The Stage is the Court and All the Players Merely Copies: Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra as Propaganda

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Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* as Propaganda

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Ginnye Cubel

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The Stage Is the Court and All the Players Merely Copies:

Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* as Propaganda

In 1603 the world as England knew it changed. After forty-five years Elizabeth I, Queen of England, and last surviving Tudor was dead and James VI of Scotland was ascending the throne. Despite several differences between the new king and the old queen, there were similarities in their patronage of the arts. Enthralled by theatrical performances, one of James’ first acts as king was to offer royal patronage to William Shakespeare’s theatre company and give them the title, The King’s Men. But it is likely that James’ love of the theatre wasn’t his only reason for patronizing Shakespeare’s theatre troupe.

According to David W. Bevington, Professor Emeritus in the Humanities and in English Language and Literature at the University of Chicago, Shakespeare’s “men received the title of King’s men in recognition not only of their talent but of their pro-Scottish dramatic activity” (23). Ascending the throne in a foreign country after a much beloved queen has passed away is no easy task. James needed all the help proving to the English people that he was worthy to rule them as an absolute monarch. And there was no better way to reach the people than through the pervasive art of theatrical performances which often, “performed editorial rather than newsgathering functions, and was in fact a “review” in the style of *Punch*, caricaturing everyone in public life” (2). Plays and theatrical performances were not in the business of reporting the news but rather critiquing and reviewing politically relevant events.
This paper seeks to explore the idea that Shakespeare's historical drama *Antony and Cleopatra* is in part a propaganda piece meant to bolster support for James while at the same time condemning Elizabeth’s previous rule. This paper will first examine the role of theatre in conveying political ideas and the specific political causes Shakespeare was involved in. Focus will then shift to Shakespeare's work *Antony and Cleopatra* and the political ideologies conveyed in the work. Furthermore, the paper will specifically focus on the differences and similarities between the images of Cleopatra the character and Elizabeth the Queen. I argue that Cleopatra is constructed as an image of Elizabeth that at once condemns her reign and revels in it. Scholars have already done a broad amount of research and I go on to add my own interpretation of the play and the representations of Elizabeth as the character Cleopatra and James as the character Caesar.

I.

If all the world is a stage, then the theatre may offer perspectives on a particular world. In the late 1500s and early 1600s the most effective means of mass communication was the theatre. Despite the invention of the printing press nearly a century earlier, the vast majority of English subjects were illiterate and unable to understand print. The public theatre, a space where news could be transmitted orally to hundreds of people at one time, became the outlet for dissemination of ideas (Mclean 1), rather like TV today. A visual and oral performance, a theatrical performance, would circulate political and cultural opinions on a variety of issues meant to sway the
audience’s opinion. The talent of both the playwright and the actors could move
audiences in everything from revolt to reassurance that social institutions would
remain intact.

Dr. John Brannigan, a writer on contemporary literary theories, suggests that,
“Literary texts can have effects on the course of history, on the social and political ideas
and beliefs of their time” (418). Literature has the ability to change history and opinion
by virtue of its pervasive nature. It has the ability to not only circulate ideas widely but
also preserve them for long periods of time. Even after the author is dead or has
stopped circulating a particular idea, it can still be promoted through performance. The
literature of the play and the subsequent performance was especially important in
Elizabethan England for their abilities to soothe social anxieties about gender and
power.

The Elizabethan era was one of great change politically: Elizabeth, a woman,
ascended the throne in 1558 and ruled for more than forty-five years as a virgin. A
predominately patriarchal society, England was anxious about its queen. Louis Adrian
Montrose, an American literary theorist and scholar, notes in “Shaping Fantasies:
Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture”,

From the very beginning of her reign, Elizabeth’s parliaments and
counselors urged her to marry and produce an heir. There was a deeply
felt and loudly voiced need to insure a legitimate succession, upon which
the welfare of the whole people depended. But there must also have been
another, more obscure motivation behind these requests: the political
nation, which was wholly a nation of men, seems at times to have found it
frustrating or degrading to serve a female prince—a woman who was
herself unsubjected to any man... (451)
Not only was Elizabeth a woman and socially speaking, inferior, but also her refusal to marry was defiance to the patriarchal structure and a liability for succession to the throne. By occupying the top spot in the political sphere and refusing to marry and bring a man in to occupy that space, she was upending ingrained ideas of gender roles and making her subjects nervous. If this long perceived idea of men monopolizing power was unstable, then it might unsettle other instabilities. Additionally, Elizabeth’s refusal to marry and produce a legitimate heir left the English throne open and vulnerable to foreign rule. Already having suffered through the reign of Bloody Mary Tudor and her foreign marriage and fanatical Catholic views, the English people were disinclined to open up their kingdom to outside rule. An English successor with Protestant views would be the ideal candidate but succession would be unsure at Elizabeth’s death, as she had no direct English relatives.

These anxieties about gender roles and succession of power manifested themselves throughout the theatre, most notably in Shakespeare’s own plays. The great bard gave images of royalty in plays such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Richard II* to reflect these anxieties. For instance, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Oberon claims he is able to win back the wily Fairy Queen by anointing her eyes with ‘Dian’s bud’ or virginity. As a result of this passage, Montrose states that Shakespeare “re-mythologizes the cult of the Virgin Queen in such a way as to sanction a relationship of gender and power that is personally and politically inimical to Elizabeth” (452). Essentially, because Oberon is able to recreate the Fairy Queen as a virgin he is able to subject her again to his control, as the ethos of patriarchal society requires control of a woman’s body to either her father or husband. Thus, the virgin—Elizabeth’s everlasting
symbol—is subject to the male no matter what her social or political status is. Elizabeth then, despite being queen was symbolically speaking, still within the constructs of a male dominated society. On the opposite side of things, Richard II tells the tale of a despotic ruler who is overthrown and replaced by a noble. The play not only questions the idea of divine rule but also draws eerie parallels to Elizabeth and her reign (Bevington 4). The questioning of divine right to rule in Richard II brings to light the many issues surrounding Elizabethan power structures. Namely that Elizabeth may have no more claim to the throne than any well-educated subject in the kingdom. And all these questions and challenges were brought to a wide audience via the theatre. The theatre then, was the perfect medium for transmitting ideas about gender and power in Elizabethan society.

After Elizabeth’s death and the subsequent end of the Elizabethan era, theatrical performances continued to play an important role in circulating ideas about gender and power. James VI of Scotland and Elizabeth’s successor to the English throne saw the theatre as an opportunity to bolster support for his reign.

A renowned scholar and lover of theatre, one of James’ early acts was to patent the theatre company associated with Shakespeare and named it the “King’s Men” (Mclean 1). This outstanding patronage is a sign of James’ sincere love of the theatre. However, I suggest that James’ patronage wasn’t completely earnest—there were political motives behind patronizing the theatrical arts. In Ralph Mclean’s article “James VI and I and His Patronage of the Arts” he suggests that James was aware of the potential for theatrical performances to convey his political ideas, namely, his desire to unite Scotland and England under one monarchy (1). Before taking the throne in 1603,
James was the king of Scotland and upon his ascension to the English throne, still wore the Scottish crown. His desire to merge the two kingdoms under one banner (Great Britain) stemmed from the idea that the kingdoms would be stronger united than divided. It would also combine the resources of both to create a strong force against opposing countries. In addition to combining the kingdoms, another political goal James worked hard to advance was one of peace. Upon ascending the throne he was “reluctant to embrace any policy that might lead to hostility abroad...[and] his first major action as king of England was to end Elizabeth’s long war with Spain” (Davies 126). A policy of peace was James’ objective and he needed to convince the Spanish-hating English to end the war on peaceful terms. And he attempted to do so by elevating the idea of peace to one of great value.

James’ made his intention to combine the thrones clear from the beginning—the only thing standing in his way was Parliament. But a propaganda campaign through theatre—which would reach members of Parliament and the general populace—could start to shift things James’ way. Just as Elizabeth before him had constructed an elaborate, virginal image of herself to resolve anxieties about her reign James created an Augustan image to endear himself to his subjects. Caesar August, as an historical figure known for bringing unity and peace to the widespread Roman empire, was an ideal figure and image for James to emulate as his own political agendas corresponded respectively with his desire to unify Scotland and England and to end the war with Spain. And with Shakespeare’s help, James would be able to help establish and perpetuate this image through the play Antony and Cleopatra.
II.

*Antony and Cleopatra* was recorded on official registers in 1607, just a few short years after Elizabeth’s death and James’ ascension to the English throne. The play is a complex interweaving of history, gender concerns, and politics that ultimately witnesses the destruction of a wanton Egyptian queen and triumph of a noble Roman general: a theme James could capitalize on.

From the beginning of his ascension the image of peace and prosperity James attempted to promote closely paralleled the Elizabethan and Jacobean fascination with ancient Greek and Roman literature. In both his coronation and later propaganda movements James compared himself to the great Roman, Caesar Augustus (Davies 124-5). Caesar not only brought the divided triumvirate under one rule but also brought peace (125). By comparing himself to Caesar, James evoked images of consolidation and peace—his two main political ambitions. Furthermore, not only was he able to accomplish a smooth and favorable transition to power but he also did it as a man. Elizabeth’s image as a virgin made her thoroughly female and placed her in stark contrast with the main patriarchal idea that women did not participate in politics. James’ ascension to the throne could then be seen as a triumph of man over woman and a restoration of patriarchal values. This restoration of patriarchal values mirrors the restoration of patriarchal politics to the land of Egypt after Cleopatra dies and Caesar takes the throne.

While James probably never specifically requested Shakespeare to write a play of pure propaganda it is not unrealistic to suggest that the pressure to support a new
the king's patronage put the theatre troupe associated with Shakespeare in a very prominent position, elevating the dramatic arts to another level and placing the actors and writers in socially coveted positions. In fact, the actors in the company were allowed to refer to themselves as "gentlemen" (Mclean 1). But as in most instances of dealing with patrons, the number one objective is to impress them—especially if your patron is a king. As Mclean notes in his article "the King's Men need[ed] the king for support" (1). Alienating the king's friendliness and patronage would not serve Shakespeare or his theatre troupe well. Shakespeare writing a play that reflected the ideals of gender and power promoted by his new patron would have only helped the King's Men rise further in James' esteem and patronage.

In his article "The Politics of Antony and Cleopatra," Paul Rose notes "Antony and Cleopatra is a very reassuring play. At the end society is preserved by the triumph of Caesar, which brings with it the beginning of the Pax Romana. It is all very reassuring, or at least, it was—for the Elizabethans" (379). The idea of consolidation (dissolution of the triumvirate) and the resulting peace in Antony and Cleopatra not only mirror James' political objectives but also provides the added comfort of reassurance for England's subjects. Because James was already promoting himself as the next Caesar, the leap wasn't too far for Shakespeare or his audience (Davies 124). While Antony and Cleopatra mixes in elements of James' propaganda I want to make the case that by extension the play presents Elizabeth's memory fondly as Cleopatra. And in doing so, the play raises several questions about gender and politics.
Elizabethan society, and the eras and cultures preceding it, were predominately patriarchal societies that believed women were inferior to men on a social, political, and economic scale. In Louis Adrian Montrose’s essay “‘Shaping Fantasies’: Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture” he notes that in Elizabethan society there is a distinct “interplay between representations of gender and power in a stratified society in which authority is everywhere invested in men—everywhere, that is, except at the top” (439). For Elizabethans, power and gender were confusing topics: conventional societal notions placed men in the highest positions of power. But a woman held the highest position of power in the kingdom—the monarchy. Reconciling the ideals of a patriarchal society with the actuality of Elizabethan society resulted in two specific portrayals of Elizabeth’s gender: the virgin and the female prince.

Affectionately known to her subjects as the “Virgin Queen,” Elizabeth’s sexuality (or lack thereof) became an important topic for her subjects. She was at once both a woman and a man—she had the body of a woman but more or less behaved like a man, ruling her kingdom with a firm hand. This was puzzling to 16th century society whose rigid constructs of gender firmly placed women in the domestic sphere far away from politics. Elizabeth was an entity that challenged previously held notions. And if there’s one thing a culture has trouble with, it is a break in long-held conventions. The people of Elizabeth’s era needed a way to define Elizabeth and place her in a specific category so she was easier to understand and work with. As such, Elizabeth was defined as a type of woman out of the typical sphere of womanhood—the virgin. Since Elizabeth showed
no real interest in marrying her people established her as the everlasting virgin. In Susan Frye’s *The Competition for Representation*, “The representations of her body assigned to the queen by her subjects demonstrate their anxiety about the roles and standards appropriate to a female prince” (13). Elizabeth’s metaphoric body literally became the property of her subjects as they tried to understand what to do with a female monarch. The connotation of the name “Virgin Queen” reflects the reverence and adoration the people of England felt for their queen. After all, she brought peace to England after the violent reign of her sister Mary Tudor and began to raise the country’s status to a major world power through accumulation of wealth. In essence, the people of England adored their queen and elevated her to the highest position of the female gender, the “virgin.” Conferred with this supreme status, Elizabeth was now outside the sphere of the typical and the usual rules did not apply to her. As such, her gender did not conflict with her position as monarch because her virginal status placed her outside of all typical patriarchal rules. But while her subjects were creating this image of the virgin, Elizabeth was fashioning a much different image—that of the female prince.

Realizing the anxieties created about her gender, Elizabeth worked to fashion an image of herself that existed within both the patriarchal ideology and the reality of her rule. Elizabeth produced for herself an ambiguous gender that combined aspects of both the male and the female. She often declared herself female while taking on significant male roles and responsibilities (Frye 6) and even referred to herself as a ‘female prince.’ Her exact gender becomes hard to define and hard to place in the context of Elizabethan society but this construction was necessary in order for Elizabeth to “justify her right to rule England and to reduce common anxiety among her
subjects'; [she] exhaustively used conflicting gender expectations for females as well as the theory of absolute monarchy" (Kim 102). Elizabeth used the stereotypes of femininity—such as motherhood and flirtation—to engender herself to her subjects while at the same time ruling with the iron fist of a prince.

Tired of the tyrannical rule of her sister Mary, the people of England welcomed Elizabeth to the throne with high hopes for improvement. But when it became doubtful that Elizabeth would marry and fit into the assigned female gender role, Elizabeth had to find another way to soothe her subject's fears. *The Queen Majesty's Passage*, a document that recorded the queen's coronation process casts "Elizabeth as a mother who receives metaphoric children from the city and as a daughter who receives advice...[it] assigns her the domestic roles that attempt to contain the power and voice of women" (Frye 25). Elizabeth's coronation process was one of the major times in which the people of England could see the queen up close and an exceptional opportunity for Elizabeth to promote her own image. In *The Queen Majesty's Passage*, it is clear that an image of Elizabeth presented was that of mother/daughter/dependent of the English people. These specifically female roles allowed for Elizabeth to promote an image of her inherent femaleness. But at the same time, she complemented this image of absolute femaleness with the image of absolute monarchy.

During her reign, Elizabeth ruled with a firm hand. While she had advisors and council members to give recommendations, she always had the last say. Even more so she had the power to censor. She actively "exercised the power to censor, interrupt, or critique what did not please her" (Frye 11). Elizabeth, as queen of England, reserved for herself the right to control the avenues of speech and opinion when she found it to her
disadvantage. This exercise of power is consistent with the idea of an absolute monarch, which confers unlimited power allowing even for censorship of the arts. In this way Elizabeth was able to perpetuate the idea of her absolute reign and establish herself as an absolute monarch. Through this avenue Elizabeth was able to identify herself as a king of England.

In her speech at Tilbury, as the Spanish Armada approached, she is famously quoted as having told her soldiers, “I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king” (Thomas 1). Once again Elizabeth created an image of herself as a king despite her female body. This construction of absolute kingship, coupled with her image of inherent femaleness generated a blurred gender line. As both a woman and an absolute monarch Elizabeth was neither female nor male—she was a little of both. This blurring of gender constructs allowed for her to once again be placed outside the normal sphere of consideration and exempted her from following the strict patriarchal rules. In her own construction as a female prince she was able to hold her position as monarch of England and soothe anxieties about her gender.

When it came down to it Elizabeth was an absolute monarch, something typically male, and wouldn’t let anyone stand in her way. Still she was able to blend both genders in order to appeal to her subjects. Paradoxically, while her ambiguous gender provided some relief to her subjects by not conflicting with their patriarchal ideals, it also left room for questions as to what exact role Elizabeth was playing. The construction of this ambiguous image then had the contradictory effect of both soothing her subject’s anxieties and leaving room for more. While her ambiguous gender (wholly female/a
prince) placed her outside the normal sphere of consideration and exempted her from the rigid constructs of a patriarchal society it was this exact displacement that raised more questions about Elizabeth's gender and how it correlated with power, leaving room for anxieties to surface and ultimately be soothed on the stage as the character Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Before a discussion of Cleopatra as a representation of Elizabeth and a comforting exhibition of gender and politics, it is useful to demonstrate how the character Cleopatra is portrayed within the confines of the play. Later on I will compare Cleopatra's image with Elizabeth's image to reveal Cleopatra as a representation of Elizabeth.

In a position similar to Elizabeth—a female monarch trying to maintain power in a patriarchal society—Cleopatra's image was a different blend of gender and power. Instead of being elevated to the highest rank of female (the virgin) she is instead regaled to the lowest stature of the female (the whore). In the play Cleopatra is vivacious, charming, vain, and capricious, at once intriguing and infuriating. She seduces Roman generals with ease and destroys empires with her lustful impulses. Her liaisons with various men and her strong sexual appetite makes her a ready target for the designation of "whore." The connotation of the word "whore" is negative and automatically disqualifies her character to rule effectively. Once defined, Cleopatra becomes someone the other characters can more easily interact with—she is no longer a threatening entity. By defining her thus, the other characters are able to place her in category that puts her outside the typical sphere of womanhood and exempts her from patriarchal constructs. It doesn't matter that she is a woman holding the highest
position of power in Egypt—her status as a “whore” places her outside consideration and allows her to maintain power without conflicting with patriarchal constructs. She becomes at the same time disempowered and empowered through the label “whore.”

In addition to being labeled a whore, Cleopatra is also described as thoroughly male. Physically a woman she inhabits a social position (monarch) that is typically reserved for men. Additionally the other characters in the play continually refer to her as a man and often joke that she wears the pants in the relationship as opposed to Antony. Quite literally she wears Antony’s “sword Philippan” and dresses Antony in her clothing (2.5.22-23). This cross-dressing on the part of Cleopatra further muddles the image of her gender by not keeping her in the strict definitions of the female—i.e., wearing dresses and avoiding war clothing. Furthermore, Caesar refers to Cleopatra as a man when he calls her “Cleopater” (2.2.125). At first glance the mispronunciation seems to be an attempt to degrade or slander Cleopatra by mispronouncing her name. However, the Latin suffix ‘pater’ means ‘father’ in Latin (Shakespeare and Andrews 75). The mispronunciation then becomes a play on words to suggest that Cleopatra is actually emasculating. Caesar’s use of the word then raises the question of Cleopatra’s gender role and whether or not she is female or male. Because it is incompatible for her to be both female and male (having female characteristics while maintaining a male position of power) she must be a female out of the typical sphere of womanhood. This characterization as a male despite being a female, allows the gender lines of Cleopatra’s character to be blurred enough to also put her outside the sphere of consideration and thus un-subjected to patriarchal ideas.
Something also interesting to note is that the era in which *Antony and Cleopatra* was staged would have had a young boy playing the part of Cleopatra. This casting no doubt strengthened the idea of Cleopatra possessing male characteristics (Gandrow 123). While writing the play Shakespeare had to consider who would play the role of Cleopatra and take into consideration what that would mean for the portrayal of her overall character. Even Cleopatra comments on this tradition in Act 5.2 when she foresees the Romans using a young boy to portraying her on the stage (5.2.218). Everyone was aware of using male actors to portray female characters. While this was a fact of life it still helps emphasize some of the gender confusion Cleopatra’s character seems to possess (124). Though Cleopatra’s character embodies the stereotypical worst of female characteristics (vain, temperamental, and seductive) she is nonetheless endowed with the power of a man. She is after all the sole ruler of a country and in command of its resources. Her character is in constant conflict with the audience’s expectations of conventional gender roles. Cleopatra is in the unique position of monarch—a position typically inhabited by a man—and she exhibits the worst of the female stereotype while inhabiting this role. Thus, she becomes an undesirable being who doesn’t fit into society’s rigid view of a proper woman. The portrayal of Cleopatra’s character, on stage, by a man, heightens this gender tension and blurs the lines between feminine and masculine. Like the boy actor, the role conflates the genders and forces the audience to recognize the blurred gender lines within Cleopatra’s character. This blending of genders is not dissimilar to Elizabeth’s blending of genders. But while both women are portrayed as distinctly male, their female characterizations are vastly different. Elizabeth is presented as the noblest example of the female, the virgin, while
Cleopatra is presented as the worst possible specimen of the female, the whore. However, these differences in representations of the female allow for the connection between Cleopatra and Elizabeth to be drawn.

IV.

Cleopatra is the exact opposite of what is expected of a representation of Elizabeth. On opposite ends of the spectrum of female value, Elizabeth and Cleopatra are defined as the virgin and the whore. Cleopatra is base and Elizabeth an almost divine being that is above sexual impulses (Stewart 1). This opposition ought to rule out Cleopatra as a representation of Elizabeth but using the Hegelian Dialectic theory of negation I argue that the sheer force of this contradiction actually makes Cleopatra closely related to Elizabeth.

In Hegelian Dialectics the theory of negation "means a wide variety of relations difference, opposition, reflection or relation...Most dramatically, categories are sometimes shown to be self-contradictory" (Spencer and Krauze 1). Negation at its "most dramatic" is simply a reversal of the subject's characteristics. Within this concept of negation there are several categories of contradiction: the second category is Essence: "the opposed pairs immediately imply one another. The Inner and Outer, for example: to define one is at the same time to define the other" (1). This category of negation suggests that the subject cannot be defined without its exact opposite. The concept of 'Inner' has no meaning without the direct contradiction of the concept of 'Outer.' The opposite must exist in order for a particular concept or subject to exist. In the case of this paper the concept of a 'whore' cannot exist without its direct opposite
the ‘virgin’ and vice versa. The concept of a ‘whore’ is a direct negation of the concept of a ‘virgin.’ Cleopatra as the whore is a direct negation of Elizabeth the virgin. And through this direct negation one suggests the other. Furthermore, because

“Literature...is not involved with making direct explicit statements about life but with showing and expressing experience through imagery, symbolism, metaphor, and so on” (Barry 102) negation is necessary to represent Elizabeth so as to maintain the integrity of the literary piece. The virgin is fulfilled in the whore and we may take Cleopatra as a woman of power, just as Elizabeth is. The Hegelian Dialectic theory of negation isn’t the only way in which Cleopatra is constructed as a representation of Elizabeth: there are several situations in the play, which directly correlate to situations in Elizabeth’s era.

The implicit representation of Elizabeth in Cleopatra in Shakespeare’s play *Antony and Cleopatra* suggests that she may be a further way to define Elizabeth’s specific gender and power role in a patriarchal society. According to Susan Frye, “This conflict between the only woman with access to the forums of political debate and the predominately male interest groups surrounding her helped place questions of gender at the center of performance” (18). The Elizabethan society’s anxiety and preoccupation with their monarch’s gender could flow almost automatically into an address in theatrical performances—and do so without directly commenting on it. Louis Montrose suggests that, “the ostensible project of elaborating Queen Elizabeth’s personal mythology inexorably subverts itself—generates ironies, contradictions, resistances which undo the royal magic” (455). Elizabeth’s mythological image as the virgin queen could only be discussed by creating contradictions of that image so as to not directly
address it. When Shakespeare chose Cleopatra as a subject, he mentally chose Elizabeth as well.

In the late 1500s and early 1600s a number of plays were created featuring either the Roman generals or Cleopatra herself making Egypt an en vogue thing to write about and giving Shakespeare a number of literary sources to draw from. Writing the historical drama *Antony and Cleopatra* in the early 1600s, Shakespeare drew his material from a number of sources including Thomas North’s translation of Plutarch’s *Life of Antonius*, Samuel Daniel’s play *Cleopatra*, and the Countess of Pembroke’s play *Antonie*. From each of these he draws specific incidences and specific scenes. Yet, not everything in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* can be traced back to these sources. There are particular scenes such as Cleopatra’s inquiring of a messenger about the appearance of Antony’s wife Octavia that have no apparent precedent (Morris 272). Additionally there are character traits in Shakespeare’s Cleopatra that don’t match Plutarch’s account of Cleopatra. As Shakespeare took a good deal of his plot from Plutarch’s history, it is probable that he may root his character in Plutarch as well. However, there are occasional meanderings away from the historical accounts of Antony and Cleopatra that bear close resemblance to actual events in Queen Elizabeth I’s court.

For instance, in Act 3.3 of *Antony and Cleopatra* Cleopatra peppers a messenger recently arrived from Rome with questions about the appearance and stature of Mark Antony’s wife Octavia. She demands to know what color Octavia’s hair is and whether she is tall or short. No such incident occurs in Plutarch. While it could be argued that
Shakespeare invented this scene, it bears close resemblance to an incident in Queen Elizabeth I’s court.

Sir James Melville, an ambassador from Scotland, visited Elizabeth’s court in 1564 and found himself barraged with questions about his own queen Mary. Melville recounts Elizabeth’s attempt to get him to speak ill of Mary by asking what color her hair was and what color hair he, Melville, thought was best (Morris 273). In an awkward and even dangerous position Melville responds simply that “the fairnes of them baith was not ther worst faltes [sic]” (273).

Old as the incident was, it was probably a part of court lore handed down as an amusing story. With the popularity of Shakespeare’s plays and his appearances at court to perform he would have heard of such court gossip. Substituting a historical event with an Elizabethan anecdote was to cast a very specific image of not only Elizabeth but also the Elizabethan court.

Another piece of court gossip that bears uncanny resemblance to a scene in *Antony and Cleopatra* is the violent outbursts that often accompanied Elizabeth’s displeasure. Known for her fiery temper, Elizabeth was prone to boxing her councilors on the ears and throwing shoes at the Lord Treasurer when displeased by their actions or some news imparted by them (276). These acts of physical violence closely mirror the physical violence Cleopatra displays towards a messenger in Act 2.5. The messenger, having just arrived in Egypt from Rome, informs the queen that Antony has married another woman, Octavia. Cleopatra, outraged at this news strikes the messenger and threatens, “I’ll unhair thy Head” as the stage directions indicate the actor is to “hale him up and down.” The quick violence displayed by Cleopatra is very
similar to the quick violence Elizabeth was known to show in her court. And as Kenneth Muir notes, "When one considers, too, Elizabeth's occasional acts of violence, one is bound to wonder whether Shakespeare was so ignorant of how queens, good or bad, behave" (Muir 237). Such incidences were no doubt part of court gossip passed down through the ranks and incorporated into Shakespeare's play.

Another instance in which we see Elizabeth reflected in Cleopatra is in Act 3 when Antony and Cleopatra fight against Caesar's forces in battle. In 3.7 Cleopatra says, "Sink, Rome, and their Tongues rot/That speak against us. A Charge we bear I'th' War,/And as the President of my Kingdom will/Appear there for a Man. Speak not against it./I will not stay behind." This short speech she gives in which she declares her intention to be present during the battle because she is the monarch echoes the speech Elizabeth gave at Tilbury to her troops (Morris 276). With the Spanish Armada advancing on the English shores, Elizabeth spoke at Tilbury:

I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realm; to which rather than any dishonour shall grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarer of every one of your virtues in the field (Norton 763).

The sentiment in both these speeches is nearly identical. Both women recognize that they are women but insist on taking a male role and ride into battle because they are the monarchs of their kingdom. Additionally, each queen wishes harm upon her
enemies. The striking similarity in speeches makes an even greater case for Cleopatra as a representation of Elizabeth, the female prince.

V.

Cleopatra as a representation of Elizabeth offers interesting dimensions to Antony and Cleopatra. It is a tragic historical drama, but it is also a series of political allegories and propaganda that diminishes Elizabeth’s reign while bolstering support for James’ ascension. However, I argue that Cleopatra’s final scene serves as redemption of Elizabeth’s reign.

First, in order to denigrate Elizabeth’s reign Shakespeare had to first tear down Cleopatra’s reign. Described as vain and lusty, Cleopatra is viewed by the other characters as more of a harlot than a queen. From the very beginning of the play she is referred to as a “Gipsy” and “Strumpet” (1.1.10-13) and other terms with a denotation of whore. The negative connotation of “whore” and other similar terms attempt to discredit Cleopatra as a legitimate and likable character. Labeling her with a term that is the opposite of the feminine ideal suggests she is unworthy of respect and as such the legitimacy of her reign is called into question.

In Act 3.6 Caesar rages against Cleopatra’s acquisition of Egypt:

Contemning Rome, he’s done all this, and more
In Alexandria. Here’s the Manner of’t.
I’th’ Market-place, on a Tribunal silver’d,
Cleopatra and himself [Julius Caesar] in Chairs of Gold
Were publicly entron’d. At the Fee sat
Caesarion, whom they call my Father’s Son,
And all th’ unlawful Issue that their Lust
Since then hath made between them. Unto her
He gave the 'stablishment of Egypt, made her
Of lower Syria, Cyprus, Lydia,
Absolute Queen (3.6.1-11).

Ultimately Caesar rants that Cleopatra received her throne only because she seduced Julius Caesar and had a child by him. The mention of the illegitimate child Caesarion alludes to Cleopatra’s sexual liaisons with Julius Caesar and not only marks her as a whore but also delegitimizes her reign. Paul Rose in his article “The Politics of Antony and Cleopatra” notes that, “Cleopatra’s power has not the saving grace of honorable acquisition. Cleopatra’s is a naked, hereditary, despotic power” (387). Essentially Cleopatra has nothing with which to legitimize her rule as she gained it through less than honorable means. And as a representation of Elizabeth, this discrediting of Cleopatra’s reign ultimately calls into question the creditability of Elizabeth’s reign.

With the Tudor line of succession as convoluted as it was, Elizabeth’s claim to the throne was often called into question. Interestingly enough, the loudest critic of Elizabeth’s claim to the throne was James I’s own mother Mary Queen of Scots. Marrying the great-grandson of Henry VII, she maintained that the Catholic Church never sanctioned Henry VIII’s divorce from Katherine of Aragon and therefore his marriage to Elizabeth’s mother Anne Boleyn was illegal. In effect, Elizabeth is a bastard, leaving Mary’s husband the legitimate claim to England’s throne (Sommerville 1). While there is no direct parallel between the above scene in Antony and Cleopatra and the claims of Mary Queen of Scots, the mention of illegitimate children and undeserved claims to the throne echo the political climate of Elizabethan England. Cleopatra’s depiction as a whore ultimately tears down Elizabeth’s reign by calling into question
the legitimacy of her claim to the crown. And the main reason for tearing down Elizabeth’s reign was to bolster support James I’s reign.

James’ ascension could be heralded as a new beginning. But Elizabeth I was a tough act to follow—a beloved queen, she brought prosperity and power to England while many believed that James lacked the ability to be a strong monarch (Davies 128). James, however, realized the power of his image and the power of the theatre to perpetuate that image.

Just as Elizabeth crafted for herself an elaborate image of the virgin, James crafted for himself an Augustan image. Soon after taking the throne James had a coronation medal “minted for distribution to his new subjects, which depicted James wearing a laurel wreath, while a Latin inscription proclaimed him Caesar Augustus of Britain, Caesar the heir of the Caesars” (125). This image of James as Caesar Augustus was meant to communicate the idea of a strong and capable monarch—one who would succeed Elizabeth’s rule with a capable hand. With such a readily available image the association with Caesar in the play is almost automatic.

While Caesar isn’t one of the main characters in *Antony and Cleopatra* he ultimately ends the play as the triumphant character succeeding Cleopatra as monarch and bringing peace to the land. Paul Rose notes, “*Antony and Cleopatra* is a very reassuring play. At the end society is preserved by the triumph of Caesar, which brings with it the beginning of the Pax Romana. It is all very reassuring, or at least, it was—for the Elizabethans” (379). Even though Caesar is a foreigner his succession to Cleopatra’s throne brings about an era of peace for her subjects. In a similar way James intended for
his succession to be smooth transition of power that brought about peace and prosperity. And this is reflected in the end of the play.

Despite James’ heavy influence on the impact of the play and the obvious propagandist undertones, I argue that the play actually makes a turn at the end that redeems Elizabeth’s reign. Neville H. Davies notes that, “Unequivocal support of James by Shakespeare, however, is equally unlikely. The myriad-minded creator of the serpent of the old Nile might reasonably be expected to have adopted a highly ambiguous attitude toward the policies and person of his unattractive sovereign” (131). While James was supporting Shakespeare and his company it can’t be expected that Shakespeare would whole-heartedly adopt all of his benefactor’s political ideas. Especially since James remained somewhat unpopular with the majority of English people. Davies notes, “Bishop Goodman was later to remember that although people were ‘generally weary of an old woman’s government’ by the end of Elizabeth’s reign, experience of James soon prompted a revival of her reputation” (129). As such an unpopular figure, James created nostalgia in the English for their previous, successful monarch. Shakespeare may well provide a slight turn at the end of the play that redeems Cleopatra’s character and her reign ultimately redeeming Elizabeth and her reign.

Throughout a majority of the play Cleopatra is portrayed as a whore with the nature of the label ultimately debasing her reign. However, her character does develop beyond this label by the end of the play. In 5.2 she commits suicide in an attempt to be reunited with Antony calling out to him “Husband, I come” (5.2.287). Previously in the play we see no such tender emotion from Cleopatra in regards to Antony. She typically
displays only feelings of jealousy, flirtation, and lust towards Antony so that this final display of affection radiates a kind of complexity that we haven't previously seen from her character. In this way we see Cleopatra developing past the 'whore' stereotype and finding redemption. Even Caesar acknowledges her growth in character when he commands, “Take up her Bed, /And bear her Women from the Monument. / She shall be buried by her Antony. / No Grave upon the Earth shall clip in it/A Pair so Famous.” (5.2. 355-58). This show of respect towards Cleopatra indicates that Caesar is acknowledging her development beyond that of a simple whore. And by developing her character beyond that of a whore, her reign and legitimacy as monarch are validated. She is no longer a common whore but a woman of worth and therefore a viable queen. As a representation of Elizabeth it serves to legitimize her reign. Interestingly enough, the recognition of Cleopatra's development and subsequent validation of her reign come from Caesar, the character who has least to gain from it as the new monarch. This scene at the end makes the end all that more poignant.

VI.

With Cleopatra as a representation of Elizabeth, Antony and Cleopatra takes on whole new meaning. Given the role of theatre in exhibiting political ideologies and James I's succession to the English throne it is highly probable that Antony and Cleopatra is more likely a propaganda piece than a tragic historical drama. The play itself examines the relationship between power and gender and ultimately uses
negative stereotypes of the female gender to denigrate Cleopatra’s reign and build up Caesar’s succession. In doing so, the play also dissembles Elizabeth’s reign to make room for building up James’ succession. However, I argue that Cleopatra’s redemption towards the end of the play serves as a restoration of Elizabeth’s power and legitimacy. This may be a revival piece meant to celebrate Elizabeth’s reign under the guise of praising James’ accession. At the time of Elizabeth’s death, Shakespeare paid no tribute to Elizabeth and “did not even bother to eulogize Elizabeth—a fact noticed unfavorably by his countrymen” (Bevington 23). Perhaps *Antony and Cleopatra* is the eulogy the English people were waiting for—just in disguise.
Works Cited


