Queen Cleopatra in the Eyes of the Western Macho

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This research involves discovering the male western perspective toward the female oriental character Cleopatra the Queen of Egypt by comparing two literary works Antony & Cleopatra by Shakespeare verses Caesar and Cleopatra by Bernard Shaw. Also this research gives a glimpse of the history of how Cleopatra was viewed from Roman point of view. The goal is to show how the western masculine frame of mind looked at the oriental femininity depicted by Cleopatra also; the research will discuss the way both authors displayed the oriental Queen of Egypt Cleopatra in their literary works. Cleopatra was presented as a mystery to all the male figures who wrote about her. In Caesar and Cleopatra, George Bernard Shaw uses his legendary wit to turn ancient history on its head—and to challenge Shakespeare’s view of his two famous protagonists. Political drama meets sparkling comedy as veteran strategist Julius Caesar becomes mentor to the enchanting teenage queen of Roman-occupied Egypt. To conclude, Bernard Shaw portrayed the character of Caesar and Cleopatra unlike Shakespeare's weak representation of Julius Caesar.

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Introduction

Cleopatra (Isis) is a name that is known all over the world. Many authors, scholars and movie markers were fascinated by her life.

Her life was enchanting as a queen, as lover and as a woman from the orient. She ruled Egypt in the golden age of the Roman Empire. She consummated a liaison with Julius Caesar that solidified her grip on the throne and made him fall in love with her. After the assassination of Julius Caesar, she aligned with Mark Antony whom also remarkably fell in love with her. Their passion was the cause of their iconic death.

A lot of literary works and movies displayed Cleopatra as an exotic, witty, seductive, sinful, charming queen who used her body and wits to rule Egypt. This research will discuss how Cleopatra was represented from a Roman and masculine point of view, the two works that were the pillars the research area are: Antony and Cleopatra by William Shakespeare, Caesar and Cleopatra by Bernard Shaw.

Antony and Cleopatra by William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra is a play filled with political intrigue, power struggles, war and its consequences, and the plight of two desperately impassioned lovers. Although the play’s action is slightly
more complicated than Shakespeare’s other tragedies, *Antony and Cleopatra* provides an excellent means for students to study the multiple levels of subject matter contained in historical dramas. Teachers of English, history, political science, social studies, geography, mythology, and drama may all benefit from the themes explored in this play. The play, therefore, provides many opportunities for cross-curricular study.

The very mention of the two title characters, *Antony and Cleopatra*, conjures images of love and the desperate measures taken in pursuit of love. Some have subtitled this play “The Greatest Love Story Ever Told”. Others argue that the play does not depict love, but rather presents a desperate infatuation that destroys a great Roman leader and a noble Egyptian queen. With either interpretation, the play offers a compelling love story that will intrigue students of any age or skill level. Additional themes of divided power, battles with formidable forces, and manipulative enemies and subordinates provide suspense and action. The juxtaposition of love and war is neatly wrapped in Shakespeare’s poetic language, thereby providing a literary work that is compelling and eloquent (Facciponti, 2004, pp. 15, 23, 116).

**Caesar and Cleopatra by Bernard Shaw**

Political comedy at its best, *Caesar and Cleopatra* takes on the themes of imperialism and leadership as only George Bernard Shaw can. Set amidst the Roman conquest of Egypt, the play pits the mature statesmanship of Julius Caesar against the nave ambition of Cleopatra. It imagines Caesar’s first meeting with Cleopatra and their subsequent plotting as Caesar attempts to subdue Egypt and Cleopatra tries to eliminate her brother and rival claimant for the throne. Assassination and intrigue, romance and betrayal, all are dealt with in Shaw’s inimitable comic style. Caesar and Cleopatra represent a mature Shaw, who revolutionized the British theatre by combining exceptionally entertaining comedy with incisive and relevant themes (Bernard, 1913, p. 205).

*Caesar and Cleopatra* is an attempt at the portraiture of a truly great man. It is Shaw’s ninth play, but it is here, in the character of Caesar, that we get for the first time a clear idea of his conception of a great man. Caesar is Shaw’s greatest character thus far. He is a man of rare magnanimity and power; he is a master not only of his mind but also of his environments; he has a purpose of his own and he is endowed with a tremendous will which enable him to manipulate things and beings for the accomplishment of his purpose; he is possessed of wonderful restraint and clemency; he is immune from the weakness which flesh is heir to; he is, says Shaw, naturally great.

“Shakespeare’s Caesar might have been a successful importer of bananas; Shaw’s is a genius whose every speech has the sound of a genius”. Shaw’s Caesar is a very great man but is he the real Julius Caesar? Shaw’s says, “Shakespeare’s Caesar is the reduction ad absurdum of the real Julius Caesar. My Caesar is a simple return to nature and history”. Shaw’s Caesar is in many respects a different man from the Caesar of history. He has represented Caesar as too great to find any joy and peace in this world.

Shaw has attributed to Caesar the qualities of absolute disinterestedness in worldly affairs, freedom from worldly ambition and aversion to political and military glory (Sarathi, 2012, p. 194).

**Cleopatra Through Eyes of History**

As a queen and a public figure, her life in general and her death in specific were reported by historians with anxiety during that period. It is known that history is reported by men of power so lets a peak of how the Roman historians Plutarch and Dio reported Cleopatra’s beauty, life and death.

For she was a woman of surpassing beauty, and at that time, when she was in the prime of her youth, she was
most striking; she also possessed a most charming voice and knowledge of how to make herself agreeable to every one. Being brilliant to look upon and to listen to, with the power to subjugate every one, even a love-sated man already past his prime, she thought that it would be in keeping with her role to meet Caesar, and she reposed in her beauty all her claims to the throne. She asked therefore for admission to his presence, and on obtaining permission adorned and beautified herself so as to appear before him in the most majestic and at the same time pity-inspiring guise. When she had perfected her schemes she entered the city (for she had been living outside of it), and by night without Ptolemy’s knowledge went into the palace (Dio, 2011, pp. XLIL, 4-6, 34).

… Cleopatra sent to Caesar a letter which she had written and sealed; and, putting everybody out of the monument but her two women, she shut the door. Caesar, opening her letter and finding pathetic prayers and entreaties that she might be buried in the same tomb with Antony, soon guessed what was doing. At first he was going himself in all haste, but, changing his mind, he sent others to see. The thing had been quickly done. The messengers came at full speed, and found the guards apprehensive of nothing; but on opening the doors, they saw her stone-dead, lying upon a bed of gold, set out in all her royal ornaments. Iras, one of her women, lay dying at her feet, and Charmion, just ready to fall, scarce able to hold up her head, was adjusting her mistress’s diadem. And when one that came in said angrily, “was this well done of your lady, Charmion?” Extremely well, “she answered, and as became the descendant of so many kings”; and as she said this, she fell down dead by the bedside (Plutarch, 1920, pp. LXXXV, 2-3).

Antony and Cleopatra

Shakespeare portrayed Cleopatra a smart women who can make a man do whatever she wants in a way that is not imaginable. His characters words are the living proof of his projection of her personality.

Antony: She is cunning past man’s though (Shakespeare, 1971, p. 13).

Enobarbus: This cannot be cunning of her; if it be, she makes a shower of rain as well as Jove (Shakespeare, 1971, p. 13).

In other sections of the play Shakespeare drew an image of her as a week, helpless woman and queen without the masculine figure of the play Antony.

Enobarbus: And the business you have broached here cannot be without you; especially that of Cleopatra, which wholly depends on your adobe (Shakespeare, 1971, p. 15).

Cleopatra was seen as a witch and as a lustful figure that used her charms and body to spell Antony and control him as she controlled Caesar before him.

Pompey: But all the charms of love, salt Cleopatra, soften thy lip! Let witchcraft join with beauty, lust with both! Tie up the libertine in a field of feasts, keep his brain fuming (Shakespeare,1971, p. 35).

Agrippa: Royal wench!

She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed:
He plough’d her, and she corpp’d.

Cleopatra was known throughout history and literary works as an image of lust.

Pompay: Can form the lap of Egypt’s widow pluck the ne’er lust-wearied Antony (Shakespeare, 1971, p. 37).

Orient was known to the west as an exotic place inhabited by exotic people the image of Cleopatra sailing from Egypt to the city of Tarsus to meet Antony shows how the west was fascinated by the way she presented herself.
Enobarbus: I will tell you.
The barge she sat in, like a burnish’d throne,
Burn’d on the water: the poop was beaten gold;
Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
The winds were love-sick with them; the oars were silver,
Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
The water which they beat to follow faster,
As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,
It beggar’d all description: she did lie
In her pavilion—cloth-of-gold of tissue—
O’er-picturing that Venus where we see
The fancy outwork nature: on each side her
Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
With divers-colour’d fans, whose wind did seem
To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
And what they undid did (Shakespeare, 1971, p. 49).

Even in the minds of Antony’s soldiers Cleopatra was different from the rest of the women on earth. She was an icon of lust. Although at this point she got older and age didn't pull his wrinkly strings on her.

Enobarbus: I saw her once
Hop forty paces through the public street;
And having lost her breath, she spoke, and panted,
That she did make defect perfection,
And, breathless, power breathe forth.

Enobarbus: Never; he will not:
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, 1971, p. 71).

Cleopatra was seen as a goddess. Her image wearing Isis dress was charming that the soldiers talked about it. Everything around her was holy and interesting.

Caesar: She in the habiliments of the goddess Isis (Shakespeare, 1971, p. 120).

Roman masculine point of view towards Cleopatra was a fallen woman; they judged her because of her relations with the most remarkable Roman leaders Caesar & Antony.

Caesar: Cleopatra hath nodded him to her. He hath given his empire up to a whore (Shakespeare, 1971, p. 101).

Although she was misjudged by the Roman masculine characters in the play put her death was respected and honored even by her worst enemy Octavius Caesar.

Who was fascinated by the way she looked although she was dead.

Caesar: Bravest at the last,
She level I’d at our purposes, and, being royal,  
Took her own way. The manner of their deaths?  
I do not see them bleed (Shakespeare, 1971, p. 203).  
Caesar: O noble weakness!  
If they had swallow’d poison, twould appear  
By external swelling: but she looks like sleep,  
As she would catch another Antony  
In her strong toil of grace (Shakespeare, 1971, p. 205).

Caesar and Cleopatra

Although the play Caesar and Cleopatra is considered a comedy, it shows a great deal of how the masculine characters viewed women of Egypt inferior beings, especially Cleopatra their queen.

BEL AFFRIS. What shall we do to save the women from the Romans?  
BELZANOR. Why not kill them?  
PERSIAN. Because we should have to pay blood money for some of them.  
Better let the Romans kill them: it is cheaper.  
Cleopatra in this play was a young girl 16 years old; she was not viewed as a child.  
She was looked at as a woman and a slave that selling her will be an advantage.  
Cleopatra was viewed in a degrading manner by the characters in the play.  
THE PERSIAN. Cleopatra’s brother Ptolemy is at war with her. Let us sell her to him.  
BELZANOR. We dare not. We are descended from the gods; but Cleopatra is descended from the river Nile.  
Although the play was written 275 years after Antony and Cleopatra and although she was only 16 years old, it was pointed that she is a witch.  
CAESAR (with conviction). Yes I am. I live in a tent; and I am now in that tent, fast asleep and dreaming.  
Do you suppose that I believe you are real, you impossible little dream witch?  
The western perspective towards Egyptians was considered a recessed one.  
Especially that Cleopatra was their queen which also shows how she was seen as the queen of gypsies.  
CAESAR. Queen of the Gypsies, you mean  
By all means she was young, she was portrayed as a puzzle to men that they cannot figure out how to handle or treat her she was charming since she was a young girl.  
PERSIAN. Cleopatra is not yet a woman: neither is she wise. But she already troubles men’s wisdom.

Conclusions

History means his story. This research spotted light on how the masculine vista, reported Cleopatra’s life from a mannish point of view. Cleopatra was presented as a mystery to all the male figures who wrote about her. It never occurred to them to report how a brave woman she was who had used all the means she could think of to rule and protect her country. She was not displayed as a mother who was trying to protect her children and keep them safe from all the enemies their mother had to be aware of. She was not viewed as a politician who is capable to rule a country and live in prosperity. On the contrary, she was presented as a witch, seductive,
illusive and lustful woman.

References