength" and "unable to maintain power in his relationship with women" shows natural ability to genetically enhance his sexual nature of masculinity juxtaposed amidst a lack of assurance of these qualities forcing a lack of confidence (Beck, 2014, pp. 45, 67).<sup>3</sup> Though sexual nature is not necessarily framed as one of Plutarch's ways of depicting manhood from an ordering sense, it is clear that this quality was something to judge masculine strength by as, Plutarch's whole text discussing the nobility seeks to depict these masculine warriors from a place of strength and dignity.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, Plutarch's sexual outline of these men is briefly discussed in communication specialist, Bonnie J. Dow's book, *The SAGE Handbook of Gender and Communication*. In this text, Dow suggests that Plutarch frames the male side of the historical spectrum from a realm that "delves outside [of...the] relationship besides the examination of sex appeal" (Dow, 2011, p. 147). Selecting to comment on the primary component of the sexual nature of men truly brings up a fascinating question with regard to the frame structure of Plutarch's work, which rarely brings up the relationship to the wife. This is an interesting claim, especially since the Roman view of masculinity, as defined by masculine Biblical studies scholar, Colleen Conway's article, "How to Be a Man in the Roman World", states a need to "respect the wife based on the Christian principles of remaining true to a singular woman after matrimony" (Conway, 2017, p. 6). With the understanding of this standard, Plutarch's view of the familial structure may be helpful when examining the father-son relationship similarities and how this affects adult romances.

Similarly, this becomes an interesting idea when viewing Simon Watson's, a behavior psychologist who specializes in examining trends of masculinity, statements in regard to Plutarch's claims in his article, "Constructing Masculinity in Plutarch's *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*". In this scholarly article, Watson views the piece as a work of literary criticism and relates the behavioral patterns in psychology to these claims. Looking particularly at Marcus Antonius' section, Watson suggests the idea of "learned helplessness [coming from his...] family structure during childhood and during his adult life" (Watson, 2012, p. 32). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, learned helplessness in a psychiatric sense is "a condition in which a person suffers from a sense of powerlessness [...] it is thought to be one of the underlying causes of depression" (OED, 2017). With this background and the historical information gathered from Plutarch's

<sup>3</sup> This becomes an interesting idea to discuss later in the argument, as it is clear his lack of masculinity in his relationships with women do not span from lack of sexual attraction in the familial line.

<sup>4</sup> Though this is not a direct quote, these ideas are posed in the Chronological Plutarch introduction found in "The Life of Cicero" from the Clarendon history series.

*Parallel Lives*, it is quite clear that Marcus Antonius' life involved several powerful members of his family, which weakened his confidence within the sexual and leadership spheres.

Now that one has a basis in the understanding of the historical strength, or lack thereof, rather, in Marcus Antonius's character from Plutarch's text and critical theory that connects with this work, it is important that the next area of research involves the female form.<sup>5</sup> By obtaining this outline of both gender forms in alternate literary sources, this will strengthen the depth of discussion when later examining the gender scale in *Antony and Cleopatra*. In order to examine these ideas, which will assist in the analysis of Cleopatra's character in the following sections, the argument must switch focus with regard to genre of literary criticism, as I move to examine Eve's role in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Temptation is a major motif present throughout *Paradise Lost*, in which a snake slithering around the tree prompts Eve to take a bite out of the forbidden fruit. Unlike the Biblical story, the reader gets to see the evolution of Eve's character as she ends up far less innocent and naïve than one may surmise from *Bible's* portrayal of a girl who betrayed God's wishes. Eve's selection to bite into this apple exists as a moment of giving into temptation. In *Paradise Lost*, the devil masquerades as a snake to pull Eve away from Adam, making her an individual who is able to make her own choices without Adam being a part of the selection process.<sup>6</sup> Essentially, *Paradise Lost* shows the evolution of an innocent woman to the moment of nakedness caused by the loss of innocence, as a result of giving into the devil's temptation.

When first examining the role of gender in *Paradise Lost* one of the main concepts that comes up in the literary research focuses on the feminist nuisances present in Eve's final speech. Upon initial reading of Milton's text, this moment seems to be Eve's choice period where she could easily take ownership for the incident at the tree. She instead presents a confident Eve who seems far less apologetic than one may expect. The Eve at the start of *Paradise Lost* would not be nearly as sassy in her response, but the Eve at the conclusion, forms her own manner of addressing the situation with respect for her newfound freedom. Patrick McGrath discusses this choice to form her own nature at the end of Milton's novel in his article, "Formal Resistance: Gender Hierarchy and Eve's Final Speech in *Paradise Lost*." This article suggests that every woman has the innate motivation to break free from her partner to explore the world herself suggesting that:

Eve's final speech [...] shares the cry of all women, [...] there is an unapologetic quality to her character that confidently owns what has made her separate from the man [...]; she owns her wrongs in a way that pleases her prerogative. (McGrath, 2013, p. 26)

By articulating the desire to break free in a way that suits the woman's personal needs, these comments about Eve provide a nice basis to understand that separation from woman's connection with man at every moment, and in some ways, a freeing quality for the woman to make her own decisions.

Literary theorist, Lana Cable would most likely argue against these insights, claiming Eve's power to come from the attachment to Adam. In Cable's article, "Gender and the Power of Relationship: "United as One Individual Soul in *Paradise Lost*," the central discussion of Eve's power in the story spans from her physical connection to Adam. Cable claims, "Eve is formed from a rib of Adam, [so...] it is through receiving a piece of

<sup>5</sup> Since my argument in Part III will outline Cleopatra's strength based on Antony's loss of masculinity, this jump in concentration area will seem less drastic when they are paired with one another in the final section of this analysis.

<sup>6</sup> These concepts are rephrased, but make up the major premise of the article "Rethinking Hawaa: Gender in *Abdilatif Abdalla's Utenzi wa Maisha ya Adamu na Hawaa* Through the Lens of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*".

his masculine image that she is able to mold into the strong, individual woman at the end” (Cable, 2004, p. 14). This presents an interesting case in discussion with the formation of where female strength derives from and if Eve developed the stronger qualities of her character traits at the end of the play from Adam’s help. Cable further explains later that it is through “Eve’s explorative nature that she is able to gain control as he loses it” (Cable, 2004, p. 16). This presents an interesting idea to add to this power discussion as Eve may be gaining power through the rib from Adam’s loss of that bone, which further propels her to abscond with power later in the text when it comes to decision making.

Another voice regarding Milton’s text and female dominance coming from choices and assertions comes up with the discussion of the erotic change that happens with Eve after her initial meeting with the snake. There is a passage in which Eve sexually flirts with Adam as the “divine figure,” showing the change in personality, since she had her discussion with the devil creature (Milton, 2018, p. 156). In Fletcher Linder’s article, “Speaking of Bodies, Pleasures, and *Paradise Lost*: Erotic Agency and Situation Ethnography,” the control of Eve in the relationship shifts right when the snake initially tempts her. It is at this moment that she is separated from Adam and has the confidence to get what she sexually desires from him. Linder claims that, “once Eve meets the devil face-to-face she has been tempted and changed” (Linder, 2001, p. 2). I argue that this comment truly shows that Eve gains control from her adventurous capabilities by seeing the desires she is forbidden from as she then becomes moved to act on the desire of those sexual wants. The article further specifies that Eve “knows that she wants to advance towards Adam in a sexual light, so she begins to change into a woman leaving the girl essence behind” (Linder, 2001, p. 13). In this way, the devil almost enables Eve to grow up and discover what lust and desire can do to the body. Eve, in a way, almost becomes transfixed by sex, which gives her more power in the eyes of Adam as she turns him on. This furthers her desire for power, thus enabling Eve to become “Adam’s temptress”<sup>7</sup> (Poole, 2008, p. 147). Basically, Eve does to Adam what the devil did to her.

In essence, though my literary sources may not neatly fold in perfect conjunction with one another, they each provide an interesting basis for understanding Shakespeare’s literature in the following sections by outlining what enables the female fluctuations within the power constructs in the relationship between men and women. In Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, he outlines the qualities of masculinity and the sexual arguments, presented in Mark Beck’s book to explain these qualities with regard to sexual pursuit and female confidence. Then, to further understand these ideas, I utilized the notes of behavior psychologist, Simon Watson, to theorize that this confidence issue with sexuality may span from the idea of learned helplessness. Learned helplessness’ definition from the Oxford English Dictionary enlightened the discussion by opening up the possibility for the family structure, thus introducing the possibility of a dominant female during adulthood and how this could in turn weaken the man’s feeling of power; providing a nice segway into the *Paradise Lost* and its supplementary analyses discussing female power. From this point, the analysis shifted to a female-focused argument with Eve in *Paradise Lost*. Starting with the theme of temptation, power was discussed as something that is obtained from the sin committed due to the freedom in the choice to disobey. Leaving McGrath’s argument, the next topic of power and women came in Cable’s article arguing for power being transferred through the rib of Adam. This posed the idea of power transference that framed a nice new way to look at Eve’s new dominant nature as a transfer from Adam’s loss of control when Eve tastes the fruit. The last argument, which nicely ties the

---

<sup>7</sup> Poole’s article did not have much relevancy to the rest of the argument in this analysis, but the phrasing of transitioning into Adam’s temptress seemed to really suit the argument at hand.

Plutarch and Milton thoughts together, is the sexual nature of Eve. This obviously dove into the transformation aspect of Eve's character from an innocent girl to sex-craving woman.

Clearly, this section analyzing these two non-Shakespearean pieces provided an interesting look at the roles of gender dominance and the transitions with power within these roles. With this knowledge, one may now transition to close reading Shakespeare's work with a new appreciation for these particular areas of focus regarding gender, desire, control, dominance, and temptation. Though not innately Shakespearean, these ideas transcend literature and provide a solid lens for discussion within the following two sections.

## **Part II: Close Reading—Cleopatra's Essence: A Close Reading of Other's Views of Cleopatra's Observed Nature**

Enobarbus:

Upon her landing, Antony sent to her, / Invited her to supper: she replied, / It should be better he became her guest; / Which she entreated: our courteous Antony, / Whom ne'er the word of "No" woman heard speak, / Being barbered ten times o'er, goes to the feast, / And for his ordinary pays his heart / For what his eyes eat only.

Agrippa:

Royal wench! / She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed: / He plowed her, and she cropped.

[...]

Enobarbus:

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; for vilest things / Become themselves in her: that the holy priests / Bless her when she is riggish. (Shakespeare, 1961, II.ii)

To begin this close reading section, I will first specify why I did not select to pull a portion of Cleopatra's text for close reading, since it is in fact her character that this analysis focuses on. Interestingly enough, it was rather difficult to locate a section of Cleopatra's text or speech to close read, since it is rare to find Cleopatra speak more than five lines together in any given section. While in most arguments one would claim this lack of speech to be a detriment to the discussion, I actually find this to be a happy realization that occurred through my attempt to find a speech to close read, as the lack of textual content only further illustrates the power of her character. It is not the fact that Cleopatra does not have text to say, as she has the largest female part in this drama, but it is the fact that she is selective in her statements. Some of Cleopatra's power comes from being a woman who selects to concisely phrase her words. Due to the fact that most of the play Cleopatra maintains the power in her relationship with Antony, there is no need for her to speak large lines of text consecutively to explain herself, as it is the complex sensual characterization that is built through her actions and her brevity that provides her this innate power within the relationship.

In fact, another realization I had when examining Cleopatra's text is how perfectly iambic her lines are. While Antony and the other men often have many lines containing feminine endings and imperfect lines of pentameter, the surety and perfection with which the majority of Cleopatra's lines are scripted says a lot, even though she may not be speaking in a monologue fashion. Another element that I found intriguing when examining this play, is that it is in the top five plays for containing a large number of Alexandrias<sup>8</sup>, yet Cleopatra

<sup>8</sup> For clarification, Alexandria in terms of scansion, not the town referenced in *Antony in Cleopatra*.

does not have a single line embodying this redundant iambic quality in the entire play. Having this baseline understanding of the scansion present throughout the play, provides a deeper textual comprehension of Cleopatra's character and illustrates that sometimes surety can be framed in the lack of soliloquies present in the character's evolution. This is because, the audience is able to track the confidence of the characterization without having to necessarily have Cleopatra break the fourth wall to clarify that she is lusty or power hungry. The motivations and action cycles present in this text span from clearly motivated action cycles. In fact, Konstantin Stanislavski references Cleopatra when discussing motivated action on stage in his book, *An Actor Prepares*, claiming that she is a character who "moves only when she desires and follows the path she was motivated to come onto the stage with [...]" in this way her action cycles are unstoppable" (Stanislavski, 2004, p. 209). Having an acting theorist comment on the active motivation out of all the plays that could have been selected only further exemplifies this point.

The opening commentary in this small selection of dialogue truly encapsulates Cleopatra's nature as perceived by those watching her behavior and it is clear by how she treats Antony where the power and dominance exists within their relationship. Selecting to have Enobarbus suggest that Cleopatra said that she should be summoning Antony as her guest for dinner, shows the dominance Cleopatra exerts in something as simple as a meal invitation. Also in this first section of Enobarbus' dialogue, the choice to call Antony courteous, which can be defined as one who is "kind and complaisant in the conduct of others", according to the Oxford English Dictionary, shows Antony's attempt to try to deal with the stripping of power the moment Cleopatra claims that she should invite him (OED, 2017). The choice to utilize the word "courteous" is rather interesting in this essence, because according to Open Source Shakespeare, an online Shakespeare concordance, this word is only used twenty-five times in Shakespeare's entire canon. Each time mentioned by either a gentleman in the lower class talking about someone of higher nobility in prose, or as a way to mock the lewd nature or women's disrespect; and both definitions are rather fitting in this juxtaposition of character, when examining Cleopatra and Antony (Open Source Shakespeare, 2017).<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, throughout this text, both Enobarbus and Agrippa use personification, first with the bed commentary, and then with the comments on age farther down in the section. Selecting to discuss the elements around Cleopatra in this personified fashion makes her power over the men in this play clear and exemplifies her complex nature as she implores masculine traits juxtaposed amidst her feminine beauty. Selecting to somewhat aggrandize the qualities surrounding Cleopatra, makes this power realization quite clear in the discussion tonality. According to the concordance Open Source Shakespeare, Cleopatra is called a wench six different times throughout *Antony and Cleopatra* (Open Source Shakespeare, 2017)<sup>10</sup>. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a wench as "an association with the common woman", which in the case of Cleopatra's nobility is quite the nasty remark as it attempts to cuckold her as a member of lower status (OED, 2017). Though Cleopatra may articulate these qualities in her implied vulgar nature, Enobarbus later claims in this section she "satisfies [...]" the vilest of things", her drive spans from her sexual nature (Shakespeare, 1961, II.ii).

---

<sup>9</sup> This is rather interesting, as both ways in which Shakespeare utilized this word fit in this scenario pretty perfectly; in fact, "courteous" is often used to create a *double entendre* about Katherine's vulgarity in another William Shakespeare's works, *The Taming of the Shrew*.

<sup>10</sup> I also find it interesting that Katherine from *The Taming of the Shrew* is the only other woman in Shakespeare's canon to be called a "wench" six times.

Another rhetorical device utilized in this selected textual close reading selection is onomatopoeia. The consonance present in the appetite section of Enobarbus' miniature monologue suggests that Cleopatra has a snake-like essence. Similar to what is witnessed in Shakespeare's title character *Richard III*, the use of repeated "s" sounds signifies a serpent-like quality to Cleopatra's character. Throughout *Antony and Cleopatra*, this repetition of the "s" sound like a snake occurs fifteen times, and every time it is communicated it either references Cleopatra, as seen in this close reading section, or is communicated by Cleopatra herself. Another moment worth mentioning is Shakespeare's choice to select the word "cloy" meaning "to scratch or claw", according to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 2017). This nicely pairs with the consonance snake sound rhetorical device as they both frame Cleopatra in an animalistic sense.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, selecting to use terms such as "riggish" (a woman who is sexually immodest, wanton—according to the Oxford English Dictionary) who "stales" men (stale means "to lure" according to the Oxford English Dictionary) frames a woman who is a temptress and a promiscuous brute (OED, 2017). Interestingly enough the term "riggish" is only utilized once in the entire canon, it is a word Shakespeare actually coined specifically for this circumstance, according to Open Source Shakespeare concordance (Open Source Shakespeare, 2017). The choice to take the time to coin this term specifically for this instance further justifies the reasoning from earlier arguing that Cleopatra talks even when she is silent. Taking the time to create a word for Enobarbus to present Cleopatra to Agrippa with clarifies what the audience is supposed to think of her character. The word itself sounds like what it is<sup>12</sup> and Shakespeare concocted it solely for this consonance-filled discussion between these two men. These horrid words that Agrippa and Enobarbus frame Cleopatra with suggesting that she possesses a volatile way of expressing her sensual presence articulates the negative societal feminine traits present throughout the early modern period. Though these may be rather harsh qualities to suggest that a woman possesses, Cleopatra's actions show a desire for power and support the basis of these commentaries on promiscuity. Even in the most sexual moments between Cleopatra and Antony, the rules that Cleopatra establishes for Antony do not seem to apply to her in the same manner. In essence, it is alright for Cleopatra to have an affair, but Antony even taking a moment to bat an eye at Octavia is completely unacceptable to her.

In essence, by analyzing other scholar's views of Cleopatra's character, one gains insight into the workings of Cleopatra's mind. Moreover, knowing why Cleopatra oftentimes chooses to remain silent provides insight into her character and enables one to further comprehend the complex nature of this pseudo-femme fatale. The sexual promiscuity is recognized by all of the men in the story that cross paths with Cleopatra, and it is important to close read these passages, such as this dialogue between Agrippa and Enobarbus, as it fills in the gaps of what may be going on offstage that is not explicitly shown to the audience. So, clearly, even though the close reading section is not actually a passage communicated by Cleopatra herself, the characterization comes through as described via other character's descriptions of her nature, as well as her actions.

### **Part III: Literary Argument—The Gender Scale: Minimized Masculinity Enables an Increase in Female Dominance**

The theme that is present in the above sections and throughout Shakespeare's work as a whole spans from the female character gaining dominance within the relationship with the man due to a shift in the initial

<sup>11</sup> An animal that can slither, hiss, and claw at things is an interesting combination and frames a vicious animalistic depiction of Cleopatra.

<sup>12</sup> The sounds of the word frame what the word is making this a prime example of a homophone.



expectation that the man has the power. Looking specifically at Shakespeare's work, it is clear that Cleopatra gains her power from others by transferring the powerful position to her after losing it, which occurs down to the very moment of her death.<sup>13</sup> This power transfer, allows her to gain a masculine essence throughout the majority of the play, Cleopatra utilizes her various feminine tactics to obtain and sustain this control. Though from the start of the tragedy, Cleopatra is nothing shy when it comes to independence in personality and sassy nature in her attitude, as Antony continually loses his masculinity, Cleopatra grows in her power by tipping the culturally anticipated gender scale of female submission to a male hierarchy in her favor, causing her to become, in turn, more powerful and masculine herself. Evidently, Cleopatra's character in William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* increases in power as Antony's masculinity lessens.

Having this as the main driving point in the literary argument portion of this discussion enables one to focus on the points presented in the previous sections to compare and contrast the points made in other literary contexts, outside the realm of William Shakespeare's works. One element that is quite intriguing about the texts uncovered on Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* exists in the lack of masculinity in Marcus Antonius' character basis. Since there is evidence that Shakespeare utilized Plutarch's ideas as an outline for the story when scripting the play, lines in which Cleopatra exercises her power within the relationship from a sexual stance, make total sense when examining Plutarch's outline in which Antonius is listed low on the masculinity hierarchy order. From Part I of this analysis, the *Parallel Lives* research showed a lack of confidence in Antony's character when it comes to sexual ideologies, which is an element that is clearly articulated throughout Shakespeare's play. In fact, there is a moment in the middle of the play in which Antony clearly shows his weakness in this area and Cleopatra capitalizes on the moment as a place to usurp power. Since Antony returns in a stage of uncertainty, Cleopatra gets stronger due to his continual struggles claiming, "Since my lord / Is Antony again, I will be Cleopatra" (Shakespeare, 1961, III.ii.185-186). In this moment, as Antony goes back to the lower stance in the relationship, as defined in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, Cleopatra maintains her position of power within the couple pairing, just as she wants it.<sup>14</sup> This is not the only instance in which the audience witnesses this shift returning to the female dominant status that Cleopatra desires.

Another moment that further articulates this notion of Cleopatra's power coming from Antony's loss occurs at an instance that correlates well with the theory about learned helplessness from part one of this exploration. With the knowledge that learned helplessness occurs from an individual "suffering from a sense of powerlessness," as discovered in the previous section, Cleopatra's consistent drive to have the power and control naturally pulls away from Antony's ability to experience these feelings (OED, 2017). As Cleopatra and Antony discuss the loss to Caesar in act four, Cleopatra takes his words, which are evidently muttered in a hope to seek comfort, and formulates a sassy rebuttal in which she not only corrects him, but simultaneously gains more power in the situation. In essence, she is correcting someone who is discussing how they got conquered. Cleopatra's response to Antony's claims about Caesar not being the catalyst of destruction, but rather he, himself (Antony),<sup>15</sup> suggests that he should always be the stronger one. However, due to his power hungry partner and strength never initially being something Antony has, leads Cleopatra to suggest: "So it should be,

<sup>13</sup> Please note that this comment will be explained in further detail later in this literary argument section.

<sup>14</sup> One could also pair this concept with the ranking of leadership referenced in the *Parallel Lives* section of Part I of this analysis, as Antony is not showing masculine leadership in his relationship with Cleopatra.

<sup>15</sup> This moment may seem a little confusing out of context; however this moment exists as a *double entendre* and a word play in which Cleopatra flips what Antony said to frame him as the weaker part of their romantic pairing.

that none but Antony / Should conquer Antony” (Shakespeare, 1961, IV.iii.19-20). The choice to respond to Antony’s essential cry for help and confidence in this manner, nicely illustrates the power being placed into the hands of Cleopatra and disappearing from Antony.

In addition, this instance being viewed as learned helplessness helps explain why Antony selects to turn away from Cleopatra for a little while when people bring up that he should be with Octavia. In this scenario during the play, after being stuck in the sequence of learned helplessness for so long with Cleopatra, Antony seeks to explore other options and discovers Octavia. In this section of Shakespeare’s great tragedy, Antony actually parallels Eve from Part I of this research, as the only way that he feels he could gain any sense of control or confidence derives from leaving Cleopatra’s space as he feels the freedom from her may actually be somewhat helpful in freeing himself. Though Eve completely changes as a person from her adventure experience, Antony does not truly change all that much from this moment, however I argue that it is quite important to note that the man is taking on the innocent Eve persona from the start of *Paradise Lost*, which only further emphasizes Antony’s lack of masculinity that exists on a constant descending power slope for the majority of the drama. Also, it is important to note that Cleopatra does not enjoy the freedom away from Antony in the way that Eve does when meeting the devil by the tree in *Paradise Lost*, as suggested in the first portion of this analysis. Antony is everything that Cleopatra wants in a man, so her inability to be with him frustrates her to no end and sparks an inordinate amount of jealousy.

Moreover, Cleopatra has almost complete sexual control over Antony by the middle of act three after Antony comes to the realization that looking at Octavia was a major mistake. Cleopatra, by this point in the play, has exercised the skills that innocent Eve, at the start of *Paradise Lost*, must strive to obtain as a tool to lure Antony in. In the previous paragraph, Cleopatra’s choice to sassily respond to Antony reinforces her sexual stance within their relationship, thus creating a power differential led, of course, by Cleopatra. In Part I, it is clear that Eve is tempted in order to become more sexual in her relationship with Adam by the devil, which then enables Eve to evolve and become somewhat of a temptress for Adam. At this moment of the story, Eve controls the connection as she moves their relationship into a new, lustier place. Plutarch’s text suggests that Antonius may not be very smooth when it comes to the sexual game in this way; Eve and Cleopatra serve similar purposes. Though Cleopatra has the passion and lust from the start, unlike Eve does, both women utilize their sexual charms to get their desired sexual pleasure from their men who both are not super great with discussing sexual ideas openly themselves. In this manner, the women almost school their husbands into consummating the relationship. In this way the literature from Part I of this investigation nicely matches up with Shakespeare’s text, though the moment that enabled the lovers to get to that point differs.

Similarly, this sexual concept spans the length of the play, but takes on several molds of Cleopatra’s complex character, as Cleopatra will never use the same tactic twice with Antony. This keeps Antony on his toes, enabling a snake-like essence to underlay Cleopatra’s character as she wraps herself around Antony and he never knows what is coming next.<sup>16</sup> This can be specifically seen in the reaction to hearing that Cleopatra is dead (Shakespeare, 1961, V.ii). At this moment in the play he reaches an all time low as he fails a suicidal attempt and essentially feels that he has lost his partner, though she is only concocting this lie as part of her plan to retain power. This quality of Eve’s personality, as witnessed in the discussion from Part I on *Paradise*

---

<sup>16</sup> The snake-like essence is seen through the animalistic references in the close reading, and enables a new look at temptation at the conclusion of the play when she kills herself with “asp” venom.

*Lost*, can be seen in comments Agrippa makes in the second act as well. Here, Agrippa claims to have witnessed Cleopatra becoming breathless, yet ultimately her breath caught up with her, showing that even in a state of her breathlessness, the power was still very much under her own control:

I saw her once  
 Hop forty paces though the public street;  
 And having lost her breath, she spoke, and panted  
 That she did not make defect perfection,  
 And breathless, power breathe forth. (Shakespeare, 1961, II.ii. 237-241)

In this passage, Enorbus suggests that the beauty of Cleopatra is present in her breath and that quality leads her to obtaining her innermost desires of control and passion. This piece skillfully matches with the selection chosen for the close reading in section two, as the nature of discussing her character in this way has the same gossipy nature as seen in the scene with Agrippa. This moment almost acts as a cultivation of Cleopatra's character as control seems to be her manner of maintaining her sanity, despite the chaos surrounding her with Antony's often inability to formulate exactly what he wants to say to her, as Antony is sexually shy, but deeply attached to Cleopatra.

By the same token, unlike Eve, Cleopatra never has the innocence of girlhood at any point in the play, but Cleopatra does become overtly sexually explicit during act three, to an extent that Eve does not get to with her flirting with Adam. For at that moment, Cleopatra takes on the role of the male aggressor. This evolution into a masculine dominance is attested to by other characters throughout the close reading section above; her power and masculine nature described in the last section, frames her to be more of a man than her Antony could ever wish to be, in some respects. However, there is a declaration of this change made by Caesar as well claiming Cleopatra's triumph over Antony, gibling that he is "not mere manlike / Than Cleopatra; nor the queen of Ptolemy / More womanly than he" (Shakespeare, 1961, I.iv.6-8). Here is an instance towards the beginning of the play that illustrates that others witness the lack of masculinity in Antony and recognize that Cleopatra gains power from his loss of it. Moreover, this also maintains the chatty structure of people gossiping about Cleopatra as analyzed in the close reading section of this analysis.

It is clear from the above discussion that the shift in masculine dominance was placed in nearly every interaction that occurs between Cleopatra and Antony throughout the course of the play, however it is not explicitly stated as masculine by Cleopatra until the clever moment of phrasing nearing the end of the drama, in which Cleopatra actually makes these claims about her masculine strength as she ends her own life.<sup>17</sup> At the start of the last scene in act five, Cleopatra claims, "My resolution's placed, and I have nothing / Of woman in me<sup>18</sup>; now from head to foot / I am marble-constant, now the fleeting moon / No planet is of mine" (Shakespeare, 1961, V.ii.238). As Cleopatra nears death, this utterance is almost her apostrophe to the gods or spirits that she is not solely woman.<sup>19</sup> This is a major moment within the context of the masculinity transfer,

<sup>17</sup> This provides an interesting moment as this is one of the few times that Cleopatra speaks in depth in a miniature monologue in the entire play.

<sup>18</sup> In this semi-apostrophe, as defined above, Cleopatra removes herself from the gender ideology vocally, not just through her actions like earlier in the play—this is similar to Lady Macbeth's "unsex me here" moment (Shakespeare, 1961, I.v.32).

<sup>19</sup> Please note that I do realize this was a *double entendre*, commenting on how a man was likely dressed as a woman articulating this line in the early modern period.

due to the fact that Antony is wounded during this moment; since Antony tries to kill himself but fails and injures himself. As Antony is injured and dies in the arms of Cleopatra, the transfer of the masculinity comes full circle as Cleopatra holds the man as he is dying. In most instances, the woman dies in the arms of the man and the flipped nature of this image sends a powerful message regarding the gender story that is going on amidst the political elements and the romance.<sup>20</sup> In this particular instance, as Antony dies in the arms of Cleopatra, the stage picture resembles that of *La Pieta*. This nicely relates a Biblical image to this text, which parallels the other Biblical reference that follows, in which asp venom initiates Cleopatra's suicide, which presents an interesting argument as the snake tempts the first lady, Eve, to sin in the *Paradise Lost* story. So it is important to note that it is snake venom that leads to Cleopatra's death.

In the final section of *Antony and Cleopatra*, the countryman that Cleopatra obtains the snake from for her suicide shares a piece about honesty. The countryman states that he met a woman, "a very honest woman, but something given to lie, as a woman should not do but in the way of honesty" (Shakespeare, 1961, V.ii.252). This moment is one of the few throughout the course of the play where prose is utilized, and this foreshadows Cleopatra's death due to the lie about dying before. Even this femme fatale-based woman reaches the lowest point, and she sustains power and choice during the suicide, which the asp, "snake or serpent", places venom into her skin, so that she is able to have the suicidal moment she desires (OED, 2017). This acts as a catalyst for others to follow suit in her suicidal moment. This also serves to give her back the control that the countryman tried to abscond with in his warning. Cleopatra's suicide is the final moment of someone having to give up something for her power, as the snake expels venom into Cleopatra's chest in order for her to have the power to die after Antony's defeat. Since Cleopatra would have been mocked and ridiculed in the city, if she did not take her own life, this moment frames a solid confusion to Cleopatra's complex desire for power and control.

Overall, it is fascinating to view the gender dominance scale getting tipped in a direction that allows the woman to have some power. Clearly, Cleopatra becomes overly power hungry and by the end of Shakespeare's drama has evolved almost completely into a man from the strength and power standpoint, with the closing moment of taking her own life, after Antony dies powerlessly in her arms. Examining Plutarch and Milton's works provided a solid basis by which I was able to compare these power shifts. It is evident through the close reading of other characters' views on Cleopatra, that she is certainly sexually powerful judging both from a lusty and masculine sensibility. This final section solidifies this concept of the power shifts controlled by Cleopatra's complex temptress characterization.

So, the relationship chaos provides a solid plotline to pair with the political craziness Antony endures in battle. But what exactly causes the relationship between Cleopatra and Antony to evoke a need for power and dominance? Antony is not at all complex when compared with Cleopatra's character, so this analysis seeks to define the motivation behind these powerful impulses. Looking at the moment in which Antony turns to Octavia for a bit creates jealousy within Cleopatra's character and pokes the powerful, sexual creature within her to erupt. The major character choice that changes everything is Antony's decision to initially look at Octavia in a romantic light, because he is, in a way, cheating on Cleopatra through sight. Antony's masculinity shrinks as he tempts the ultimate temptress, which can concoct tempestuous and fatal consequences.

---

<sup>20</sup> Note, *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare's Plays* was correct in classifying this as a play with mixed genre as it is a tragedy, history, and romance all at the same time (McDonald, 2001, p. 204).

## References

- Arenburg, M. (2015). Rethinking Hawaa: Gender in *Abdilatif Abdalla's Utenzi wa Maisha ya Adamu na Hawaa* through the Lens of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. *Research in African Literatures*, 46(3), 24-45.
- Beck, M. (2014). *A Companion to Plutarch*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell.
- Bellin, E. V. (1987). *The Feminization of Praise: Aemilia Lanyer*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton U Press.
- Cable, L. (2004). *Gender and the Power of Relationship: "United as One Individual Soul" in Paradise Lost*. Random House Publishing.
- Conway, C. (2017). How to Be a Man in the Grecian World. Retrieved from <https://www.ancient-origins.net/man-grecian-world>
- Dow, B. J. (2011). The SAGE Handbook of Gender and Communication. *Gender and Discussion*, 2, 1.
- Dryden, J. (1683). Contributions to Plutarch's lives. In *The Works of John Dryden, Vol. 17: Prose 1668-1691; An Essay of Dramatick Poisie and Shorter Works* (p. 226).
- Linder, F. (2001). Speaking of Bodies, Pleasures, and *Paradise Lost*: Erotic Agency and Situation Ethnography. *Cultural Studies*, 15(2), 352-374.
- McChrystal, D. (1993). Redeeming Eve. *English Literary Renaissance*, 23(3), 490-508.
- McDonald, R. (2001). *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents*. Bedford: St. Martins Pub.
- McGrath, P. (2013). Formal Resistance: Gender Hierarchy and Eve's Final Speech in *Paradise Lost*. *Milton Quarterly*, 47(2), 72-87.
- Milton, J. & Anna, B. (2008). *Paradise Lost*. Oxford University Press.
- North, T. (2015). *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*. London: Penguin Books.
- Open Source Shakespeare. (30 April 2017). Retrieved from <http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/>
- Oxford English Dictionary. (May 2017). Retrieved from <http://www.oed.com/>
- Poole, K. (2008). Naming, "Paradise Lost," and the Gendered Discourse of Perfect Language Schemes. *English Literary Renaissance*, 38(3), 535-559.
- Shakespeare, W. (1961). *Antony and Cleopatra: Shakespeare*. London: University Tutorial Book.
- Stanislavski, K. (2004). *An Actor Prepares* (4th ed.). Detroit: Neal-Schuman.
- Watson, S. (2012). Constructing Masculinity in Plutarch's *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*. *Behavioral Psychology and Plutarch*, 1, 154-206.