

# *Unraveling the Complexity of Cleopatra in Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra*

Qichen Li<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>City University of Hong Kong, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong, China  
a. liqichenliyan@163.com

\*corresponding author

**Abstract:** William Shakespeare, widely regarded as the paramount dramatist and poet of the English Renaissance, crafted the renowned tragedy *Antony and Cleopatra* towards the end of his illustrious career. In this play, Shakespeare revitalized a Roman classic, breathing new life into its narrative, particularly through his portrayal of Cleopatra as a character of remarkable complexity. She emerges as both a sensuous oriental queen and an astute politician, inviting diverse interpretations from critics and establishing herself as a controversial literary figure. This paper delves into the intricacies of Cleopatra's character, employing textual analysis and comparative methods to unveil the challenges and complexity inherent in her portrayal. The study begins by examining various interpreted versions of Cleopatra, illustrating the nuanced perspectives that contribute to her controversial nature. Subsequently, an exploration of Shakespeare's dramatic techniques elucidates how he effectively conveys the multifaceted dimensions of Cleopatra's character. The paper then delves into historical and dramatic sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the complexity of Cleopatra. Shakespeare's success in crafting a captivating and intricate Cleopatra has fueled continuous research and interpretation across subsequent generations. The complexity of Cleopatra's image not only reflects the cultural dynamics of ancient Rome and Shakespeare's era but also underscores the challenges faced by women in positions of power and love. Her characterization is a result of the intricate interplay between culture, gender, and power dynamics. This study aims to deepen our comprehension of Cleopatra's portrayal in *Antony and Cleopatra*, offering examples and insights for future research endeavors centered around similar themes.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, Antony and Cleopatra, Cleopatra, Complexity

## 1. Introduction

*Antony and Cleopatra*, a Roman tragedy penned by Shakespeare around 1607, is an adaptation from Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*. Extensive scholarly research has been devoted to the exploration of the play, with a particular emphasis on its central characters, *Antony and Cleopatra*. L.T. Fitz highlights that the previous studies predominantly concentrated on Antony, framing the narrative as "the fall of a great general" and characterizing the primary thematic interest as "transcendent love". Contrarily, Fitz contends that Cleopatra assumes a more heroic role in the tragedy, asserting that she is, in some respects, the true "hero" of the narrative [1]. This assertion is grounded in the observation that the play's climax centers around Cleopatra's suicide, and she

grapples with the internal conflicts typical of a tragic hero [1]. Recent scholarship has witnessed a burgeoning interest in the character of Cleopatra. Some academics commend her profound love for Antony, portraying them as a formidable pair characterized by “transcendent love” [2]. Some scholars perceive Cleopatra as a political figure—an intelligent, cunning, and ambitious woman who strategically employs her allure and influence to manipulate and control Antony. However, they contend that Cleopatra, the lover, is at odds with Cleopatra, the queen. Schucking posits that “Cleopatra depicted as an intelligent, passionate, astute, heartless, essentially vulgar, and profoundly immoral courtesan in the initial three acts bears little resemblance to the regal, loving, and tender queen portrayed in the final two acts” [2]. However, I argue that these interpretations underestimate the complexity inherent in Cleopatra’s character. Previous studies, primarily focusing on the relationship between Cleopatra and Antony, have often overlooked her emotional experiences and inner world. Moreover, existing research tends to present Cleopatra in two extreme images—as a symbol of power and as a great lover—while neglecting the intricate complexities and contradictions within her character. This paper seeks to delve into the multifaceted nature of Cleopatra’s image through three dimensions: performances associated with her role, the portrayal of the complexity within Cleopatra’s image, and the underlying reasons for these complexities. By conducting a thorough examination and analysis of these aspects, I aim to provide a nuanced understanding and explanation of the intricacies within Cleopatra’s image in *Antony and Cleopatra*, shedding light on its role in the play and its broader cultural significance.

## 2. Performing Cleopatra

The intricate portrayal of Cleopatra renders her a challenging role, often proving elusive for many actresses to fully embody. Sara Munson Deats contends that a central challenge in adapting the play lies in “to maintain the play’s precarious equipoise between the play’s romantic and political emphases”, sparking considerable debate, particularly surrounding how Cleopatra should be interpreted [2]. The divergence in directors’ emphasis on either the romantic or political facets of the play contributes to the incomplete realization of Cleopatra’s character, leaving actresses to navigate between portraying her as either the queen or the lover. Deats notes that nineteenth-century renditions frequently omitted political subplots that detracted from the romantic narrative and satirical scenes that disappointed the lovers. In 1889, Cora Urquardt Potter earned praise from Doris Adler for successfully “transforming Cleopatra from a royal queen to a royal wench” [2]. Potter’s influential performance left a lasting impact on subsequent actresses. However, during the 1970s and 1980s, prevailing anti-romantic and anti-heroic sentiments prompted productions to accentuate the political elements of the play, diminishing the romantic aspects. The feminist movement also brought increased attention to Cleopatra’s wisdom. In Trevor Nunn’s 1972 version, Janet Suzman’s portrayal emphasized Cleopatra as a shrewd politician rather than a passionate lover, influencing later renditions. Consequently, actresses playing Cleopatra have often been confined to embodying one facet of her complex image: either the majestic queen or the debauched mistress, the cunning politician, or the infatuated lover. David Fuller identifies the primary challenge in portraying Cleopatra as the need “to be both a ‘lass’ and ‘unparalleled,’ ‘royal Egypt’ and ‘no more but e’en a woman’ and “to encompass the range in such a way as to bring its extremes into coherent relation with one another” [3]. Earlier actresses, following Potter’s model, accentuated the sexy and passionate elements, resembling a royal mistress more than a queen. However, modern actresses tend to adopt a portrayal characterized by intelligence and political acumen, often lacking sex appeal and passion to Antony. Critically acclaimed performances by Zoe Caldwell (1967), Janet Suzman (1972), Maggie Smith (1976), and Dorothy Tutin (1977) are regarded as politically astute queens who downplay their passion for Antony. Bernard Crick describes Suzman as “the most marvelously political Cleopatra”, akin to “a bit of a female Henry VIII” [4]. Margaret Tierney [5] observes that

Suzman's Cleopatra appears manipulative, delaying the audience's belief in her love for Antony until Act 5. Comparing Peggy Ashcroft's classic performance with Suzman's, David Fuller notes that Ashcroft infuses tenderness, while Suzman tends to convey manipulative tones [3].

Ashcroft successfully encompassed both the regal queen and passionate lover personas, resembling a fusion of Porter's and Suzman's performances. Overcoming the constraints of her appearance, Ashcroft achieved "the infinite variety of the seductive queen, simultaneously riggish, viperish, imperious, sensuous, and regal" [2]. In 1967, Ann Kinsolving adeptly transitioned between the roles of "empress, coquette, and jealous lover" in her performance [6]. Hollywood luminary Katharine Hepburn took on the role of Cleopatra in 1960, earning acclaim for skillfully blending the queenly and alluring aspects, portraying an "intelligent, passionate, regal Egyptian queen" [2]. The 1987 rendition, directed by Peter Hall, received high praise, with actress Judi Dench, portraying Cleopatra, earning near-unanimous acclaim from critics. Dench was recognized for brilliantly embodying the seemingly "impossible" diversity within Shakespeare's Cleopatra—the comic, shrewish, passionate, and majestic facets [2]. Fuller notes that Dench skillfully combines Ashcroft's enchanting vocals with Suzman's physical theatricality [3]. Cleopatra's complexity renders her a formidable character, and the exploration of this complexity by successive generations of actresses has elevated the Egyptian queen to one of the most beloved characters in Shakespeare's plays.

### 3. Shakespeare's Characterization of Cleopatra

There are contradictions in the image of Cleopatra, with Shakespeare employing ambiguity as a strategic dramatic device to harmonize these conflicting facets. David Cecil [7] stands as the pioneer in suggesting that Shakespeare intentionally embraced this strategy within the play. Scholars like Danby [8] and Mack [9] resonate with the pervasive ambiguity and duality woven into the narrative. Other scholars, including Logan, posit that Shakespeare drew inspiration from Christopher Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, incorporating the characterological technique of ambiguity into *Antony and Cleopatra* [10]. The ambivalence and ambiguity permeating the motivations and behaviors of the two protagonists spark a quest for a comprehensive understanding of their psychology [10]. Logan accentuates that ambiguity not only captivates the audience by shrouding Cleopatra's image in mystery but also "instills a kind of credibility that people are familiar with from their everyday living", making Cleopatra the most thoroughly humanized among the significant characters in the play [10].

The ambiguity of Cleopatra's motives of actions adds to her mystique, raising compelling questions such as her flight during the naval battle at Actium (3.10), her flirtation with Caesar's envoy Thidias (3.13), her decision to feign death through Mardian (4.13), and her offer of treasure to Caesar (5.2) [11]. Most significantly, the profound mystery persists regarding Cleopatra's ultimate decision to commit suicide. Was it a martyrdom for Antony's death, or a refusal to endure the humiliation of captivity following a political defeat? If Cleopatra is viewed solely as an enamored lover of Antony, her actions become challenging to decipher. While Shakespeare's primary focus is on Cleopatra's romantic relationship with Antony, her character transcends this singular dimension. Cleopatra's political acumen emerges prominently when Caesar dispatches Thidias to sever her ties with Antony. Though coerced on the surface, Cleopatra deftly maneuvers the political landscape. Her crisis after Antony's defeat compels her to seek a new patron, evident in her subsequent offer of wealth to Caesar in Act V. Throughout, Cleopatra strives to maintain her regal status while being Antony's lover. After the naval defeat at Actium, she implores Antony's messenger to beseech Caesar for the throne of Egypt for her descendants. Following Antony's demise, she asks Caesar's envoy, Proculeius, to plead for her son's inheritance of the Egyptian throne.

The most contentious enigma revolves around Cleopatra's rationale for taking her own life. If one contends that Cleopatra committed suicide as a form of martyrdom for Antony, this would categorize

her as an enamored lover. Conversely, if one posits that Cleopatra committed suicide due to desperation and an unwillingness to endure the humiliation of captivity, then she can be viewed as a failed politician and a noble queen. The perplexity surrounding Cleopatra's actions, particularly her visit to Caesar and the offering of her wealth, contradicts the expected behavior of someone intent on self-destruction. Certain critics, such as John Wilders, assert that Cleopatra intentionally misleads Caesar into believing she harbors no suicidal intentions, implying that Seleucus is acting under specific instructions [3]. Alternatively, some argue that she resorts to her cunning tactics, attempting to entice Caesar and engage in negotiations. Cleopatra's suicide can be attributed to various factors. As the Queen of Egypt, her demise was not entirely a result of grief following the death of her lover Antony but rather a strategic act to salvage her dignity following unsuccessful negotiations with Caesar. In Act V, Cleopatra emerges as the unequivocal protagonist, grappling with an internal conflict and ultimately choosing to meet her end with regal composure. While expressing a desire for reunion with Antony, she also articulates her apprehension and aversion to becoming a captive in numerous dialogues with her servants. Shakespeare employs the characterological technique of ambiguity and duality in his portrayal of Cleopatra, rendering her character more intricate and captivating by presenting apparent contradictions. In directing Judi Dench as Cleopatra, Peter Hall underscores the character's ambiguity, advising Dench to avoid conveying a singular idea to the audience [10]. Dench successfully executes this directive, allowing the audience to appreciate various facets of Cleopatra's personality.

In conclusion, Shakespeare's adept use of ambiguity serves to present the multifaceted nature of Cleopatra's character. Far from being contradictory, the deliberate ambiguity enhances the enigma surrounding Cleopatra, making her character more mysterious, vivid, and alluring. This dramatic technique endows Cleopatra's image with enduring charm, attracting successive scholars for study and inspiring directors to adapt it for generations.

#### 4. The Underlying Reasons for Cleopatra's Complexities

The depiction of Cleopatra in the play is shaped by historical sources and the Renaissance English imagination of Egyptian culture. Logan notes that while the primary source for the play was Plutarch, Marlowe's influence played a significant role in adapting specific details [10]. While Shakespeare preserves much of Plutarch's plot, his portrayal of Cleopatra deviates from Plutarch's characterization. In Plutarch's account, Cleopatra emerges as an Egyptian queen with political ambitions and active political engagement. Gifted in languages, she could converse in foreign tongues with the representatives of the nations she negotiated with [10]. In contrast, Shakespeare departs from Plutarch's emphasis on politics, choosing instead to focus on the private lives of the characters. Although not indifferent, Shakespeare displays a lesser interest in the political aspects of *Antony and Cleopatra*'s story compared to their romantic entanglements. Thus, unlike Plutarch's ambitious Egyptian queen, Shakespeare's Cleopatra places higher value on her love for Antony. As noted by Logan, she is primarily concerned with the outward symbols and ceremonial aspects of her queenship [10]. When informed of Antony's marriage to Octavia, Cleopatra reacts as a jealous lover, prioritizing Octavia's physical appearance and character over the political implications of the union. However, Shakespeare does maintain Cleopatra's regal dignity as a queen, particularly evident when she requests to participate in the war. In doing so, she emphasizes that, as the leader of a kingdom, she has borne the charge of the battle and must be physically present on the battlefield.

Furthermore, scholars like Logan have identified numerous parallels between Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* and Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, encompassing protagonists, language, and writing techniques. Reuben Brower elucidates that "Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage*...offered the most likely example for the Shakespearian blend in *Antony and Cleopatra* of the Virgilian heroic and the Ovidian erotic" [12]. Cleopatra, akin to Dido, exhibits aggression and

forcefulness, displaying passion in her courtship. Both playwrights deviate from conventional gender roles, creating unexpected and engaging experiences for readers and audiences alike. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the protagonists seamlessly transcend and expand prescribed gender norms. A noteworthy instance of this occurs when Cleopatra appropriates Antony's sword while he is inebriated and attires him in her robes and mantles. In essence, Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra is a fusion of Plutarch's astute and crafty Egyptian queen and Marlowe's assertive lover, Queen Dido of Carthage. This amalgamation contributes to a multifaceted and intricate image of Cleopatra in the play, characterized by complexity and richness.

Moreover, Shakespeare's depiction of Cleopatra's intricate persona was intertwined with exotic imagery of Egypt, resonating with the English people's prevailing conception of the Egypt during that era. Initially, it becomes evident that Cleopatra's image carries an Orientalist bias which portrays her as lascivious, sensual, and exotic. Within the play, Cleopatra's carnal and amorous nature sharply contrasts with Octavia's Roman attributes—holy, cold, and serene. In a moment of Antony's anger upon discovering Cleopatra's flirtation with Caesar's messenger, he lauds Octavia as “a gem of women” (3.13.108) while dismissing Cleopatra as “a morsel and fragment” (3.13.116-17), highlighting Cleopatra's lack of recognition within Roman values [11]. The racial identity assigned to Cleopatra in the play has sparked considerable debate. Dorothea Kehler notes that “the director's choice of leading lady constructs a racial/ethnic identity for Cleopatra that shapes the way the audience reads her sexuality and politics” [13]. The historical Cleopatra's ethnicity is contested; her lineage can be traced back to Macedonian ancestors, yet the possibility of an Egyptian grandmother introduces the notion of her being a hybrid. Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra further adds to the complexity, referring to “the white hand of a lady” when Antony orders Thidias to be whipped. However, Cleopatra in the play is likely neither strictly black nor white but rather described as ‘tawny.’ In the first act, the Roman Philo mentions Cleopatra's “tawny front”, and she herself speaks of a complexion with “Phoebus' amorous pinches black” [13]. Early renditions of Cleopatra featured both white actors and actresses. In the 1980s, scholars began to approach the play from a postcolonial perspective, casting Cleopatra as “the threatening and seductive black African queen” [2]. Over time, there has been a gradual emergence of black Cleopatras, exemplified by actresses like Michele Shay. Nevertheless, Kehler highlights the problematic nature of associating Cleopatra's skin color with outdated notions that link black individuals to heightened sensuality compared to white individuals [13].

In addition to employing Orientalist imagery to depict Egypt and Cleopatra, Shakespeare also allegorically attributed the qualities of Queen Elizabeth I to the character of Cleopatra. Scholars, including Paul Yachnin [14], have presented compelling evidence highlighting the striking parallels between Elizabeth and Cleopatra, including intelligence, charm, assertiveness, a fiery temperament, opulence, and political acumen [15]. Lisa Starks contends that “although Cleopatra is initially described as the African queen and exotic Other, she progressively assumes more of a white English identity than a black Egyptian one throughout the course of the play” [16]. Cleopatra thus is transformed into a symbolic representation of Elizabeth I. In conclusion, Shakespeare masterfully blends historical and dramatic sources, Orientalist imagery, and the persona of Elizabeth I to craft a nuanced and complex portrayal of Cleopatra.

## 5. Conclusion

The allure of Cleopatra as a character resides in the intricate and multifaceted nature of her portrayal. Over the years, scholars have approached Shakespeare's depiction of Cleopatra from various perspectives. Historically, some researchers have characterized her either as a ‘treacherous strumpet,’ attributing Antony's downfall to her actions, or extolled the ‘transcendental love’ shared by this regal couple [12]. Gradually, scholarly attention has shifted towards exploring Cleopatra's political and



racial dimensions. The intricate and glamorous portrayal of Cleopatra not only captivates numerous readers and viewers but also establishes her as one of the most renowned female characters in Shakespeare's plays. This paper delves deeper into Cleopatra's complexity, underscoring her standing as one of the most challenging female roles to interpret. Consequently, a significant debate surrounding the play *Antony and Cleopatra* revolves around the nuanced portrayal of Cleopatra—a role that has been undertaken by many esteemed actresses but successfully embodied by only a few, such as Judi Dench. The complexity inherent in Cleopatra's characterization stems from her simultaneous embodiment of traits as a sensual and passionate beauty and an assertive and forceful queen, oscillating between roles as an infatuated lover and a shrewd politician.

Shakespeare drew upon the works of Plutarch and Marlowe to craft a nuanced and captivating Cleopatra, blending Plutarch's astute statesman-queen with Marlowe's forceful and passionate Carthaginian queen, Dido. The influence of Marlowe's deliberate ambiguity in characterization is evident in this play, and Shakespeare's skillful use of ambiguity unveils the intricacies of Cleopatra's character, portraying her as a fusion of "queen" and "lover". This ambiguity not only engages the reader's imagination but also shrouds Cleopatra's motives in mystery, adding to the allure of her character. Moreover, certain scholars argue that Shakespeare infused elements of Queen Elizabeth I into his portrayal of Cleopatra, drawing parallels in terms of shrewdness, forcefulness, aggression, and extravagance. However, Cleopatra is not a mere Egyptian iteration of Queen Elizabeth; rather, her depiction reflects the Orientalist imaginings of Egypt prevalent in Shakespeare's era and the broader English context. Cleopatra's 'tawny' skin, carnal desires, and passions align with the Orientalist portrayal of women, offering a lens into the prevailing attitudes of the time. Contemporary scholars have shifted focus to Cleopatra's racial identity, with attention drawn to her black African features. From a post-colonial perspective, some researchers argue that Cleopatra was a black or mixed-race queen. As Shakespeare's most intricate heroine, Cleopatra's charm has enraptured both scholars and audiences, enduring across time. Evolving from a devoted lover of Antony to embodying both "queen" and "lover", Cleopatra's image continues to transform, with contemporary interpretations portraying her as a black African queen. Researchers' perspectives on Cleopatra have deepened and broadened, reflecting the ongoing exploration of her complex and fascinating role in both stage performances and literary criticism.

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