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Cleopatra: Femme Fatale or Androgyne

Cleopatra, Egypt's final active pharaoh was the last in her family of Greek descent remaining after the death of Alexander the Great. She was also, the first in her family lineage to learn Egyptian and she would portray herself as the Egyptian goddess of fertility and femininity Isis. She historically seduced Julius Caesar, became his mistress and even bore his (illegitimate) child, aiding her young ascension to the throne. She later in life seduced the Roman ruler Mark Antony, which as told in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* was a passionate, manipulative, powerful relationship full of sex, deceit and war. Which ultimately culminated in Antony's demise and eventually both their subsequent suicides.

Powerful women are constantly introduced in literature and film as dangerous temptresses who are also beautiful, and cunning. The "femme fatale" is defined by *Merriam-Webster* as "a very attractive woman who causes trouble and unhappiness for the men who become involved with her." The phrase is French for fatal woman. She (the femme fatale in question) uses her usually exaggerated feminine traits of beauty, charm, and sexuality in order to achieve power or some other form of hidden agenda. This may occur subconsciously, as in the film *Titanic*, in which "femme fatale" Rose DeWitt Bukater was only able to change her horridly long name to something simpler after a tragic shipwreck that caused the death of her newly found lover Jack Dawson, amongst many others. *⁹

* This was not something that is clarified as to whether she wanted or not as I'm sure she appreciated the status her name brought her at times and despised it at others.

Of course, he didn't die in order for her to be able to take his name and she didn't manipulate him in order to be able to change her name. In fact, Rose did not make a conscious effort at manipulating him either. Any and all manipulation occurred subconsciously, without her knowledge.[†] Jack Dawson had originally planned on giving Rose his name through marriage. Yet, his love for this woman (he first saw her on the ship from the deck below, as an unattainable vision of purity and passionate lust; she was an "angel" in all white, with red hair and red lipstick, a wide brimmed sunhat casting a mysterious shadow across her face) caused him to, when they were thrust into the frozen waters of the Atlantic, allow her to lie on the floating door while he froze to death in the ocean.^{‡♥} He was doomed from the moment they struck ice, which ironically occurred only a few hours after they consummated their love for each other. Rose was a woman of wealth and status, who was on the verge of losing it all. Her fiancé would ensure she not lose her wealth nor her status. What she did not have in this relationship was powerless. She was trapped and utterly powerless to make decisions. She had a mind of her own. Jack Dawson gave her the power to freedom, to have an opinion, to not be an idle "woman". In taking his name after his untimely death she continued to use the idea of him as a mode to attain power, and she was freed from her stifling conditions in first class to a life as an empowered, free-thinking woman.[§] She falls into the literary and cinematic

[†] But have we not all heard of a man being pussy whipped? Oh, the things a man will do for the one he loves, when he is in love.

[‡] Both Jack and Rose would not have ended in this predicament had she stayed in her little life-boat of privilege and rowed to safety with her mother.

[§] The narrative of the film plays out so that Rose's fiancé Caledon Hockley would have been brought to his demise by the betrayal of his future young hot wife, whether the ship had sunk or not due to her disinterest in him and her newfound lust for freedom, Jack, and the rugged, American male.

archetype of the femme fatale by intelligent, beautiful, deadly, and in search of power. She at different points in her life seduced two different men in order to achieve different forms of power and status. Both of who were doomed to either heartbreak and/or embarrassment in Hockley's case, and/or arrest and an untimely death as was destined for Dawson.

Rose Dawson (acquired name) is not that different, when looked under the lens of an understanding of the femme fatale archetype, to Cleopatra, whose love brought untimely deaths to both Julius Caesar and, as portrayed in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Mark Antony. Cleopatra was, aside from being the powerful queen of Egypt, very beautiful breathtakingly, eternally, and youthfully so. In act two scene two of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Enobarbus described his and Antony's first encounter with her beauty, stating:

“For her own person,
 It beggared all description: she did lie
 In her pavilion, cloth-of-gold of tissue
 O'erpicturing that Venus where we see
 The fancy outwork nature: on each side her
 Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids
 With divers-colored fans, whose wind did seem
 To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
 And what they undid did.”

His first impression of Cleopatra is one of utmost beauty. He regarded her in that moment as having possessed beauty, which surpassed the beauty of any created image or painting (as would have existed in Shakespeare times), in which imagination and idealization of the body through the manipulation of paint was key, of Venus. Venus, the roman goddess of love, sexuality, and femininity; was also the most beautiful of all mortal and immortal women. This was an honor she had bestowed upon her by the most beautiful mortal man after defeating Athena and Hera both in ancient Greek, immortal

beauty pageant. After making this comparison Enobarbus continues his description of Cleopatra and upon the mention of Antony's need to leave the beautiful woman** replied with;

“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”

Not only, was Cleopatra so beautiful that just upon hearing how Enobarbus described her beauty Agrippa feared for Antony's safety and wellbeing, but she was also unlike other woman in her temperament. Cleopatra was of an ageless beauty (unlike men and masculine beauty which ages and is fleeting, ideal feminine beauty is everlasting), she was never boring for she had so many enchanting qualities. She differed from other women as well in that men when encountered with other women grew more dissatisfied with time, the same woman becoming less appealing over time; yet, when encountered with Cleopatra their desire and lust for her could only grow even when encountered with her poorer traits.

After all of the compliments showered upon Cleopatra's name by Enobarbus, he finished his statement by calling her a slut. She was capable of seducing men easily. They fell in love with her and she indulged in physical passions. Understandably, Antony fell in love with her, and her hyper-feminist state of existence and living. Antony fell in love with Cleopatra, self-indulgence, passion, and love itself. Antony coming from the masculine world that was Rome was of no match to the feminine oasis of Egypt.

** Notice how when a woman is too beautiful it automatically becomes dangerous for men to be around lest they fall under the womans “spell”

Cleopatra is herself referred to later in the play as Egypt further exemplifying her connection the land that existed on an oasis of fertile ground moistened by a flowing river. Antony, at a celebratory feast with Caesar and other Roman generals, tells Caesar to live in the moment, to which Caesar responds with I would rather seize the day. This response exists to further separate the two worlds that are Roman, masculine Antony and Egyptian, feminine Cleopatra. Masculine Rome is obsessed with war, hence the need to capture or seize the day. Upon stating that he would rather live in the moment, Antony revealed a new softness in his character. He was no longer the ruthless general he was prior to meeting Cleopatra, and Egypt. He was, post-Cleopatra willing to forget his obligations in order to self-indulge in passion.^{††}

It was this newfound weakness for Cleopatra that kept Antony in Egypt. It was also his love for her that caused him to be consumed by rage at her dishonor and forget his masculine reasoning. He threw himself, after some poor planning, into a war he was also fated to lose. Cleopatra (determined to maintain her status as a powerful queen) followed Antony into war, yet, deserted the battle and him at the first sign of potential loss. Antony followed her in her retreat from the battle, ensuring his embarrassment in the eyes of other Romans and men.^{‡‡} Seemingly upset at Cleopatra, Antony ignored her. Cleopatra, refusing to be ignored, ideated a scheme that would capture Antony's attention and through emotional manipulation put an end to his anger. She faked her suicide and sent word to Antony of his name being spoken with her last breath. At the receipt of the

^{††} Passions in this case referring to both passion that comes from the liver as well as the more primordial passions of the flesh.

^{‡‡} Because why should any man run out of a battle due to the blind following of a beautiful woman whom in a feminine lapse of courage has abandoned army and troops to be killed.

message Antony forgot of his misguided anger and resentments towards Cleopatra thinking only of her bravery and then killing himself.

Throughout the play, and as long as Antony remained in love or enthralled by her, Cleopatra is able to manipulate him in order to achieve more power (higher status), as well as manipulating him emotionally to ensure his emotional captivation with her. Through her beauty, guile, and use of power she is able to constantly manipulate men into receiving what she wants even if it means their downfall, making Cleopatra another example of the femme fatale archetype.

Yet, even though gifted with the epitome of feminine beauty, Cleopatra asserts more in her nature than just that of a woman whom seduces men to their doom. She is passionate in love, yes, but also, in anger. Physical manifestations of anger as violence and war is masculine. Yet, as well as the fact that more than once Cleopatra was angered to the point of physical violence, she was also interested in war, and she fostered within her a masculine obsession with status and country. Her lack of trust in others embodies the traits necessary to survive in the masculine world, where one with power must always be apprehensive and wary of others. Where the ideal wife of the Roman masculine world was quiet, reserved, simple, and ready to stand out of their husbands way when it pertained to war and conflict; Cleopatra seemed to exist as their opposite. She was not quiet, reserved, or simple. She had a flare for theatrics and would not let herself be forgotten or placed second in importance to a war (or anything/anyone else for that matter). She embodied the irrationality and impulsivity of war and passion; she filled the air surrounding her with the scents of floral perfumes, was excruciatingly beautiful and

very dramatic as well as being nurturing and maternal. Pompey describes Antony's relationship with Cleopatra in scene two act one where it is written he stated:

“His soldiership
Is twice the other twain; but let us rear
The higher our opinion, that our stirring
Can from the lap of Egypt's widow pluck
The ne'er-lust-wearied Antony.”

Cleopatra in this description took on the role of mother to Antony's suckling child. Which he was also reduced to when blindly following her out of the battle as a child would blindly follow his mother. Antony loses his sense of self because of her unpredictable nature and is weakened by her non-presence, which tears him apart, as a woman should not weaken a man. Cleopatra was as easily overcome with feminine emotions of love, sadness, and jealousy as she was with more masculine sentiments of courage, pride, and anger.

The blending of masculine and feminine qualities defines androgyny, and Cleopatra appears as an androgyne or a character that possess the dual qualities of man and woman, the perfect blend feminine and masculine. This appearance is exceptionally visible in the very visual description of her theatrical and dramatic suicide. At the prior thought of having lost Cleopatra, Antony once again blindly followed her, this time to the land of the dead. He attempted to die an honorable Roman death by committing suicide, making the statement “I am conqueror of myself.” Antony, though, was not able to die alone, and was carried into Cleopatra's quarters in order to end his life near his source of both natural, feminine love, and masculine power. Cleopatra followed his example (previously set by her) to die a masculine honorable death, in her own feminine way. At the time of her death she spoke of the loss of her womanhood and her current state of

constant marble. The clown that visited her right before her death appeared with the promise of figs (a symbol for female genitalia), yet in fact, he does not bare figs but poisonous snakes at the request of the queen. After he made some insinuations and references to the serpent as a phallic symbol such as: "I wish you all the joy of the worm" the clown left Cleopatra alone to her task. At the moment before her death she proclaimed;

"If thou and nature can so gently part,
the stroke of death is a lovers pinch
which hurts, and is desired."

She grabbed a snake and placed it to her breast, where like the image given of Antony suckling from her breast earlier, the snake, latched on and suckled. At this point she placed another snake on her arm (a symbol of strength and masculinity even in the end of her life) and soon after died.

Is Cleopatra the beautiful femme fatale, or the androgyne quarreling internally between her masculine and feminine sides? Must she be regarded as purely one or the other? The fatal woman in all of her beautiful deceit is powerful and just as fickle in her emotions as any man. The linear understanding of gender as male on one side and female on the other side no longer applies or even makes sense when comparing femme fatales to androgynes, if there is even possibly a separation between the two. All humans are inherently androgynous, maintaining traits of both masculine and feminine origin. Maybe it isn't the woman that's fatal either, but rather, an emotion; love, "Amor Fatale." Love sees no gender, all are capable of falling into its fatal grip.^{§§}

^{§§} Just ask Shakespeare what happened to Romeo and Juliet.