

THE EXPECTATIONS OF WOMEN IN POLITICAL POWER: CLEOPATRA IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAY

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Abstract

This research article examines the complex interplay between gender and political power through William Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra in "Antony and Cleopatra." By analyzing Shakespeare's characterization of the Egyptian queen against the backdrop of both ancient Roman and early modern English attitudes toward female rule, this study illuminates the social, cultural, and political expectations imposed upon women in positions of authority. The research demonstrates how Shakespeare's Cleopatra simultaneously conforms to, subverts, and transcends these gendered expectations through her deployment of performance, sexuality, rhetoric, and political strategy. This article argues that Shakespeare creates a multifaceted representation of female political power that reveals the tensions between feminine identity and political authority in patriarchal societies. Through close textual analysis, historical contextualization, and feminist critical frameworks, this study explores how Cleopatra navigates competing expectations of femininity and kingship, ultimately suggesting that Shakespeare's portrayal offers insight into both the limitations imposed upon and the unique strategies available to women in positions of political power across historical contexts. The findings contribute to broader scholarly conversations about gender and authority in Shakespeare's works and enhance our understanding of early modern attitudes toward female rule.

Keywords: william shakespeare; antony and cleopatra; female sovereignty; gender politics; political power; cleopatra vii; early modern england; elizabethan drama; performativity; roman antiquity; queenship; feminine authority

Introduction

In Shakespeare's tragedy "Antony and Cleopatra," written circa 1606-07, the figure of Cleopatra VII Philopator stands as one of literature's most complex representations of female political power. Creating this characterization shortly after the death of Queen Elizabeth I and during the early reign of James I, Shakespeare crafted a portrait of female rulership that engages with both ancient and contemporary expectations, anxieties, and assumptions about women in positions of political authority.

This research examines how Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra illuminates the complex expectations placed upon politically powerful women—expectations that simultaneously demand and reject stereotypically feminine qualities, that require performance of both strength and vulnerability, and that position female rulers as eternally "other" within predominantly masculine power structures. Through this analysis, we gain insight not only into

Shakespeare's artistic vision but also into early modern conceptions of gender and power that continue to resonate in contemporary discussions of female leadership.

The significance of this investigation lies in its exploration of the tension between womanhood and political authority in Shakespeare's work. Rather than viewing Cleopatra primarily as a romantic figure or as a symbol of exotic otherness, this study foregrounds her political identity and the strategies she employs to navigate gendered expectations while maintaining sovereignty. By examining how Shakespeare constructs this complex female ruler, we can better understand both the playwright's nuanced engagement with gender politics and the broader cultural attitudes toward female governance that informed his characterization. This article addresses about Shakespeare represent the conflicting expectations placed upon women in positions of political power.

Historical and Theoretical Context

• Classical Representations of Cleopatra

Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra draws heavily on classical sources, primarily Plutarch's "Life of Antony" as translated by Sir Thomas North in 1579. These Roman accounts, written by the victors of the conflict between Octavian and the Antony-Cleopatra alliance, largely present Cleopatra as a dangerous foreign seductress whose feminine wiles threatened Roman masculine virtue and political stability. Plutarch describes her as possessing "irresistible charm" and suggests that her relationship with Antony was primarily politically motivated.

These classical narratives reflect Roman anxiety about female political power, particularly when embodied in a foreign queen who refused to submit to Roman authority. The historical Cleopatra—the last active ruler of the Ptolemaic dynasty who maintained Egyptian independence through strategic alliances with Roman leaders—represented a challenge to Roman patriarchal and imperial assumptions. The Roman portrayal of Cleopatra as sexually manipulative served to delegitimize her political authority by reducing her statecraft to seduction.

• Women and Power in Early Modern England

Shakespeare wrote "Antony and Cleopatra" in the aftermath of Queen Elizabeth I's forty-five-year reign, during a period when English society was still processing the experience of female monarchy. Elizabeth had carefully crafted a public image that negotiated the tension between her female body and her royal authority, famously declaring that she had "the heart and stomach of a king, and a king of England too." Her strategies for maintaining power—including her cultivation of a virginal identity, her rhetorical skill, her performance of both feminine and masculine qualities, and her careful management of court factions—established a model of female rulership that both accommodated and challenged patriarchal assumptions.

The transition to James I's reign represented a return to traditional male monarchy, potentially allowing Shakespeare and his audience to reflect on the preceding female reign with a complex mixture of perspectives. This historical moment provided Shakespeare with a unique

vantage point from which to explore the contradictions and challenges of female political power through the safely distant figure of Cleopatra.

• Theoretical Frameworks

This research draws on several theoretical frameworks to analyze Shakespeare's portrayal of female political power. Feminist literary criticism provides tools for examining how Shakespeare navigates gendered expectations in his characterization of Cleopatra. The concept of performativity, as articulated by theorists like Judith Butler, offers insight into how Cleopatra's gender and political identity are enacted through performance. Postcolonial theory helps illuminate the intersection of gender and cultural difference in the play's Roman/Egyptian dichotomy.

Additionally, new historicist approaches situate the play within early modern discourses about female rule, while psychoanalytic perspectives inform analysis of the play's treatment of desire and power. Together, these frameworks provide a multifaceted approach to understanding Shakespeare's complex representation of the expectations placed upon women in positions of political authority.

Conflicting Expectations: Between Woman and Ruler

• The Paradox of Female Authority

Shakespeare's Cleopatra faces a fundamental paradox: the qualities expected of an effective ruler (decisiveness, rationality, constancy) were coded as masculine in both ancient and early modern contexts, while the qualities associated with femininity (emotionality, inconstancy, sensuality) were viewed as antithetical to effective leadership. This paradox creates a double bind for women in power, who are criticized both for lacking feminine qualities and for displaying them.

This paradox is articulated through the Roman characters' conflicted perspectives on Cleopatra. Philo introduces her as a "strumpet" whose feminine charms have transformed Antony from a great general into "the bellows and the fan to cool a gipsy's lust." Yet when Cleopatra demonstrates political calculation and military involvement, the Romans criticize her for transgressing

proper gender boundaries. This no-win situation reflects the contradictory expectations placed upon female rulers.

Shakespeare demonstrates how Cleopatra navigates this paradox by selectively performing feminine and masculine qualities according to political necessity. When she asks, "Think you there was or might be such a man as this I dreamt of?" after hearing of Antony's marriage to Octavia, she strategically performs feminine jealousy while simultaneously gathering critical political intelligence about her rival.

- **Body Politics: The Female Body as Political Site**

In both classical and early modern contexts, female rulers faced unique scrutiny regarding their bodies. While male rulers could separate their physical bodies from their political authority, female rule was inextricably linked to the female body and its associated cultural meanings. Shakespeare explores this connection through repeated references to Cleopatra's physical form and its political significance.

The Romans repeatedly reduce Cleopatra to her body, with Caesar dismissing her political relationship with Julius Caesar by crudely noting that "he plowed her, and she cropped." This reduction of political alliance to sexual transaction reveals how female rulers' bodies become sites of political contest and commentary in ways male rulers' bodies do not.

Cleopatra demonstrates awareness of this body politics when she refuses to be taken to Rome, imagining how:

"mechanic slaves

With greasy aprons, rules, and hammers shall

Uplift us to the view. In their thick breaths,

Rank of gross diet, shall we be enclouded

And forced to drink their vapor."

This passage reveals her understanding that as a female ruler, her body would be subjected to public display and commentary in ways that would undermine her royal dignity and political authority.

- **The Expectation of Sexual Virtue**

Female rulers faced contradictory expectations regarding sexuality: expected to produce heirs (requiring sexual activity) while simultaneously maintaining a reputation for sexual virtue. Shakespeare explores this contradiction through

Cleopatra's open sexuality, which the Romans condemn as immoral while simultaneously being fascinated by it.

Unlike Queen Elizabeth, who resolved this contradiction by cultivating a virgin identity, Cleopatra embraces her sexuality as a component of her political persona. Her relationships with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony serve both personal and political purposes, securing Egyptian independence through strategic alliances with Roman leaders. Yet these same relationships are used by her Roman enemies to delegitimize her rule.

Shakespeare complicates simple judgment of Cleopatra's sexuality by portraying her relationship with Antony as encompassing genuine emotional connection alongside political calculation. When she declares, "Eternity was in our lips and eyes, / Bliss in our brows' bent," she expresses an intensity of feeling that transcends pure political manipulation. This complexity challenges the reductive Roman view of female sexuality as either virtuous or vicious, suggesting a more nuanced understanding of how sexual and emotional relationships intersect with political alliances.

Cultural Dichotomy: Rome versus Egypt as Political Paradigms

- **Roman Masculinity and Political Order**

Shakespeare establishes Rome as a political system where authority is explicitly linked to masculine virtues. The Roman leaders value military prowess, stoicism, self-control, and duty to the state—qualities traditionally coded as masculine. Caesar embodies these values, criticizing Antony for becoming "a woman's man" and abandoning Roman duty for Egyptian pleasure.

This masculine political ethos leaves no legitimate space for female authority. From the Roman perspective, women can only influence politics indirectly through their relationships with men, as illustrated by Octavia's role as a peace token between Caesar and Antony. Direct female rule, as exemplified by Cleopatra, is viewed as inherently transgressive and threatening to proper political order.

Shakespeare reveals the limitations of this rigid gendered political system through Antony's tragic struggle to reconcile his Roman identity with his love for Cleopatra. The Roman valorization of masculine self-control proves inadequate to accommodate the full range of human experience, suggesting that political systems that exclude feminine qualities may be fundamentally incomplete.

• **Egyptian Fluidity and Alternative Authority**

In contrast to Rome's rigid gender hierarchy, Shakespeare's Egypt represents an alternative political paradigm where feminine qualities are not excluded from conceptions of power. Egyptian politics accommodates emotional expression, sensual pleasure, and theatrical display—elements the Romans dismiss as frivolous but which constitute genuine political currency in Cleopatra's court.

Cleopatra's authority stems partly from her mastery of spectacle and performance, as illustrated by Enobarbus's famous description of her appearance on the Cydnus:

"The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne,
Burned on the water... For her own person,
It beggared all description..."

This carefully orchestrated display represents a distinctly feminine approach to establishing political presence—one that proves remarkably effective despite (or because of) its departure from masculine Roman models of authority.

• **Hybrid Political Identity**

Shakespeare suggests that effective female rulership may require developing a hybrid political identity that strategically deploys both masculine and feminine qualities. Cleopatra demonstrates this hybridity when she participates in military planning, arms Antony before battle, and considers leading her own troops—traditionally masculine activities—while simultaneously using emotional appeals and theatrical self-presentation to achieve political ends.

This hybrid approach reaches its culmination in Cleopatra's death scene, where she dons her royal robes to die "after the high Roman fashion" while simultaneously employing the traditionally feminine weapon of the asp. By declaring, "I am fire and air; my other elements / I give to baser life," she transcends simple gender categorization,

suggesting a political identity that encompasses both masculine and feminine elements.

Strategies of Female Political Power

• **Performance and Theatricality**

Shakespeare portrays performance as a crucial strategy for female political authority. Throughout the play, Cleopatra consciously performs various aspects of femininity—the jealous lover, the grief-stricken widow, the seductive beauty—to achieve specific political objectives. Her theatrical skill allows her to shape others' perceptions and responses, creating political advantage through performance.

This strategy reflects the reality faced by female rulers like Elizabeth I, who carefully crafted public personas that balanced feminine and masculine qualities. In a world where direct female authority was viewed with suspicion, theatrical self-presentation offered women a means to establish and maintain power while nominally conforming to gender expectations.

Shakespeare suggests both the power and limitations of this strategy. While Cleopatra's performances repeatedly succeed in manipulating those around her, they also reinforce Roman perceptions of feminine inconstancy. When Antony declares, "She is cunning past man's thought," he acknowledges the political effectiveness of her performance while simultaneously positioning it as fundamentally deceptive and therefore illegitimate.

• **Information and Intelligence**

Cleopatra demonstrates acute awareness of the political value of information. She repeatedly seeks intelligence about Rome and her rivals, particularly regarding Octavia's appearance and character. Her famous interrogation of the messenger about Octavia reveals not merely jealousy but political calculation:

"Is she as tall as me?"

"She is not, madam."

"Didst hear her speak? Is she shrill-tongued or low?"

These questions aim to assess Octavia as a political rival rather than simply as a romantic competitor. By gathering this intelligence, Cleopatra gains information that helps her maintain her hold over Antony and, by extension, secure her political position.

• Alliance Building and Network Maintenance

Shakespeare portrays Cleopatra as a ruler who maintains power partly through strategic alliance-building. Her relationships with Julius Caesar, Pompey, and Mark Antony all serve political as well as personal purposes, securing Egypt's independence in the face of Roman imperial ambitions. What the Romans interpret as mere sexual manipulation, Shakespeare reveals as sophisticated coalition-building.

Cleopatra's careful maintenance of her court, particularly her close relationships with her attendants Charmian and Iras, demonstrates the importance of personal networks to female political authority. Unlike the Roman leaders, who operate within formal institutional structures, Cleopatra relies on personal loyalty and informal influence—strategies historically more available to women excluded from formal political institutions.

• Rhetoric and Language

Shakespeare gives Cleopatra extraordinary rhetorical skill, allowing her to use language as a political tool. Her linguistic versatility—shifting between imperious commands, tender intimacy, quick wit, and poetic eloquence—enables her to navigate diverse political situations and maintain authority in contexts where women were expected to be silent or subdued.

Her verbal sparring with Antony demonstrates how wit serves as a form of power accessible to women even within patriarchal constraints:

"If you find him sad,
Say I am dancing; if in mirth, report
That I am sudden sick."

This linguistic play maintains her unpredictability and therefore her power in the relationship, showing how verbal agility can substitute for formal authority in gendered power dynamics.

Expectations in Action: Key Political Moments

• The Battle of Actium and Military Expectations

Cleopatra's participation in the Battle of Actium represents a critical moment in Shakespeare's exploration of gendered expectations regarding political leadership. Female rulers faced contradictory expectations regarding military matters: excluded from direct military command

due to their gender while simultaneously judged by their nations' military success.

Shakespeare portrays Cleopatra's decision to flee the battle—followed by Antony's politically disastrous choice to follow her—as a pivotal moment that seems to confirm Roman beliefs about the dangers of female influence on military affairs. Yet he complicates this judgment by suggesting that Cleopatra's retreat may have been strategically sound given Egypt's inferior naval position. This complexity challenges simplistic gendered narratives about military leadership while acknowledging the real constraints faced by female rulers in martial contexts.

• Negotiating with Caesar

Cleopatra's negotiations with Caesar after Antony's death illuminate the particular challenges facing female rulers in diplomatic contexts. Her approach combines formal political calculation with strategic performance of vulnerability, attempting to secure her children's future while maintaining her own dignity and authority:

"My master and my lord
I must obey."

This apparent submission disguises her true intent to maintain independence through death rather than accept subjugation. Her approach reflects the limited diplomatic options available to female rulers confronting more powerful male adversaries, necessitating strategies of apparent compliance masking private resistance.

• The Final Political Act: Death as Assertion of Authority

Cleopatra's suicide represents her final and perhaps most profound political act. By choosing death over becoming a spectacle in Caesar's triumph, she denies him complete victory and maintains control over her public image and historical legacy. Her careful preparation—donning royal robes, arranging her body in a dignified posture—transforms her death from defeat into a form of political triumph.

When she declares, "Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have / Immortal longings in me," she asserts her royal identity and sovereignty even in death. This final scene reveals Shakespeare's most profound insight about female political authority: that within patriarchal constraints, control over one's own narrative and public representation may constitute the ultimate form of power available to women.

The Roman Male Gaze: Perception and Representation

• Reductive Categorization

Shakespeare demonstrates how male characters repeatedly attempt to categorize and thereby control Cleopatra through reductive labels. For the Romans, she is variously a "strumpet," "gipsy," "great fairy," and "serpent of old Nile"—designations that emphasize her foreignness, sexuality, or alleged deceitfulness rather than acknowledging her political acumen.

These categorizations reflect the broader tendency to delegitimize female political authority by reducing women leaders to stereotypes. By portraying Cleopatra as consistently exceeding and defying these labels, Shakespeare suggests the inadequacy of such categorizations to capture the complexity of female political identity.

• The Male Narrative

The play reveals how historical narrative itself serves as a tool of patriarchal power. Cleopatra demonstrates acute awareness of how her story will be told if she allows herself to be captured:

"The quick comedians
Extemporally will stage us, and present
Our Alexandrian revels: Antony
Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
I' the posture of a whore."

This passage recognizes how male-dominated historical and artistic traditions reduce politically powerful women to sexual objects or cautionary tales. By choosing death, Cleopatra attempts to wrest control of her narrative from Roman hands, ensuring she will be remembered on her own terms rather than through the distorting lens of patriarchal representation.

• Fascination and Fear

Shakespeare portrays the Roman attitude toward Cleopatra as a complex mixture of fascination and fear that reflects broader cultural attitudes toward powerful women. Even as they condemn her, the Roman characters cannot help but be captivated by her. Enobarbus's famous description of her appearance on the Cydnus reveals this ambivalence, acknowledging her extraordinary impact while framing it as dangerously seductive.

This simultaneous attraction and repulsion mirrors early modern English attitudes toward female rule—a complex mixture of admiration for Elizabeth I's accomplishments and deep anxiety about the implications of female authority for patriarchal social and political structures. By portraying this ambivalence through the Romans, Shakespeare creates space for his audience to reflect on their own conflicted attitudes toward female political power.

Comparative Context: Shakespeare's Other Female Rulers

• Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth: Contrasting Models

A comparison between Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth reveals Shakespeare's exploration of different strategies for female political engagement. While Lady Macbeth attempts to reject her femininity entirely ("unsex me here") to access masculine forms of power, Cleopatra largely works within feminine paradigms, using traditionally feminine qualities like emotional expressiveness and sexual allure as political tools.

Lady Macbeth's strategy ultimately fails, leading to psychological disintegration, while Cleopatra maintains her dignity and agency to the end. This contrast suggests Shakespeare's recognition that rejecting femininity entirely may be an ultimately unsustainable strategy for female political engagement, while Cleopatra's integration of feminine and masculine qualities offers greater possibility for genuine female authority.

• Volumnia and Indirect Power

Volumnia in "Coriolanus" represents another model of female political power—the woman who exercises authority indirectly through male relatives. Her influence over her son gives her significant political impact despite her lack of formal position. However, this indirect power remains contingent on male cooperation and fundamentally reinforces rather than challenges patriarchal structures.

In contrast, Cleopatra exercises direct sovereign power, allowing Shakespeare to explore the particular challenges facing women who hold formal political authority rather than merely influencing male power-holders. This distinction highlights the unique expectations

placed upon women who claim direct political authority rather than operating within traditional feminine spheres of influence.

- **Katherine of Aragon: Virtue Politics**

Queen Katherine in "Henry VIII" represents a model of female political engagement based on moral virtue and Christian piety. Her appeal to justice relies on positioning herself as morally superior to her male adversaries, a strategy with limited effectiveness but significant dignity.

While Cleopatra employs a much more pragmatic and sensual approach to power, both characters ultimately demonstrate the importance of maintaining personal integrity in the face of overwhelming male political force. Their different strategies reflect the diverse ways women might navigate political expectations while remaining true to their own values and identities.

Beyond Shakespeare: Contemporary Resonance

- **Persistent Expectations**

Many of the contradictory expectations Shakespeare portrays through Cleopatra continue to shape perceptions of women in political leadership today. Female political figures still face scrutiny regarding their appearance, emotional expression, and personal relationships that their male counterparts largely escape. The double bind Shakespeare identifies—criticism both for displaying traditionally feminine qualities and for lacking them—remains a challenge for contemporary women leaders.

- **Evolving Strategies**

While the specific constraints faced by politically powerful women have evolved since Shakespeare's time, many of the strategies he portrays through Cleopatra remain relevant. Performance, rhetoric, alliance-building, and information-gathering continue to be crucial tools for female political leadership, particularly in contexts where women's authority is still questioned or undermined.

- **Changing the Paradigm**

Shakespeare's portrayal of the Roman/Egyptian dichotomy as representing competing conceptions of political authority suggests the possibility of political systems that do not exclude feminine qualities from legitimacy. This vision resonates with contemporary efforts to reimagine leadership in more inclusive ways that value traditionally feminine qualities like

collaboration, emotional intelligence, and relationship-building alongside traditionally masculine qualities like decisiveness and strength.

Conclusion

Shakespeare's characterization of Cleopatra offers a remarkably nuanced exploration of the expectations placed upon women in positions of political power. Through her character, he examines the contradictory demands, structural limitations, and unique strategies that shape female political authority in patriarchal contexts. While acknowledging the constraints facing female rulers, Shakespeare also suggests the possibility of effective female sovereignty that works both within and against gendered expectations. The play's Roman/Egyptian dichotomy provides a framework for exploring competing conceptions of political legitimacy and the place of gender within them. While the Roman system explicitly links political authority to masculine qualities, Shakespeare's Egypt represents an alternative paradigm where feminine characteristics are not excluded from legitimate political expression. Cleopatra's tragedy stems partly from the clash between these systems, as her model of authority proves ultimately vulnerable to Roman military force. Yet Shakespeare refuses to present Cleopatra's defeat as a simple validation of Roman masculine values. Her death, while acknowledging the military limitations of her position, nonetheless represents a powerful assertion of sovereignty and control over her own narrative. By denying Caesar his triumph and ensuring she will be remembered on her own terms, she achieves a form of victory that transcends simple political conquest. This research demonstrates that Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra offers insights into female political authority that remain relevant across historical contexts. The strategies she employs to navigate gendered expectations—performance, rhetoric, alliance-building, and strategic self-presentation—reflect those used by women from Queen Elizabeth I to contemporary female leaders. The contradictions and double binds she faces similarly persist in contemporary expectations of women in power. By examining Shakespeare's complex representation of these dynamics through Cleopatra, this research contributes to broader scholarly conversations about gender and authority in his works and in early

modern culture. It also suggests that Shakespeare's nuanced understanding of the relationship between gender and power offers valuable perspectives for contemporary discussions of female leadership and the evolving expectations placed upon women who exercise political authority.

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