

# Evasion of Stigma: Study of Gender Problem in *Antony and Cleopatra*

Yuiko Okajima<sup>1)</sup>

**Abstract** : This essay focuses on the complexed emotional reactions of the audience in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and aims to explore the causes for those reactions by analyzing the gendered identity of the heroine. Her notoriety, or her emasculation of the hero and her cunning self-protection, is supposed to arouse from the audience a feeling of alienation from and antipathy for Cleopatra. However, her theatrical identity, which is formed mainly through her own self-defining narratives and her elaborate manipulation of self-image, induces the audience to remove antipathy for her. Cleopatra's deliberate attempt to maintain her queenly image enables her to retain dignity despite the slander on her immorality. Also, her theatrical identity shown toward the climax of the play, in which we can see the emphasis on wifehood and the absence of motherhood, fits the idealistic image for femininity that the conventional patriarchy has invented for the benefit of the male. Though she is partly transgendered, Cleopatra remains within the domain of the conventional patriarchy after all, and this restrains the audience from feeling antipathy for the heroine. The theatrical empathy for Cleopatra rather contributes to the social fixation of the conventional gender model. The attempt to reinterpret Cleopatra's theatrical identity thus allows us to realize the hidden gender bias, which exists still in the present age.

**Keywords** : Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, gender, heroism

## 1. Introduction

In Shakespearean tragedies and historical plays, “unfeminine” heroines such as Lady Macbeth, Joan of Arc, and Margaret in the first tetralogy, give certain thrills to the audience through their actions that seem transgendered and therefore heroic. Yet their heroic impressions do not persist until the end. Although the scenes of their predominance over masculinity are indeed some of the highlights of each drama, their debased femininity is disclosed and their dramatic presence is eventually peripheral. Lady Macbeth becomes mentally distracted, and her death is only reported. Joan of Arc is forced to confess her adultery and pregnancy, and is executed as a witch. Margaret suddenly loses her toughness after her son is killed, and is banished as a prisoner. Those female characters are deprived of their masculine masks and deepen uncanny witchlike impressions, and they are expelled to the periphery of the theatrical space. The audience is thus induced to have a sense of alienation from them.

However, the heroine in *Antony and Cleopatra* is quite different from those female characters mentioned above. Like them, Cleopatra seems to be in a sense an extraordinary threat to masculinity: she changes masculine Antony into an anti-hero. She ensnares Antony with her “charms” and degenerates the hero by seducing him into indulgence in Egyptian debauchery. Her bewitchment is also regarded as the crucial factor in Antony's defeat in the Battle of Actium. In spite of her notorious emasculation of the hero, she nevertheless does not remain a mere wicked female character. She retains dignity as a queen throughout the drama and rather keeps fascinating the audience. This essay will focus on the incongruity between these theatrical reactions: the expected feeling of alienation from the heroine and the involuntary attention to and empathy for her. The aim of this essay is to explore the background of Cleopatra's success in evading the stigma of being an anti-heroine mainly by analyzing the narratives concerning her gendered identity, and to consider the gender problem behind the theatrical representation of Cleopatra.

## 2. *Show me like a queen*

*Antony and Cleopatra* was first performed around 1607, four years after the death of Elizabeth I and the enthronement of James I. It was the time when popular attitudes toward royal authority were complicated: nostalgia for the last queen and vague disappointment with the new king were intermingled in mass psychology. Yet the national pride of England, which

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1) Monozukuri Department, Tokyo Metropolitan College of Industrial Technology

was established in the glorious Tudor dynasty, was still maintained and the national power was directed toward overseas expansion. Heroes with military prowess were enthusiastically welcomed in such a social context of territorial expansion. On the other hand, it was assumed to be natural in early modern England that women should be subordinate to men, and that chastity and modesty were considered as the most idealistic female virtues so that men could easily control them.<sup>2)</sup>

Seen from such an androcentric point of view, Cleopatra appears to deviate from the conventional gender model. She is disobedient and hard to control for the male. Unlike Joan and Margaret, whose “unfemininity”, or gross deviation from the conventional gender image, leads to their anti-heroic endings as scapegoats, however, it seems perplexing that such a notorious and wily queen avoids provoking constant antipathy from the audience and even retains her dramatic presence until the very last. This section will explore the background which causes the difference in the dramatic presence between Cleopatra and those anti-heroines by focusing on how Cleopatra’s theatrical identity is constructed through the narratives.

Cleopatra is represented as the target both of disapproval and of admiration in the narratives of male characters. In Philo’s opening derision of Antony, she is indicated as an annoying outsider with an emphasis on her sensuality and exoticism:

Nay, but this dotage of our general’s  
O’erflows the measure. Those his goodly eyes,  
That o’er the files and musters of the war  
Have glowed like plated Mars, now bend, now turn  
The office and devotion of their view  
Upon a tawny front. His captain’s heart,  
Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst  
The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper  
And is become the bellows and the fan  
To cool a gypsy’s lust. (1.1. 1-10)<sup>3)</sup>

Though Caesar and Pompey similarly imply their antipathy for the Circean queen, who emasculates the hero, Cleopatra is extravagantly admired as a rare woman, seen from Antony’s side. Enobarbus’s concise description of the queen in the following clearly expresses Cleopatra’s infinite attractiveness, which arouses insatiable masculine desire.

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. (2.2.245-250)

What is common at the bottom of those conflicting emotions toward Cleopatra, that is, antipathy and admiration, is considered to be the masculine desire for an extraordinary woman. Though it seems contradictory, the antipathy for the uncontrollable is actually analogous to the frustration at being unable to conquer the one that should be within the reach of male dominance.

Despite her passionate and impulsive actions, Cleopatra rationally recognizes her own sexual value in the male-centered society. Her reminiscence about past affairs suggests her acute self-consciousness, in which she regards herself as an object to be sexually consumed by gods and heroes:

Think on me,  
That am with Phoebus’ amorous pinches black

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2) Mary Beth Rose, p30.

3) The quotations from *Antony and Cleopatra* in this essay are based on the editions of The New Cambridge Shakespeare Series.

And wrinkled deep in time. Broad-fronted Caesar,  
 When thou wast were above the ground I was  
 A morsel for a monarch. And great Pompey  
 Would stand and make his eyes grow in my brow;  
 There would he anchor his aspect, and die  
 With looking on his life. (1.5.28-35)

Her keen awareness of how she has been gazed at and desired by men is what makes Cleopatra seem distinct from those anti-heroines mentioned above. Cleopatra enhances her own value as a woman by defining herself as the target of the legendary heroes' desire. In contrast, most of those anti-heroines do not reveal their own self-consciousness in their narrative. They may temporarily entertain the audience with their eccentric actions, which can create a transgendered impression, but they seem to lack the will to define who they are. So their identity remains obscure, and this encourages the audience to interpret those anti-heroines just as eccentric and uncanny women and thus to feel alienation from them. Though Joan tells of her saintly origin, this is only a mask: it turns out to be false and this makes her image as a witch seem all the more convincing.

Cleopatra's self-conscious attempt to prevent her disgrace is also found in her elaboration to retain dignity as the Egyptian queen after their defeat in the Battle of Actium. Since she understands her own utility value for Caesar, Cleopatra realizes his hidden intention to exploit her as a display of his triumph to enhance his heroic image: "for her life in Rome / Would be eternal in our triumph" (5.1.65-66). Noticing such a political motive of Caesar, she objectively imagines and vividly dramatizes the scene of humiliation with her own narratives.

Now, Iras, what think'st thou?  
 Thou an Egyptian puppet shall be shown  
 In Rome as well as I. 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 vapour.  
 ...  
 Saucy lictors  
 Will catch at us like strumpets, and scald rhymers  
 Ballad us out o'tune. 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  
 Ith' posture of a whore. (5.2.206-220)

Her intense self-consciousness and imagination urge Cleopatra to recognize the absolute necessity to avoid such a disgraced exposure of herself in order to retain royal dignity. She thus produces the drama of her own death with queenly dignity before being exploited by Caesar.

Now Charmian!  
 Show me, my women, like a queen. Go fetch  
 My best attires. I am again for Cydnus,  
 To meet Mark Antony. Sirrah Iras, go –  
 Now, noble Charmian, we'll dispatch indeed –  
 And when thou hast done this chare I'll give thee leave  
 To play till Doomsday. Bring our crown and all.  
 ...

Let him come in. What poor an instrument  
 May do a noble deed! He brings me liberty.  
 My resolution's placed, and I have nothing  
 Of woman in me. Now from head to foot  
 I am marble-constant; now the fleeting moon  
 No planet is of mine. (5.2.225-239)

Presenting a queenly appearance, she makes serpents bite her breast and dies. Such a self-determined and self-sufficient way to end her own life is praised as “bravest” (329) and “being royal” (330) even by Caesar and hence her queenly dignity is successfully maintained in the end.

Cleopatra's acute sense of self-awareness and her elaborate attempt to protect self-image give us the illusion that a female character on stage can be an autonomous human being that is able to imagine herself as an object of others' gaze and to act according to her own will. This is what makes Cleopatra a distinctive female protagonist in Shakespearean tragedy. Although most of the male protagonists in Shakespearean tragedies have some introspective aspect, the heroines with anti-climactic endings seem to lack such self-consciousness and subjectivity. They have almost no moments of self-definition or introspection. They may be outstanding in that their actions partially seem transgendered – deviate from the conventional gender model, but their impact is only limited. They end as eccentric but peripheral characters that only temporarily attract the gaze of the audience, unlike Cleopatra, who successfully convinces the audience of her intense dramatic presence by clarifying her identity and controlling her self-image.

### 3. *Husband, I come!*

We have discussed so far what is behind the distinctiveness of Cleopatra's dramatic presence. But this is not an adequate explanation for the erasure of her notoriety. In addition to her emasculation of Antony in Alexandria, it seems morally unacceptable for Cleopatra to betray Antony, to whom she is supposed to devote all her passion, and to submit to his opponent Caesar for her self-protection. From the dramaturgic point of view, however, Cleopatra ends in evading the stigma and wins the empathy of the audience. This section will consider what saves Cleopatra from disgrace and what is behind the audience's empathy by observing her gendered identity especially in the scenes after the Battle of Actium.

After their defeat in the Battle of Actium, Cleopatra's passion for Antony seems to be restrained and her behavior becomes increasingly political and self-protective. She tries to conserve the national interests of Egypt as a sovereign rather than to please Antony as his lover. She implies to Caesar's follower Thidias her unwilling “embrace” of Antony and shows her ready obedience to Caesar.

THIDIAS He knows that you embrace not Antony  
 As you did love, but as you feared him.  
 CLEOPATRA O!  
 THIDIAS The scars upon your honour therefore he  
 Does pity as constrained blemishes  
 Not as deserved.  
 CLEOPATRA He is a god and knows  
 What is most right. Mine honour was not yielded,  
 But conquered merely.  
 ...  
 Most kind messenger,  
 Say to great Caesar this in deputation:  
 I kiss his conqu'ring hand. Tell him I am prompt  
 To lay my crowns at's feet, and there to kneel.  
 Tell him, from his all-obeying breath I hear  
 The doom of Egypt. (3.13.57-79)

In contrast with her self-protective detachment from her lover, Antony's psychological dependence on his lover deepens as their defeat is decisive. As Enobarbus's later aside "Caesar, thou hast subdued/ His [Antony's] judgement too!" (3.13.36-37) sounds persuasive, the audience is induced to direct their attention to the hero's anti-heroic decline and to the abnormality of his passionate dependence on his lover.

I have offended reputation,  
A most unnoble swergering.

...

Egypt, thou knew'st too well  
My heart was to thy rudder tied by th'strings,  
And thou shouldst tow me after. O'er my spirit  
Thy full supremacy thou knew'st, and that  
Thy beck might from the bidding of the gods  
Command me. (3.11. 48-60)

Antony's involuntary subordination to a woman who is ignorant of wars is engraved as his loss of heroism on the audience's mind. Like Othello, who believes that his wife committed adultery and kills her as punishment, Antony also curses Cleopatra and repeatedly expresses his wish to kill her.

All is lost

This foul Egyptian hath betrayed me.  
My fleet hath yielded to the foe, and yonder  
They cast their caps up and carouse together  
Like friends long lost. Triple-turned whore! 'Tis thou  
Hast sold me to this novice, and my heart  
Makes only wars on thee. Bid them all fly;  
For when I am revenged upon my charm,  
I have done all. Bid them all fly, Begone!

...

Betrayed I am.

O this foul soul of Egypt! This grave charm,  
Whose eye becked forth my wars and called them home,  
Whose bosom was my crownnet, my chief end,  
Like a right gipsy hath at fast and loose  
Beguiled me to the very heart of loss!

...

The witch shall die!

To the young Roman boy she hath sold me, and I fall  
Under this plot – she dies for't. (4.12. 9-49)

On the other hand, Cleopatra shows an unresistant attitude toward Antony's resentment toward her. She just begs his pardon for her cowardly retreat in the battle and also does not try to disprove his slander on her inconstancy. When she notices Antony's unrestrainable fury at her betrayal, she decides to stay in the mausoleum and sends the false news of her death to Antony, which results in his unsuccessful attempt to commit a heroic suicide. Furthermore, she refuses to go to the dying Antony, who ardently hopes for the last kiss, but lifts him into the mausoleum where she stays lest she should be caught and exposed in the "imperious show of the full-fortuned Caesar." Such self-preserving behavior of Cleopatra should appear to be immoral and censurable, but she nevertheless escapes from popular aversion. On the contrary, she even wins the audience's empathy as a heroine after all.

This discrepancy between the expected criticism and the actual empathy of the audience is considered to result from the complexed representation of the heroine's gendered identity that is revealed after Antony's death. Cleopatra evades her own responsibility for the degeneration of the hero by attributing the tragic ending of Antony's life to "the false huswife Fortune" (4.15.46). She then plays the role of the glorifier of Antony. His heroic masculinity, which Cleopatra herself used to damage, is now restored through her own narrative depiction of Antony. Cleopatra glorifies Antony with these magnificent epithets: "the crown o'th'earth," "the garland of the war," and "soldiers' pole" (4.15.65-67). She also enhances the value of his presence by expressing the feeling of meaninglessness of her life in the world where Antony no longer exists: "Shall I abide / In this dull world, which in thy absence is / No better than a sty?" (62-64). She reveals her own feeble femininity after Antony's death: she recognizes that she herself is "No more but e'en a woman, and commanded / By such poor passion as the maid that milks / And does the meanest chares" (78-80). The audience is induced to newly build up Cleopatra's image as a powerless worshiper who is dependent on Antony.

The gendered dependence of Cleopatra upon Antony is most clearly represented in the way she calls him in her last moments:

Methinks I hear  
 Antony call. I see him rouse himself  
 To praise my noble act.  
 ...  
 Husband, I come. (5.2.277-281)

For the first time in the play, Cleopatra defines herself as Antony's wife, though in fact she is not his legitimate spouse. Their relationship as a married couple is authorized and glorified even by Caesar, who in the past made Antony marry his sister for political purposes.

She shall be buried by her Antony.  
 No grave upon the earth shall clip in it  
 A pair so famous. High events as these  
 Strike those that make them; and their story is  
 No less in pity than his glory which  
 Brought them to be lamented. (352-357)

Her identity as Antony's wife no longer makes Cleopatra deviate from the conventional gender values in which females should be subordinate to males. Now that she is confined within the framework of the patriarchal social values, Cleopatra changes from the menace to masculinity into a loyal supporter of androcracy. Despite her self-preserving cunning she used to employ, Cleopatra thus evades the stigma of being a morally unacceptable woman in the end.

Another loophole that saves the heroine from popular aversion may be found in her lack of motherhood. Cleopatra is mentioned as a mother in the play, but the aspect of her identity as a mother is never vividly depicted. She shows no maternal affection for or preoccupation with her own children. She treats her son merely as the heir of the kingdom:

If your master  
 Would have a queen his beggar, you must tell him  
 That majesty, to keep decorum, must  
 No less beg than a kingdom. If he please  
 To give me conquered Egypt for my son,  
 He gives me so much of mine own as I  
 Will kneel to him with thanks. (5.2.15-21)

Cleopatra also tries to take no measures to benefit her children after her death, though Drabella informs her of the schedule of their transfer to Rome beforehand.<sup>4)</sup> No emotional bond is thus implied between Cleopatra and her children.

Such a female figure without motherhood should be rather welcomed in male-oriented social values because motherhood is a potential threat to the fantasy of heroic masculinity that has been invented and reproduced in the androcentric society. A complete male self is attained through the exclusion of the female element from his identity, and motherhood is the most difficult female trace to eradicate because it is the very origin of selfhood. In her very influential book *Suffocating Mothers*, Janet Adelman observes the root of popular aversion to motherhood from a psychoanalytic viewpoint:

Contemporary object-relations psychoanalysis locates differentiation from the mother as a special site of anxiety for the boy-child, who must form his specifically masculine selfhood against the matrix of her overwhelming femaleness; ... Cultural practice in fact formalized both the "femaleness" of the boy-child and the need to leave that femaleness behind in order to become a man, enforcing the equation of masculine identity with differentiation from the mother through its own differentiating ceremony. (7)

Mary Beth Rose also points out the popular wish to expel motherhood in the early modern England. She describes the exclusion of motherhood from the center of conventional patriarchal society in her analysis of the royal authority of Elizabeth I in her book *Heroism and Gender in Early Modern Literature*.

...although there were various constructions of motherhood in Renaissance England, and although these were changing, all ideological agendas about the family agreed more or less ambivalently that maternity was incompatible with the public domain. The direct evocation of the queen as mother was far more likely to stimulate anxiety than to provide reassurance. (34)

Despite her cunning employed to seduce the hero, which appears to be both thrilling and morally unacceptable to the audience, Cleopatra rather plays the role of strengthening the social fantasy of heroic masculinity after all. Cleopatra is virtually depicted with no indication of motherhood, which is a potential menace to androcracy, and her subordination to Antony – the roles as his worshiper and ultimately as his wife – comes to be emphasized toward the end of the play. Her theatrical identity is reconstructed along with male desire so that it may not disturb the heroic fantasy in which the female is dominated by the male and rendered powerless. Cleopatra thus succeeds in evading the stigma. Or rather, she is willingly accepted by the audience after all since their mind is unconsciously controlled by the conventional social values of androcracy.

#### 4. Conclusion

This essay has explored the theatrical factors in Cleopatra's winning the audience's empathy in spite of her notoriety, and argued that the distinctiveness of her dramatic presence results from her elaborate manipulation of her own self-image. And the gendered representation of her theatrical identity enables Cleopatra to evade the stigma of being a mere cunning emasculator. Though she establishes and retains her own prominent individuality as a female character through the narratives of self-definition and self-production, the way in which her gendered identity is represented – the emphasis on wifehood and the exclusion of motherhood – assures the popular fantasy of heroic masculinity. Cleopatra's theatrical survival as a heroine contradictorily implies the gender bias that is ingrained still in modern society. The audience involuntarily plays a significant role in reproducing the gender bias when they are entertained by Cleopatra's actually fake deviation and feel empathy for the tragic heroine.

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4) 5.2.197-203.

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