A Golden Asp on a Silver Screen:

The Appropriation of Cleopatra in Modern Film and Ancient Literature

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Abstract.

Audiences generally consider the *Life of Mark Antony*, the ancient historian Plutarch’s biography, and *Cleopatra*, Joseph Mankiewicz’s 1963 film, to be historical works. However, a viewer must consider authorial intent when engaging with these works, for neither Plutarch nor Mankiewicz wrote a history. Both authors actually intended to convey moral messaging through their narratives, and they happened to choose the stories of Mark Antony and Cleopatra to exemplify their messages. This thesis will examine the methods in which they taught these lessons. Both Plutarch and Mankiewicz used the figures of Cleopatra and Antony, bending the historical figures around their goals rather than letting the historical facts lead.

I analyze Plutarch’s Greek and the actions of Mankiewicz’s character to determine at what points the characters hold agency in their own stories, for it is by examining the choices of each agent that the audience is able to discern each author’s moral messages. Plutarch’s queen only becomes an active participant in the story near the end, while Mankiewicz’s character relies on sexuality and displays of luxury to enact change. By using the figures of Cleopatra and Antony, Plutarch encourages his readers to avoid yielding to vice and Mankiewicz warns his viewers to avoid engaging in a decadent lifestyle.
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Unless stated, translations are my own. Where I have used others’ translations, I have given the standard passage quotation (i.e. Ant.1.1 for Life of Antony, book 1, section 1) as well as the translation source quotation (i.e. Perrin (1920): 100).

All quoted translations come from Loeb editions.

All movie time stamps are transcribed by me from Cleopatra (1963), and given in the form hour : minute : second. Parts 1 and 2 of Cleopatra have been combined into one continuous time.
Chapter One

Introduction: Using Cleopatra in Film and Literature

“I find one can tell more about the quality of merchandise by examining the, uh, backside first,” Caesar jokes with his fellow soldiers.¹ A rolled-up carpet lies at his feet, absolutely bulging at the seams. Clearly something rests at the center, and Caesar knows exactly what it is. He cuts the ropes; the carpet unwinds; a woman is tossed from the center, indeed landing with her backside up. Cleopatra, queen of Egypt and the namesake of Joseph Mankiewicz’s 1963 film, glares at Caesar for ejecting her so ungracefully. She does not yet let any more displeasure surface, but instead arches her back in a stretch; in doing so she draws attention to the cinched waist of her suspiciously 1960s-looking dress. The Greeks and Egyptians of 48 B.C.E. did not have V-necks in their chitons, but that matters not to the filmmakers. Cleopatra, of course, knows exactly what she is doing in such an outfit. Each move is calculated, from dress choice to first post-unrolling action, subtly, even subconsciously giving Caesar a taste of this character’s favorite method of exerting influence. The sexual overtones are impossible to miss, and they will reappear with persisting regularity throughout the remaining four hours of film. Cleopatra brushes herself off, stands up, and gets straight to business with Caesar. No time to waste when one has an empire to run.

Mankiewicz focuses much more on the queen’s sexuality than the ancient sources do, but he took some liberties for a purpose. After all, he is not really trying to tell the story of Cleopatra the historical person with his film. Though the movie credits the histories of

¹ 0:20:56.
ancient authors Plutarch, Suetonius, and Appian, Mankiewicz deviates from the sources in select areas because he actually intended his movie to teach moral tenets. Through his focus on sexuality and luxury throughout the film, Mankiewicz tells his audience that anyone who relies on such tools in their own life will eventually head toward disaster. These were the main ways in which Cleopatra expressed her power, after all, and she ended up with a lost empire, the last of a three thousand year tradition of pharaohs. Though taught on a grand scale, Mankiewicz encourages audiences to take these messages to heart and adapt their own lives around these lessons.

Audiences indeed ought to view the movie as a guide to morality taught through a historical framework, rather than a decadent, over-the-top love story from the golden age of Hollywood. In this way Mankiewicz actually follows the histories of one of the ancient authors extremely well, for Plutarch too wrote lessons on morality through the framework of a history focused on Cleopatra and Mark Antony. Neither writer was interested in presenting a factual, true to life history. Rather, just as children learn morals and other lessons from fairy tales, these two authors aimed to express through narrative examples the results of non-adherence to correct moral guidelines. In doing so they create biased representations of the queen; however, it is more important to keep some biased vestige of Cleopatra in our collective memory than to completely erase her because the historical accounts are a bit skewed -- as long as audiences recognize that the Cleopatra of art and literature differs from the true historical figure.
Material & literary evidence.

Scholars today know about Cleopatra’s life from ancient literature, portraiture, and epigraphy (inscriptions). The evidence is not particularly copious, but enough remains that historians can piece together a fairly feasible timeline of her life. From ancient literary sources audiences can glean public opinions on the queen, especially when the sources contain first-hand accounts flavored with emotion, or poetic judgements of a situation. Even in histories that are meant to be more neutral, ancient authors often did not hide their own theories and opinions, choosing instead to offer several instances of the same event or to offer their own thoughts on what probably occurred in reality. Visual evidence offers a more official lens, since the ruler themself generally commissioned these coins and sculptures (or at least approved them). These sources of evidence provide enough material that historians today have a pretty plausible idea of how her life progressed and how she influenced those around her, but it is important to remember too that most of these portraits were composed in order to send out a particular message to Cleopatra’s subjects, and most of the literature was written in order to fulfill a certain goal. Still, even if biased, the evidence is still enough to give a decently clear idea on who this queen was.

Any sculptural portraits that historians can attribute to the queen, as well as coins with her profile, reveal her priorities at different moments of her rule. Choosing to portray herself with her son at her side, for example, emphasizes the dynastic nature of monarchy, while further choosing whether to adorn themselves in the Greek or Egyptian style reveals messages about the intended audience of the coins and what aspects of her lineage

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Cleopatra tried to emphasize. Adding curls into her hair, for example, that echo Alexander the Great’s wild mane, suggests that the portrait’s subject has his same courage, bravery, and divine favor; similarly, portraits such as the Egyptian-style carving of Cleopatra and her son at the temple of Dendera emphasize that Cleopatra was now a member of the ancient pharaonic rule.

Historians like Josephus, Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, and Appian give very quick vignettes on the queen’s life, one telling here of the night she dissolved a pearl in vinegar and drank it, another there of the type of snake she used to poison herself. These short bursts illuminate much about the queen’s personality and her priorities in ruling, but they make it difficult to reconstruct a full account of her life. Poets like Horace and Vergil expanded on specific traits of the queen’s personality or actions. Though their accounts are limited to a few aspects (as the nature of poetry allows), they provide valuable information on the public’s views of the queen and how the events of her life affected those contemporary or near-contemporary to her life. Cicero’s letters provide an even more intimate look into the queen’s effects on private lives, for these writings are flavored with emotion and personal thoughts that histories have no way of providing. Dio Cassius, a historian writing nearly three hundred years after the queen’s death, provides in his writing a great account that allows scholars today to reconstruct a timeline of the queen’s life; one writer in particular, though, gives the most comprehensive detail on her life.

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3 See, for example, the so-called “Vatican Head” portrait or coins minted between 48 and 30 B.C.E. where Cleopatra sports the “melon coiffure” with clearly defined curls common in Roman portraiture at the time.

4 Pliny the Younger 9.58 for the pearl, and the asp in particular (rather than any other poisonous snake) is named by Strabo 17.10.
Plutarch, writing in the late first and early second centuries C.E, is most famous for writing a series of twenty-three paired biographies known as the *Parallel Lives*. In this series, Plutarch pairs together one famous Greek and one famous Roman in order to find out what aspects of human nature make someone great and what aspects caused them to fall from power. His *Life of Antony* tells the history of Mark Antony, a great Roman general who first had the chance to co-rule what was probably the largest and strongest empire in the ancient world, Rome, and then to rule what certainly would have been the greatest, a combined Roman-Egyptian empire. In telling the story of Antony’s life, Plutarch intertwines the narrative of Cleopatra. He makes their stories entirely dependent on each other; one can tell the story of neither Antony nor Cleopatra’s life without the other’s, according to Plutarch. Similarly, Plutarch would not be able to use Antony to convey his teachings without Cleopatra. Just as Mankiewicz used Cleopatra to teach his moral opinions, Plutarch relies on Antony -- but Cleopatra is essential to the story. Only because of her is Antony in these specific situations where he is tempted to drink too much, to spend all day at the theater, to ignore his duties as commander in favor of spending a long night at a feast. Plutarch brings attention to these traits, these vices, because in his eyes they are what caused Antony to fall from power. These traits are all indicative of a poor nature, for a more virtuous Roman ought to be able to control his poor character traits and live a virtuous life in spite of their desires. The more Antony yielded to his vices, the farther he drifted from the opportunity to be a great and successful Roman. Antony is the one making these poor choices; Cleopatra is the one providing the opportunity to make those choices. In this way, Plutarch generally uses Antony as what this paper will call an *agent*, and Cleopatra as an *event*.
The issue of agency.

In literature, a character can either be an entity to whom the characters around them must respond, or they can produce changes on the story with their own actions. Generally, these factors work together in harmony. In Plutarch’s *Life*, Cleopatra is an *event* that Antony, the *agent*, must actively respond to; again, she provides the circumstances that force Antony to make choices. Will he engage in his vices and each night drink what is available in Cleopatra’s palace, or will he push away the wine and focus instead on his battle plans? Will he prioritize spending time with his beloved queen or fighting the civil war with Rome?

The job of the audience then becomes to analyze the outcomes of each of the agent’s choices. Only agents can convey morals -- events tell the reader nothing about human nature, for an event itself makes no decisions; it simply provides the other characters something to respond to. An event does not test a character, and thus it gives the audience nothing to analyze, nor learn from. Plutarch creates a narrative such that Antony’s actions culminate in the loss of Egypt and Rome, an utter fall from power. The message is clear: make different choices unless you too wish to end up like this once-great leader.

Cleopatra has been both agent and event in historical accounts. Mankiewicz casts her as agent in his film, for the plot is almost entirely character-driven, and in this case Cleopatra-driven. The audience can determine what choices Cleopatra made that might have launched her into success and what actions contributed to her downfall. Mankiewicz’s teachings thus become evident through her actions. Plutarch’s work presents a more nuanced view, where at first she is pure event, but by the end she shares agency with both
Antony and fate. For the majority of the narrative, though, she is an event. This characterization makes sense, for the main agent in the life of Antony ought to be Antony himself. Most of the time, Plutarch uses the character of Cleopatra to create the situations, but Antony is the one acting and reacting; the audience is meant to learn from his choices. Both authors carefully craft their narratives so that the focus may seem to be on historical events and figures, but in truth they use the character of Cleopatra in order to present commentaries on how humans ought to live.
Chapter Two

Cleopatra as Event and Agent in Plutarch’s Life of Antony

Introduction.

Plutarch’s Life of Antony is the most famous ancient text with details of Cleopatra’s life. She is present throughout much of the text, but ultimately its focus is Antony. The Life traces how Antony grew from a troublesome child into a great leader of Rome, but ultimately fell to his own vices because of his weakness of will. Plutarch demonstrated throughout his series of Lives that men create their fortunes through a mixture of their inherent nature and the choices they make; humans are rational, and their choices have rational, expected outcomes. He thus intended the Lives to inspire his readers to make choices based on these moral guidelines. He stressed honor, duty, temperance, and wisdom, and he emphasized which figures expressed these virtues well and which figures failed because they did not adhere to these moral guidelines. One should make the same choices as Augustus, for example, when they have the opportunity to be ambitious, calculating, or patient, because his fate ended well; one should be wary of yielding to character traits that encourage them to engage with luxury or being naive, unless they want to end up as Antony had, fallen from power and dead by his own hand.

Two schools of thought lead the discussion about the manner in which Plutarch characterized his historical figures. Most scholars follow C. Pelling’s opinion that Plutarch followed the Aristotelian view, where one’s adult character follows directly from their

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childhood development. Aristotle believed that education in childhood forms character, morals, and virtue for the rest of one’s life. A person’s qualities, defined by this early education, then logically conduct their actions into adulthood, and these individual character traits are critical to understanding the logic behind someone’s choices. In looking at a character’s psychology, an audience can take away the author’s lessons and morals.

N. Loraux leads the scholars that disagree with Pelling’s view. To her, it is pointless to analyze a fictional character’s virtues because they are nothing more than just that: fictional. A human in real life has countless thought processes that guide their actions, with personal histories and personality traits that guide those thought processes. A fictional character, however, is nothing more than an amalgamation of words and actions imposed upon them by an author; they are nothing but a form. Within this framework, Cleopatra retains full accountability for her effects on Antony’s life. It does not matter whether Plutarch characterizes her as a human or not, because the only criteria for holding responsibility is that one performs actions.

Loraux’s view is not inherently incorrect, but her theory cannot apply to Plutarch’s writings. If fictional characters existed entirely free from all bonds of thought, motivation, and other person-making qualities present in real life, the audience would have no criteria with which to judge their actions. Again, the only way that characters are able to convey the moral teachings of their author is if they choose to perform actions that an audience member can analyze, and the goal of the Life is to analyze the specific actions that

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characters made to gain virtue or vice. Loraux is right that Plutarch’s characters are still just forms of real historical figures, and a reader could potentially consider the characters in the *Lives* to lack any decision-making abilities that allow the audience to judge and learn from them. However, it is necessary here to consider the authorial intent of the project. Plutarch explicitly announces that he wants to be able to teach morality, for in the small details of a character a reader can find -- in Plutarch’s own words! -- *virtue or vice.*\(^\text{13}\) To Plutarch, then, there is a person behind the character, and his commentary is what imbues the narrative with deeper meaning. In his narratives, responsibility follows agency.

When the narrative starts, Antony holds nearly all the agency. He drives the plot with his choices, and Cleopatra is nothing more than an event to which he must respond. By the end, however, she has grown to share a significant amount of agency with Antony, meaning that her actions too help convey morals. As Plutarch intertwines the stories of Antony and Cleopatra together, telling their biographies so that the life of Antony could not possibly be told without Cleopatra in it (and vice versa), he transforms Cleopatra’s role into one mirroring Antony’s. Both of their actions determine the course of the narrative. Plutarch, then, in following Pelling’s view on characterization, uses Cleopatra as both agent and event in his biography.

**The Early Narrative: Antony Holds Agency.**

When coming to the *Life of Antony*, the reader already knows how the story will end: Antony, after a series of lost wars and attempts to stay in power, will die by his own

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\(^{13}\) From *Alex.*1.2 and Perrin (1919): 225. “For it is not Histories that I am writing, but Lives; and in the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice, nay, a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fall[...]”
hand in a land far from home. Since the reader would not be searching for the end result of his life, they would be looking to see how Antony got there. Is this an Oedipus-type situation, where the gods seemed to have decided his fate before he could make any choices? Or is it more of an Agamemnon-type, where everyone could see that his own actions would destroy his life? To follow a more Agamemnon-type, Antony would have to hold responsibility and agency for his actions throughout the entire narrative. Readers could thus attribute the outcome of his life to nothing other than Antony’s own poor decisions. In the Oedipus-type, the gods would have to deliver an event outside of Antony’s control into his life -- and at the beginning of the narrative they do just that. Cleopatra arrives, and she plays a fairly passive role for a while. Cleopatra is largely an event that happens to Antony; he retains the personhood that she lacks.

Antony’s nature and Cleopatra’s passive role.

In the beginning of the history, Plutarch creates the expectation that Antony’s eventual downfall occurs because of his less than perfect nature. Plutarch implies that because Antony chooses to engage with his natural proclivity for drinking and love for luxury of all sorts, he holds the agency in causing his eventual fall from power. Plutarch mixes these poor traits with positive ones because he knows that in displaying a character who is not wholly good nor wholly evil, the audience will have the most sympathy for the forthcoming fall from power. “[T]he ideal tragedy, according to [Aristotle’s] Poetics 13, does not concern either a good man or a bad man, but someone in between: men of great renown who fall ‘not through vice and depravity’ but through some mistake.”\(^{14}\) Aristotle

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theorizes that if an audience watches a great man’s fortunes reverse from success to disaster, for example, they will feel disheartened; if they watch an evil man go from disaster to success, they will question the justice of their world. In presenting Antony as a flawed but kind-hearted individual, Plutarch is able to elicit an emotional response from his readers that will make his moral teachings more memorable. Furthermore, as Pelling notes, the qualities are all related, both good and bad. Plutarch does not choose a “quirky” assortment of traits, but he again follows the Aristotelian model in displaying a harmonized group of characteristics that clearly developed from traits Antony was born with. Essentially, this cluster of traits creates a well-rounded, humanized character and explains the reasoning for Antony’s decisions. With an explanation of how Antony goes about decision-making in place, Plutarch claims that Antony holds the agency in his eventual downfall.

In Chapter 2, the audience learns that in his youth Antony surrounded himself with bad influences that gave him a propensity for drinking. His friend Curio was foolish (ἀπαιδεύτου) in regard to pleasure (i.e., he searched for pleasure so fervently that it was foolish), and Antony was happy to join him in his drinking adventures and bouts with women. A few sentences later, Plutarch relates that Antony adopted a style of oratory that strongly resembled Antony’s own life. It was boastful (κομπώδη), hot-tempered (φρυαγματίαν), and filled with empty exultation (κενοῦ γαυριάματος) and strange ambition (φιλοτιμίας ἀνωμάλου).

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15 See M. Heath’s 2017 “Aristotle on the Best Kind of Tragic Plot: Re-Reading Poetics 13-14” for an in-depth analysis of this section of the Poetics.
18 Ant.2.3.
19 Ant.2.5.
Plutarch reveals more of his personality in a couple of later chapters, and these traits are a more mixed set. Chapter 4, for example, features Antony drinking and generally being merry with his fellow soldiers.\[^{20}\] Plutarch notes that through acts like these Antony nurtured much goodwill and affection from his soldiers, and a reader would assume, as T. Duff does, that such behavior is positive and important to his later military success.\[^{21}\] The problem is that in connecting with his men via drinking, Antony publicly displays one of his weaknesses and gives his men a reason to distrust his authority. Duff does not realize that Plutarch here reinforces that one of the leading reasons for Antony’s downfall is his love of drinking. Later, in Chapter 24, the audience learns that Antony was simple in his nature (ἁπλότης),\[^{22}\] which generally would imply that he is not the brightest and easy to take advantage of. Plutarch, though, seems to say that this simpleness actually just made him very earnest. He would apologize for his errors with strong repentance (ἰσχυρὰ μετάνοια) to ones that were wronged. In the cutthroat world of Roman politics, it probably would have been refreshing to meet with someone that was sincere and honest. At the same time, though, Plutarch qualifies this statement by saying it was only once Antony had perceived that he had done wrong (αἰσθανομένῳ) that he made his restitution; if he was too oblivious to what had been done, Plutarch implies, he would just continue in his normal manner. It is important to remember that these are qualities of a man that held great power in Rome, and one that spent much of his life as a military commander. Simpleness is not what a soldier wants from their commander -- the person in charge ought to have keen foresight and creative ideas aplenty. They should not be easy to take advantage of and so oblivious

\[^{20}\] Ant.4.1-7.
\[^{22}\] This and the following qualities from Ant.24.6.
that they do not always understand when they have done wrong. Plutarch, then, mixes a smidge of admiration into his list of Antony’s qualities, but the overwhelming picture is negative. The reader would have progressed through the narrative with the knowledge that Antony’s poor qualities were guiding his choices, indicating that they contributed to, if not entirely facilitated, his eventual downfall.

Plutarch has Cleopatra enter the narrative soon after, providing a possibility that she could share in some of the agency of the situation. Yet in this early narrative he writes her as something that Antony acts upon, not a figure that actively brings about change of her own accord. She is first introduced directly following this last description of Antony’s qualities, about one-third of the way through the history. In putting Cleopatra’s entrance soon after this list of Antony’s qualities, Plutarch emphasizes his eventual conclusion about Antony’s life: he fell from power partly because of his inherent qualities, but also partly from the event that is Cleopatra. Antony found himself, when he was with Cleopatra, in situations that continually tested his character. His proclivity for drinking, for example, was easily satisfied with all the banquets and parties he was able to throw in her palace. Being in these situations is not anyone’s fault in particular, but his poor inherent qualities ensured that these unfortunate circumstances would be at their most effective. Antony here thus holds the agency for the events that follow. A. Pontoropoulos is correct in arguing that there is an element of Greek tragedy in this portrayal, since fate destroys Antony’s potential to be a great Roman.23 However, he attributes the downfall primarily to circumstance, saying that “[h]is main feature is that he possesses a brilliant nature, which is taken down

23 Pontopopoulos (2014): 19. He is discussing Demetrius’ downfall here, but these statements apply to Antony’s, too, since he later says “The Roman Life of Antony, which follows Demetrius, will further elaborate on the existing motifs. Thus, the pair [...] shows the exploitation of a series of tragic themes.” (20) The two are paralleled, especially in their downfalls.
by his own vices. He is therefore presented in rather a tragic manner.” Pontoporopoulou contradicts himself in this conclusion, for he states that Antony’s own vices are the cause of his destruction, yet then attributes the destruction to nature. Antony’s inherent vices are to blame here. A person who was morally stronger than Antony could perhaps have counteracted these situations with some success, but he was not at all morally equipped to counter Cleopatra. Pelling more accurately notes that Plutarch documents “a man torn by psychological struggle and cruelly undone by his flaws; by his weakness of will, by his susceptibility to others, by his sad and conscious submission to his own lowest traits.”24 In his early characterization, then, Plutarch primarily blames Antony for his own downfall, which indicates that Cleopatra is absolved of blame for the time being.

*The interaction of their early characters.*

Plutarch has already described Antony’s poor moral qualities. When Cleopatra enters the narrative, he expands on those qualities by demonstrating how they affect Antony. He establishes from her first introduction that, because of Antony’s inherent nature, she would be the tipping point that caused his downfall.

With Antony being such in his nature, his love for Cleopatra became the final evil for him, and the love awakened and brought to frenzy many of the hidden and quiet passions in him; and if something useful or saving put up

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a resistance, the love destroyed and corrupted it. He was conquered in this way.\textsuperscript{25}

Though it is not immediately apparent, in this early passage Antony holds agency. Plutarch does not claim that Cleopatra was the one that completely conquered him. Rather, \textit{his love for her} is the reason that he was conquered. His innate qualities caused his downfall. Cleopatra did not destroy or corrupt any of the good qualities still in him: Antony’s love destroyed his own goodness. The words he used to describe Antony’s passions as “hidden and quiet” (κρυπτομένων, ἀτρεμούντων) are fairly drab, medical language, and they contrast sharply with how the love “brought to frenzy” (ἀναβακχεύσας) things residing deep within him.\textsuperscript{26} These hidden qualities will become major themes later in the history: Antony’s propensity for drinking, his love of theater and luxury, and devotion to physical pleasure. These qualities are all things that already existed within Antony; Plutarch does not say that Cleopatra introduced him to drinking, nor that his passions only came into being once Cleopatra entered his life. Rather, this love is, so to speak, the straw that broke the camel’s back. There could have been many situations in which Antony’s inherent qualities would lead him astray; he could have avoided his downfall, stayed in power, and eventually become a poor leader because he drank too much. Or he could have stayed in power a bit longer than he had, but then he could have been greatly betrayed by someone because of his simpleness. There were many paths that his life could have taken. The stars so happened to align that Antony loved Cleopatra, and this combined with his other flaws led to him falling from power.

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Ant.} 25.1.

\textsuperscript{26} Pelling (1988): 184.
So far, this is a Cleopatra without a personality. She exists in the beginning of the narrative only as a concept, a form, almost as if she is a boogeyman of some sort. The audience knows she will come back into the narrative, at least to some degree (they do not yet know that she will play a very influential role), yet at this point she exists only in relation to Antony. She is entirely defined by his love for her.

At the beginning of the narrative, then, Plutarch suggests that Antony’s eventual downfall will come because of his own nature. The choices he will make will be based on his inherent qualities, and these qualities are not positive ones; they are not qualities that equip one for success. His love for Cleopatra does not indict the queen, for those are Antony’s feelings. Further on in the narrative Plutarch will assign blame to Cleopatra, but at this point the fingers seem to point to Antony.

The Middle Narrative: Cleopatra Gains Agency.

After this initial introduction to Cleopatra, Plutarch begins to shift the narrative a bit to give Cleopatra a bigger role in the story. Cleopatra becomes more active in Antony’s affairs, and Antony begins to make decisions based on her. Taking an active role in affairs restores some agency to her, as her choices affect the forthcoming narratival events. However, Antony’s actions are still his responsibility; the agency becomes split between them. Additionally, Plutarch emphasizes that part of the tragedy of this situation is the timing. The blame here belongs to neither Antony nor Cleopatra, but to fate. Antony and Cleopatra happened to meet when Cleopatra was in the prime of her life, and thus her most dangerous. This is not necessarily Cleopatra’s fault -- Plutarch generalizes the statement and says that at this age, all women are naturally their most beautiful and influential. At
the same time, though fate gave them this situation, Cleopatra takes advantage of the fact that she knows she is at her most dangerous. Hence, the responsibility for these events belongs to three figures. Cleopatra does not remain an event in the Middle and Later narratives. Her presence and choices have tangible effects on Antony and the course of his life.

*Cleopatra in the natural prime of her life.*

It is unclear exactly *how much* blame Plutarch places on Cleopatra near the beginning of this section. She is on her way to meet Antony for the first time, answering his summons so they can discuss the war he is in. He calls her there for one reason, but in truth he wants her financial help with the war. Cleopatra, the audience can deduce, is delighted by this, for it gives her an opportunity to ensure the protection of Egypt from the very man who could conquer it. As she prepares her plan to get Antony on her side, Plutarch again focuses the story on Antony’s eventual downfall. He first absolves her of blame and places the agency in Antony, saying that Antony fell in love because of the unfortunate timing in which he came to know her. However, he then writes that Cleopatra capitalized on this timing, which restores some agency to her character.

ἐκεῖνοι μὲν γὰρ αὐτὴν ἐπὶ κόρην καὶ πραγμάτων ἄπειρον ἔγνωσαν, πρὸς δὲ τούτον ἐμελλὲ ἐρημησεῖν ἐν δὲ μάλιστα καρδιῶν γυναικεῖς ἄριστον τοὺς λαμπροτάτους ἔχουσι καὶ τὰ φρονεῖν ἀκμάζουσι. διὸ πολλὰ μὲν συνεσκευάσατο δῶρα καὶ χρήματα καὶ κόσμον οἷον εἰκὸς ἦν ἀπὸ πραγμάτων μεγάλων καὶ βασιλείας εὐδαιμονοὺς κομίζειν, τὰς δὲ πλείστας ἐν ἑαυτῇ καὶ τοῖς περὶ αὐτὴν μαγγανεύσαι καὶ φύλτροις ἐλπίδας θεμένη παρεγένετο.

[Caesar and Pompey] came to know her when she was still a girl and inexperienced in affairs, but she was going to visit [Antony] in that part of time in which women most hold the prime of their radiance and they are in
full bloom of their thinking. On account of this she packed up many gifts and riches and ornaments, as was fitting to carry from great affairs and a blessed kingdom, putting the majority of hope in herself and the magic and love charms around her, and she went to [Antony’s] side.27

The beginning of this passage leads the audience to think that Plutarch is placing the blame in fate, which keeps Cleopatra as an event rather than an active participant in the story. If being at her most dangerous does not stem from any choice she has made, then she still has not imposed any change on the narrative. Women on the whole are at their most dangerous when they are around this age;28 nature made Cleopatra as beautiful and intelligent as she is. Plutarch is not suggesting that women should withdraw from public life because they are this way. He simply acknowledges the fact that the situation is unfortunate. He has already established in Chapter 2 that Antony has a weakness for women, and in Chapter 24 that he is simple and easy to take advantage of. Fate is to blame here: Antony was already at a natural disadvantage, and it just so happened that Cleopatra was at her most power in this moment.

At the same time, Cleopatra does take advantage of the situation. Here lies the difference between Cleopatra as a passive event and as an active agent: if she just happens in this moment to be at her most beautiful and intelligent, that is nature working around her. If she chooses to enhance the chances of her success, however, she starts to affect the course of events. Her choices will directly and negatively affect Antony’s life. In her first active action here, she takes her most effective tools with her: the riches of her kingdom, gifts to impress him, and her own charms. Of these, she places the “majority of her hope

27 Ant.25.5-6.
28 Pelling (1988): 186. Cleopatra was 28 at this point. Plutarch “puts the height of beauty encouragingly late and the height of intellectual power depressingly early.”
in herself,” believing that the money might help, but that she will be able to get what she wants through her beauty, intelligence, and the charm and draw of her alluring personality. Pelling specifies that these are the “spells and charms [...] exercised by her personality,” suggesting that at this point Cleopatra has chosen to take advantage of her natural abilities. With full command of the charm of her personality, she sheds her passive characterization and brings a two-pronged attack against the Roman general.

This description could contain some embellishment from Plutarch’s end. He establishes in the first sentence of this quotation that she has not met Antony before, yet at the same time she already knows what his weak spots will be and how to manipulate him! Pelling notes that it is not unlikely that Plutarch took a bit of license in allowing himself to supplement sparse material; if this is editorialization, he has created a woman who, in her role as agent, is at once morally bereft and also extremely threatening. One who uses her sexual powers to get what she wants would be easy to condemn in a society where at one point the emperor had enthusiastically implemented legislation on the morality of his citizens. She is particularly threatening, too, because as a female ruler she has these powers that men do not. Her ability to manipulate someone through sex is a tool none of the great male leaders of the time had an equivalent weapon for. By capitalizing on her femininity, Plutarch has created an extremely shrewd, intelligent, and crafty woman who acutely threatens any male leader.

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30 Pelling (1980): 129.
31 Augustus was emperor about two centuries before Plutarch, but he was on the rise to power at this point in the narrative. He would become Cleopatra’s greatest enemy and eventually conquer Egypt. Subtly juxtaposing her use of sex to gain power with what Augustus would soon be encouraging provides Plutarch a platform to bring in the main goal of the Lives -- to judge what characteristics, particularly moral characteristics, made someone great or fall.
However, this is not necessarily Plutarch’s editorialization. Cleopatra, as queen of a large, wealthy kingdom, had a well-informed court that made it their business to keep up on the strengths and weaknesses of their possible enemies. She surely would have had people watching Antony, as she did not know yet whether he intended to conquer Egypt for Rome. If he had had a weakness for women since his youth, as Plutarch suggests, Cleopatra would have known about it. Bringing her most effective tools with her in this meeting is simply what any wise ruler would do. This understanding of the situation does not free Cleopatra from blame, for she is still actively making choices that will harm Antony in the future. In describing her tools, though, Plutarch does create a clever, dangerous woman; he also establishes that Cleopatra had a part in creating an unfortunate circumstance for Antony. He was already vulnerable to someone with these charms, and Cleopatra came in with two highly effective weapons. First, she was naturally at her most beautiful and intelligent, and to a man like Antony, that may as well say dangerous. Second, she enhanced what was already threatening by using her charms. Whether or not Plutarch embellished the history here, he still created a Cleopatra that is partly responsible for Antony’s downfall.

*Antony makes decisions based on Cleopatra.*

Later in the history, Plutarch assigns agency in a way that actually seems more indicative of the early narrative. He suggests that Cleopatra has reverted to an event; Antony’s poor decisions come from his own nature and the poor choices he makes on account of that nature. By playing with who takes the responsibility, Plutarch creates a highly nuanced character that is not wholly good nor evil, just as Duff claims is necessary
to create an emotional response.\textsuperscript{32} Plutarch reminds the reader that Antony’s life was full of complex situations, and though he was thrust into some tricky situations, in the end he was not equipped to deal with them. He was not morally strong enough to ever become a great man. At this moment in the history, Cleopatra is partly responsible for that, but the blame still mostly lies with Antony himself.

By this point, Antony and Cleopatra have become well acquainted and he has spent a good bit of time in Egypt with her. Plutarch here expands on the love that he earlier claimed destroyed Antony. They joked well together, often dressing up as normal citizens of the city and going around to pull pranks on others;\textsuperscript{33} they spent time with the best thinkers of the city in their secret “Society of Inimitable Livers,” feasting night after night;\textsuperscript{34} they fished, they drank, they played dice day after day.\textsuperscript{35} Antony was completely enthralled with Cleopatra, and loved to be in her company night and day.\textsuperscript{36}

Antony then leaves Egypt to go to war. He is fighting against the Parthians, an expedition initially proposed by Julius Caesar -- in fact, it is the war that Caesar was a few short days from embarking upon when he was stabbed on the Ides of March. For Antony, it would be a seven year undertaking where his allies deserted and betrayed him more than once and he lost one quarter of his men. It is perhaps the beginning of Antony’s downfall, for soon after the war his relations with those in Rome began to deteriorate. Octavian, the future emperor Augustus and Antony’s co-ruler at the moment, began calling for war against Antony. Officially, this was a war on Cleopatra and on Egypt, where Antony had

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ant.} 29.1-2.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ant.} 28.2-7.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Ant.} 29.1-4.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ant.} 29.1: οὔτε νυκτός οὔτε ἡμέρας ἀνιεῖσα, “she released him neither night nor day.”
made his home after the Parthian defeat, but in truth Octavian was fighting the Cleopatra-
Antony pair. As with the Life on the whole, the audience knows the outcome of this war,
for Antony’s defeat was enormous, and Octavian was not exactly shy about it. The reader
would be searching here for the reason that Antony lost the war. They would probably look
for foreshadowing about Antony’s later full fall from power; if this is the beginning of the
end, the end will probably be on account of similar reasons.

When Antony is fighting the war, Plutarch tells the reader that his fellow generals
and soldiers were happy because they thought his infatuation with Cleopatra was calming
down. As he drew closer to Egypt, though, it blazed up again. She met him in Syria and
that was really the last chance Antony had to escape her love. He spends the next few
chapters finishing the war, and after that he never goes to Rome again; he never escapes
his love for Cleopatra. Plutarch attributes the loss of the war to Antony’s poor decisions.

This preparation and power, which terrified the ones beyond the Indus of Bactria and subdued all of Asia, they say became unprofitable to him on account of Cleopatra. For he hurried to spend the winter with her, and ended the war before the right time and managed everything confusedly.

Plutarch misleads the reader a bit here. His phrase “on account of Cleopatra” (διὰ Ἐθνοπάτραν) makes it sound as if he is placing the blame on her, but in truth Antony still

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37 Ant.36.1.
38 The reason why she came is unclear. Plutarch just says “when she had come” (ἐλθοῦσα) and
“when he had sent her to Egypt” (εἰς Αἴγυπτον ἀποσέμψας), and not whether she was there to
provide food, men, ships, etc., or if she brought something else. Antony gives her gifts, but
presumably these were in exchange for something.
39 Ant.37.5-6
holds the agency. Cleopatra is not forcing him to finish the war, nor hurry back to Egypt; she is not threatening to take back her armies, nor to sabotage him in any other way. Just as in the first quotation (Ant.25.1), Antony is the one with the feelings, and Antony is the one making decisions based on those feelings. Plutarch again uses her as a concept, nothing but an event, rather than giving her any role in Antony’s decision-making. True, Antony’s reasoning for finishing up the war too quickly relies on her -- but in the end, he is the one that made that decision. He used the idea of Cleopatra to justify his unfortunate war plans.

In order for Cleopatra to hold agency in this scenario, she would have had to help convince Antony to end the war. Plutarch plays with the reader’s expectations, since she has already had a fairly active role in the narrative so far and actively made an impact on Antony’s decision making. In doing so, Plutarch refocuses the narrative and reminds the readers that this is a history about Antony. He has consistently been the more humanized of the pair, with a fully fleshed out background and logical (or, at least, understandable) thought processes. He is the one that needs to spark an emotional response in the readers, because he is the one that conveys Plutarch’s moral teachings.\footnote{Duff (2004): 286 and Braund (1993): 468.} Cleopatra helps set the scene, but as Plutarch reinforces her status as event he reveals the contrast in his characterization of these two figures. Antony, the agent, exemplifies what happens when someone gives in to their vices. The audience needs to learn to make different choices than he did. Cleopatra, queen of Egypt, however, is incidental. Her figure only serves to progress Antony’s story.
The Later Narrative: Antony, Cleopatra, and Fate.

The narrative follows some war history after these events, and Cleopatra takes part here and there, but the narrative really recenters on her in Chapter 60. She becomes active in the story once again as she and Antony reside together in Egypt. At this point, though, they are not going fishing and playing pranks on their subjects. Octavian has declared war on them from Egypt, and they are dealing with Antony’s loss at Actium. It would be Antony’s last battle, and the last in the war between Egypt and Rome. As Antony deals with the loss, Cleopatra regains some agency. In fact, after Antony commits suicide, the narrative actually continues for eight chapters just about her.\(^\text{41}\) She is undoubtedly no longer just an event, for her actions have tangible effects on his decisions and his fate. She never quite becomes the sole reason for Antony’s downfall, but instead Plutarch emphasizes in these sections that Cleopatra and Antony share agency. The language he uses suggests that, while Cleopatra -- at some points through intentional plans, but most often without trying -- created some unfortunate circumstances for Antony, many of the decisions still came from Antony’s poor character.

This shared blame is present in a couple of claims made about Cleopatra. At one point, for example, Plutarch says that Antony is “an appendage of the woman” (προσθήκη της γυναικὸς), and that caused him to make poor war plans.\(^\text{42}\) Though this is a simple statement of fact, it actually leaves a lot for the audience to wonder. Through whose agency

\(^{41}\) Pelling (1980: 138) believes that this unprecedented hyperfocus on a secondary character indicates that at this point the history is no longer a biography at all, but rather a way for Plutarch to explore drama and luxury. While an interesting theory, I think it more likely that Plutarch here indicates the importance of Cleopatra on Antony’s life. She has been so influential (whether as agent or event) that their two stories are entirely interlocked.

\(^{42}\) Ant.62.1. It seems that there has been little scholarly discussion on this phrase, but it likely carries a phallic connotation as well; another instance (mirroring Ant.76.6, below) where Antony and Cleopatra’s gender roles are confounded.
has this occurred? While Plutarch does not suggest that Cleopatra did any particular action to ‘bind’ him to her, he neither suggests that this was a choice Antony made. It probably is a culmination of all the time Antony spent in Egypt, along with all the little things Cleopatra has done to make the situation particularly harmful to Antony’s vulnerabilities. The blame here belongs to neither one wholly, but is split.

In Chapter 60, Octavian is declaring war against Cleopatra, and Plutarch also inserts shared blame into the claims that Octavian makes. He firstly declares that Antony had given up his sovereignty to Cleopatra (τῆς ἀρχῆς Ἀντώνιον ἦς ἐξέστη γυναικί), and next that he was not master of himself (οὐδὲ αὑτοῦ κρατοίη). Octavian places blame first on Antony and Antony’s own actions, since he actively gave up his sovereignty. It was not taken from him, nor did it just passively leave him; he gave it up. In his second claim, though, Cleopatra takes the fault. Antony is not making any choice here. Rather, Octavian is stating a fact about him. If Antony is not master of himself, though, the audience must wonder who is. Octavian does not outright state that it is Cleopatra, but every reader’s mind would have gone to her. He is declaring war on her, after all, and she is really the only person with a close relationship to Antony at this point. If Antony is not master of himself, someone must come in and fill that power vacuum. Would a queen not be a fitting candidate to hold power over a man?

Both of these claims, though, present a strange sort of neutral ground for Plutarch as an author; it is difficult to tell whether Plutarch is speaking his own thoughts through his own voice, or just reporting an event he maybe does not believe is accurate. After all, he does not confirm or deny these claims, nor agree or disagree with them. He could be

43 _Ant.60.1_.

simply reporting what Octavian said, or even what was said that Octavian said. These words need not even be Octavian’s -- “A vote was passed” (ψηφίζεται),\(^4^4\) which, though Plutarch does not say so, indicates that the senate was involved in coming to this conclusion. Are these their words, though, or the words of their leader? More importantly, how much validity does Plutarch think these claims have? He could be qualifying these claims, as in the middle he writes that Caesar (Octavian) declared this (προσεπεῖπε).\(^4^5\) If Plutarch unequivocally believed what he was reporting, he would write it as fact. This addition, saying that these were Octavian’s words and not just his, could have been a subtle way for Plutarch to criticize the government of Rome -- or it could have just been a way for Plutarch to make clear who the subject of this sentence was. The vagueness concerning his authorial intent suggests that Plutarch might have wanted all of these possibilities to exist at once, and to let the audience decide. For, as Duff writes, in encouraging the audience to think about the text critically, Plutarch is able to affix the story (and thus his moral messages) quite effectively into the minds of his readers.\(^4^6\)

It is actually as Antony is dying that Plutarch most clearly discusses the shared agency. In a speech that quite closely reflects Plutarch’s Lives on the whole, Antony considers which of his qualities have gotten him to this point: a general who has lost his last battle, finally fallen from what could have been a spectacular future. The only thing left for him to do is die. Some of his last words illuminate Antony’s thoughts on the matter: he is no longer one of the most powerful men in Rome, and he believes it is partly because

\(^{4^4}\) Ant.60.1.

\(^{4^5}\) Ant.60.1. “A rare and grave word, suiting the solemnity of the moment,” says Pelling (1988): 264.

he has become Cleopatra’s subordinate. He has his sword next to him and loosens his armor, ready to die by suicide.

καὶ τὸν θώρακα παραλύων καὶ διαστέλλον, ὦ Κλεοπάτρα,’ εἶπεν, ὦύκ ἄρθρομαι σου στερούμενος: αὐτίκα γὰρ εἰς ταῦτον ἀφίζομαι: ἀλλ᾽ ὅτι γυναικὸς ὁ τηλικοῦτος αὐτοκράτωρ εὐψυχίᾳ πεφώραμαι λειπόμενος.’

And as he loosened and put aside his armor, he said, “O Cleopatra, I am not grieved to be robbed of you; for I will quickly follow to the same place [as you]; but I am grieved that such a leader as I am found to be inferior to a woman as regards courage.”

There is an interesting dynamic in this quotation. On the one hand, Antony openly admits that he has failed as a Roman man. One of a soldier’s main duties -- let alone a general’s -- was to be brave and have outstanding courage on the battlefield. This word for courage (εὐψυχίᾳ) is specifically a soldier’s courage, which equates to a man’s courage. The idea that a woman could surpass one of the most powerful Roman men in masculine courage would have been quite shameful. On the other hand, though, Antony is dying in exactly the correct Roman way: suicide was always preferred to being taken prisoner, and men that died by suicide were honored in their own families for their courage. In words Plutarch condemns Antony for all the decisions that led up to this point; yet with his death, he pardons Antony for his choices.

Plutarch emphasizes this pardon by including a small detail: the name of Antony’s slave, Eros. Before Antony dies by suicide, he asks Eros to kill him instead. Eros refuses, however, and kills himself, abandoning Antony in his time of need. What is fascinating is that eros is a form of Greek passionate love that could very well describe the relationship between Antony and Cleopatra. Though Plutarch has not mentioned this character before

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47 *Ant.* 76.6.
in the narrative, he is described as Antony’s “trusty” slave (πιστὸς), thus suggesting that he has been by Antony’s side for a while. In other words, love has been accompanying Antony for a long time, and Antony has had faith in love for a long time. Love has influenced his decisions since, after all, the reader learned early on that Antony was conquered by his love for Cleopatra, and the love destroyed everything good still in him.\(^{48}\) As Eros abandons Antony, he leaves him completely alone for the first time in a while. Murgatroyd believes that in addition to Antony using his words to claim his inferiority to a woman, he also “immediately shows himself to be inferior to a slave,” since he asks his slave Eros to do the actual killing.\(^{49}\) Murgatroyd misses a key point here, though: Eros’ function in the story is not to be a slave, but rather to show that Antony is no longer hindered by the love that clouded his judgement. Alone, Antony’s mind is no longer clouded, and it is no coincidence that only after love abandons Antony does he redeem himself by proving to be a virtuous Roman in his death.

All this being said, Plutarch is not pardoning Antony from blame for his fall from power. Antony himself is admitting that he made choices that caused him to be inferior to Cleopatra, and he is at the same time condemning Cleopatra for having that power over him. While recognizing his own agency, he blames Cleopatra’s as well. This quotation could just as easily read, “if I were not inferior to a woman, I would not have to die by suicide.” In this way, Cleopatra’s role has shifted from the initial blameless, passive figure into a character that is also assigned responsibility for Antony’s downfall. Plutarch expresses to his readers with this overarching shift that what causes a man’s fate is not just

\(^{48}\) Ant.25.1.  
\(^{49}\) Murgatroyd (2012): 179.
merely their character, nor their decisions based on character, but also chance and fortunes’
influence on their life. It was chance that led Antony and Cleopatra to meet in the first
place, and chance that she was in the prime of her life -- the most dangerous part of her
life. With Antony predispositioned to falling for her charms and lifestyle, the Life of Antony
turns by the end into an Aristotelian Greek tragedy that Antony and Cleopatra are
responsible for.

**Conclusion.**

Plutarch’s approach to characterization adheres to the one Aristotle describes in his
*Poetics*. Characters perform actions based on rational thoughts, the reasoning of which a
reader ought to be able to clearly trace from childhood. In this sense, actions are predictable
and the reader *should* examine both the logic behind them and their outcome. Plutarch uses
a historical framework to encourage this examination, with both Antony and Cleopatra as
examples showing the results of engaging with one’s vices. Antony holds agency
throughout the whole narrative, and by looking at the outcomes of his decisions -- at one
time one of the greatest Roman leaders in the world, now dead by his own hand after
yielding to his vices day after day -- a reader can choose to live their life differently.
Cleopatra’s role shifts throughout the narrative, starting as a pure event and by the end
sharing agency with Antony and fate. Plutarch used her character to shape the occurrences
of Antony’s life, which he then needed to respond to. She was absolutely key to his project;
she enabled Antony’s decisions to take place at all. In looking at these decisions, Plutarch
urges his readers to consider their own actions and encourages them not to make the same
choices as Antony and Cleopatra. Plutarch thus uses the two characters to convey his moral
messaging; though he relied on historical sources and based the majority of his biography in fact, in truth he was writing to achieve his own goals, and he used the characters of Antony and Cleopatra to achieve those ends.
Chapter Three

Cleopatra as Agent in Mankiewicz’s Cleopatra (1963)

If Plutarch’s work follows Pelling’s criteria on what gives a character personhood, Mankiewicz’s film follows Loraux’s. Mankiewicz had no interest in showing the consistency of a character’s personality development from childhood to adulthood. Rather, he investigated the issue of agency by analyzing what characters performed actions and what effects those actions had. If a character affected the outcome of events, they held agency, and Antony and Cleopatra certainly created their own fortunes in the film. The plot is significantly character-driven, and Mankiewicz includes very few pure events (i.e. occurrences that come from fortune or the gods alone). Antony decides how relations with Rome will be, for example, determining through political and marriage alliances that he and Augustus must go to war. Cleopatra chooses to throw her support behind Antony, even when the pair’s chance of winning the war quickly dwindles. In this way, despite film critics that claim the film relies on decadent displays and Elizabeth Taylor’s beauty for its success, Mankiewicz provides a thoroughly logical plot in which an audience member can easily trace the character-driven progression of events.

Mankiewicz confirms in a couple different scenes that Antony and Cleopatra have determined the course of events. Late in the movie, Antony makes a series of questionable choices when creating the battle plan for Actium. He dismisses two of his most trusted

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50 Time Magazine (No author; 1963): “Sad to say, [...] Mankiewicz fails most where most he hoped to succeed. As drama and as cinema, Cleopatra is raddled [sic] with flaws. It lacks style both in image and in action. Never for an instant does it whirl along on wings of epic elan; generally it just bumps from scene to ponderous scene on the square wheels of exposition.”  
Bradshaw (2013): “Elizabeth Taylor’s Cleopatra is a kittenish Southern belle, witty, capricious and often semi-nude but with not much to say[...].”
Along with countless others of the same opinion.
generals and asserts over and over that, as commander, everyone must respect his power. Cleopatra approaches him and asks the reason for these outbursts.

_Cleopatra_: Antony, what has happened?  
_Antony_: To me? You have happened to me.\(^5\)

A little while later, a similar conversation occurs. The two stand in a dark crypt and discuss Antony’s behavior after Actium. He has withdrawn from all life, speaking to no one, and stalks across rooms in dark clothes. He grieves for the men he abandoned in battle and knows not how he can regain honor, nor whom he can regain it from.

_Shall I give my reason [for abandoning Actium]? Shall I say simply, ‘I loved’? When I saw you go, I saw nothing. Felt, heard, thought nothing, except your going. Not the dying and dead, not Rome [...]_. Nothing, except my love was going, and that I must be with her. That my love, my master called.\(^2\)

Antony attributes his actions over and over again to Cleopatra’s influence. The pair bit by bit created their own fall from power, with each decision gradually building on those before.

With Antony and Cleopatra established as agents, Mankiewicz has their actions lead to a couple different conclusions. He condemns everything that results from Cleopatra’s sexual abilities, claiming that sex cannot be a stable basis for an empire or alliance. He too chastises the considerable luxury present in the film. Again, though many critics attribute the over-the-top decadence to the film being made in the golden age of Hollywood, Mankiewicz actually suggests that Cleopatra’s reliance on such tools creates

\(^{51}3:04:40.\)

\(^{52}3:30:05.\)
catastrophic outcomes for the characters. In short, Mankiewicz uses the pair, but especially Cleopatra, to convey his moral teachings, just as Plutarch did.

**Cleopatra-Taylor’s sexuality.**

Cleopatra affects the film’s events through one political tool more than any other: her sexual abilities. F. Pina Polo claims that this Cleopatra is not just a sensual figure, but an “intelligent ruler […]. In Mankiewicz’s characterization, actual political power accordingly joins Cleopatra’s stereotypical power of seduction.”

Cleopatra, after all, begins an affair with Caesar immediately after arriving back in the palace, and with Antony a short time after that ends, and through both of these relationships she maintains enough power to stay on the Egyptian throne. The subtext Mankiewicz presents is that in order to stay in power, Cleopatra needs these powerful men on her side, and each of them is susceptible to the same female charm. Though Cleopatra may achieve her short-term goals of getting these men on her side, in the end Mankiewicz claims that her sex-earned power was never secure, and that power gained in this manner leads to tragic consequences. Her sexual power manifests itself in two main areas: her speech and her actions.

Mankiewicz from the start portrays Cleopatra as a sexual object. C. Moore notes that when Caesar unrolls her from the carpet and comments that he can tell more about the quality of the merchandise by examining the backside, he is not just making a witty comment about the queen he knows lies in the carpet. The language he uses conflates the queen with the object he pretends to be speaking of, and Caesar’s joke about her backside

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54 0:20:56.
flavors this objectification with sexuality. In addition, Taylor, her love interests, and other characters in the film fill their conversations with the queen with all sorts of innuendo. At the end of this carpet scene, Cleopatra fears she and Caesar have gotten off to a bad start. “I’ve done nothing but rub you the wrong way,” she says. Caesar looks right at her and responds, “I’m not sure I want to be rubbed by you at all, young lady.” A few minutes later, after their first kiss, Cleopatra coyly asks, “am I to understand that you should feel free to do with me whatever you want, whenever you want?” Whether the words come from the mouth of Cleopatra herself, her allies, or her enemies, Mankiewicz constantly has the film assert the queen’s sexual draw and abilities; through this assertion, he emphasizes that her power, and thus the legitimacy for her actions, comes from this sexuality.

Her actions, too, always bring her sexuality to the forefront of each scene. These actions include everything from her wardrobe choices and the way in which she orchestrates meetings to the actual seduction of Caesar and Antony (which, writers usually forget to mention, is an action requiring two people. As much as Cleopatra uses her female charms to achieve her goals, Caesar and Antony are more than receptive to her tactics. Cleopatra almost ubiquitously gets the blame, though). Writers comment on the plunging necklines and tight waists of Taylor’s dresses, sometimes featuring a slit up to the thigh for infrequent flashes of leg. They remark on Cleopatra’s audacity to meet with Caesar in her bathroom, dressed in only a thin robe, or the cheekiness of her plan to have Antony find her in bed. They note the cadence her voice takes when she talks with someone she desires, and they undoubtedly at some point in their articles mention Elizabeth Taylor’s famous

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56 0:23:47.
57 0:43:22.
beauty. Taylor’s violet eyes, smooth skin, small waist, and thick, dark hair have all become tools with which modern audiences see Cleopatra achieving her goals.

On this topic, writers often conflate the sexuality of Cleopatra with that of Taylor, for they often see two women as one figure in popular culture. If Cleopatra lets the Romans view her as an object, to viewers it is usually as if Taylor is doing so too. Fox Studios was happy to allow this conflation, and even promote it. E. Ford and D. Mitchell point out that some of this conflation results from the film mixing ancient and modern imagery, as with Taylor’s dresses featuring recognizably Egyptian symbols but elegant, 1960s cuts.\(^5^8\) A large degree, though, comes from *My Life with Cleopatra*, a memoir-style book written by Walter Wagner, producer of *Cleopatra*. In the book Wagner details the experience of filming with Taylor and Burton, with emphasis on the difficulty of that process. He published the book before the film opened and purposefully filled it with exaggerated events designed to popularize the film.\(^5^9\) The American public at the time voraciously seized news of the on-set affair, and as these sorts of stories continued to sell, the studio continued to release them. M. Wyke and D. Montserrat write that the link between the two women emphasizes their love of glamour and luxury, as well as the wastefulness and sexual promiscuity that result.\(^6^0\) By popularizing the mirrored images of the Cleopatra-Antony affair and the Taylor-Burton affair, Fox and Wagner successfully suggested that anything that occurred to Taylor also happened to Cleopatra, and Mankiewicz capitalized on this publicized link in order to offer a lesson on sexuality.

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\(^{5^8}\) Ford and Mitchell (2009): 106.
\(^{5^9}\) Wyke and Montserrat (2011): 190.
\(^{6^0}\) Wyke and Montserrat (2011): 189.
Audiences have always emphatically noted how prominent Cleopatra’s sexuality is in the film, but they often miss the message of this prominence. In the same way that Elizabeth Taylor’s on-set affair with Richard Burton was rooted in infatuation, caused erratic decisions from both of them, complicated the work lives of those around them, and later crumbled before the public’s eye, Cleopatra loses everything she gains with sexual tools. The queen’s goal with Caesar is to form an Egypt-Rome hybrid empire, and it seems cemented once their son is old enough to hold power in such a country. Once Caesar dies in Rome, though, Cleopatra realizes that the new rulers in Rome will never honor her plan, for everything she intended to do relied on having Caesar by her side. These plans for a combined empire could not proceed without him, for neither Augustus nor Cicero nor any other Roman leader had any reason to honor an alliance based on sexual relations with another man. A relationship between Cleopatra and Caesar did not benefit a single other member of the Roman senate, and so as Caesar dies Cleopatra learns for the first time that promises based on love (or desire, or lust, or whatever else the audience wishes to call their relationship), or based on the products of such a union, are not a reliable basis for ruling an empire.

With Antony, too, their union is based on mutual infatuation, but this causes erratic decisions and makes them unfit for governing. Mankiewicz agrees with Plutarch on this; just as when Plutarch writes that Antony “hurried to spend the winter with [Cleopatra], and ended the war before the right time and managed everything confusedly,” Mankiewicz has Antony abandon his men at the battle of Actium in order to follow the fleeing...
Cleopatra. A soldier approaches Antony and tries to speak some reason into him. “My lord, my lord, our casualties are heavy. We’ve been hit on the left. Our men need regrouping, someone to give them courage. My lord, the dying are calling for you, the living need your help! You can’t leave them! Listen to me!” He shakes Antony, but Antony’s eyes are fixed on Cleopatra’s barge. He does not respond to these shouts until he pushes the soldier away. Eventually, as Antony and Cleopatra feel the effects of such a rash decision, the Egypt that they had tried to create falls to Augustus. Again, Cleopatra learns that an empire built on love can easily evaporate before one’s eyes.

Some writers bring up that the film was made in the midst of second-wave feminism, and wish to see Cleopatra’s sexuality as an empowering tool. Because the 1960s brought sexual liberation for women in America, it would fit that a prominent figure such as Cleopatra could mirror this freedom. In this view, Cleopatra would simply be capitalizing on an opportunity she has to use tools not available to men. Her keen wit and cleverness would prove that she would be able to maneuver situations in whatever direction she desired, whether by diplomatic conversation or coy seduction. As with a soldier, who has at his disposal swords, bows, javelins, and other tools, she chose to rely on sexuality simply because that choice was available to her. However, Mankiewicz has never claimed to be a feminist, and most cite the film’s inception to Fox’s desire to make a cheap, easy, and profitable crowd-pleaser -- not to a desire to create a declaration of women’s newly-found freedom. As I will discuss below, if Mankiewicz truly wanted to make a feminist

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63 Wyke and Montserrat (2013): 188.
64 Bronfen (2013): 229. “Spyros Skouras, president of Twentieth Century Fox in the late 1950s, had chosen this monumental story in the hope that an epic film with great spectacles and glamorous stars would salvage the financial straits of his studio.”
statement, he would have to show Cleopatra using her intellect and embracing all the duties that being queen of Egypt entails. With her interests and objectives focusing exclusively on her love interests, Cleopatra’s sexuality is not a feminist tool that she employs by choice, but just a method of getting short-term results that cannot stand on their own.

This focus on sexuality is fairly unique to Mankiewicz’s characterization, and it demonstrates the priorities of modern audiences. Writers today love to claim that Plutarch is the source of Cleopatra’s scandalous reputation, but there really is little focus on sexuality in his history. At a couple instances he does allude to her beauty, which audiences can assume is a gentle way of referring to her sexuality, and in one of these passages she does capitalize on this power, just as she does in Mankiewicz’s film. However, there are not nearly enough references to her sexuality to warrant the reputation that Plutarch has among scholars today. In the majority of moments when a reader might expect to see Cleopatra rely on her sexuality -- and he does not give any details about her sexuality as they do in the movie. There are no descriptions of how exactly she made herself beautiful or attractive when going to Antony, no form-fitting dresses nor leg slits nor paper-thin robes, no outright comments like Rufio’s, that “[i]n obtaining her objectives Cleopatra has been known to use [...] her own sexual talents, which are said to be quite considerable.”

In fact, at moments where one might expect to see Cleopatra rely on her sexual skill, such as negotiations in a private room with Augustus in the midst of Egypt’s subjugation,

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65 As in Ant.25.5-6, quoted in chapter 2, where Cleopatra is at the prime of her natural beauty.
66 For the audience even hears in Ant.27.2 that she was not all that beautiful. As translated by Perrin (1920): 195-197. “For her beauty, as we are told, was in itself not altogether incomparable, nor such as to strike those who saw her; but converse with her had an irresistible charm, and her presence, combined with the persuasiveness of her discourse and the character which was somehow diffused about her behaviour towards others, had something stimulating about it.
67 0:28:30.
Plutarch does not give seduction as one of her tactics. Cleopatra tries to justify her actions to Augustus, to cause Augustus to pity her, and she tries to keep herself alive by offering Egypt’s vast treasury; she does not offer sexual favors. Plutarch notes that her charm and beauty had not disappeared, but he also conspicuously leaves out any mention that Cleopatra acted on them.

Antony’s love for her, as discussed in Chapter 2, played a large part in causing his downfall. The love that Antony holds for Cleopatra in Ant.25.1 is ἔρως (eros, sexual love), but that is Antony’s feeling for her, not something that Cleopatra cultivated for herself. This situation mirrors Rufio’s comment in a way, for both Antony’s ἔρως and Rufio’s comment are made by others about her. The modern male gaze on a woman’s sexuality is rooted in ancient times; the difference here, though, is that while Plutarch focuses on other aspects of Antony and Cleopatra’s relationship, Mankiewicz continues to stress Cleopatra’s sexuality to show how she achieves her power, emphasizing it through her own words and actions and those of others.

The reputation of Cleopatra as seductress, then, is rooted not in Plutarch’s work, but in Mankiewicz’s and his film predecessors’. The Theda Bara (1917) and Claudette Colbert (1934) Cleopatra films each created a queen that was highly alluring for their own eras, just as Taylor was seductive in distinctly 1960s clothing and behavior. The priorities of modern audiences can thus be seen in this shift to a sexual Cleopatra. An audience member might at first assume that in depicting the heroine of his movie as a fiery, sexually liberated woman, Mankiewicz was condoning such behavior and encouraging his audience

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68 Ant.83.
69 Wyke and Montserrat (2011).
70 Bronfen (2013): 219-220 for adaption of historical trends (especially visual) to contemporary ages.
to partake in the beliefs of second-wave feminism. However, because her story ends in tragedy, he actually uses the historical framework of Cleopatra’s life to explain why such behavior should be avoided.

By focusing on Cleopatra’s sexuality throughout the film, Mankiewicz manages to achieve two goals at once. He first shows the audience the way in which Cleopatra most successfully influences events, and in doing so he follows Loraux’s criteria on personhood, since according to Loraux a character achieves personhood simply by performing actions and affecting the forthcoming events of a narrative. Because Cleopatra and Antony create just about all of the events that occur in the film, they end up determining their own fortunes. They are undoubtedly the agents. Once he establishes that Cleopatra is an agent and thus that he can use her to convey his morals, Mankiewicz then demonstrates the negative consequences that come from using such a tool. Whether or not the real, historical person Cleopatra relied heavily on her sexuality for political success, Mankiewicz chose to focus on that aspect of her life to convey his own ideas on morality.

**Luxury in Cleopatra.**

*Cleopatra* is to its very core a luxurious, decadent film, and Mankiewicz here too displays Cleopatra’s agency in order to teach a moral lesson. Critics have made a habit out of ridiculing the luxury and over-the-top decadence in *Cleopatra*, but as they do so they miss the point of their inclusion. “The 1963 *Cleopatra* was a bloated yawnfest that nearly bankrupted its studio,” claims one review. Another, that “[t]he sets were ridiculous; a recreation of the Roman Forum, for instance, turned out to be bigger than the actual

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71 Patterson (2013).
Forum.”⁷² “It’s hard not to get the impression that the film is in love with itself, vainly roaming over the incredible sets, building and clothes in hopeless, self-reflective adoration,”⁷³ says yet another critic. Instead of attributing this over-the-top luxury to blind greed, Taylor’s demands, or the fact that it was 1960s Hollywood, readers ought to realize that Mankiewicz makes a judgement on morality, claiming that such a life ought to be condemned. As with Cleopatra’s sexuality, whoever chooses to engage in such a lifestyle may see rewards for a brief moment of time, but in the end their indulgence in such a vice contributes to their downfall.

Besides the budding affair between Taylor and Burton, the film is best remembered for its supremely expensive production. Mankiewicz exceeded the budget, originally set at $2 million, with the final cost around $45 million,⁷⁴ and this massive expenditure is evident in every aspect of the film. Mankiewicz placed great emphasis on displaying Cleopatra’s wealth throughout, whether through the characters eating off of golden eating vessels or stamping across animal skin decorations. The sets always featured some sort of delicately veined marble, which was sometimes a bathtub filled with milky, perfumed water, and at other times a set’s complete floors and walls. Each of Taylor’s sixty-five floor length gowns was crafted with richly dyed, heavy fabrics that drape dramatically around her figure and settle around her feet on the floor. They flash throughout the movie in shiny, ruby-red silk, Nile-green linen, and diaphanous, silver sheeting over golden fabric. Never was there a shortage of golden necklaces, armbands, or hair adornments for Cleopatra or any of her maidservants. N. Hardman puts it very well when she writes that when Cleopatra enters

⁷² Breihan (2019).
⁷³ Mike (2015).
⁷⁴ Schwab (2016): 17. Equivalent to $375,000,000 today. Estimates of the 1963 cost range from $31 million to $60 million, but any of these are a shocking departure from $2 million.
the narrative “on her luxurious barge of gold, rich silks, and Eastern perfumes, [...] the reader, like Antony, is seduced by her inescapable and overpowering presence.”

The greatest example of the luxury Mankiewicz displayed in the film comes in one of the most famous scenes: Cleopatra’s entrance into Rome. Caesar left Egypt three years ago and finally invited Cleopatra to Rome. In an eight minute sequence, she makes what was surely the grandest entrance Rome -- or any other Hellenistic kingdom -- had ever seen. Three groups of heralds, twelve horses abreast each, announce her entrance while archers shoot ribbons into the crowd. The observing Roman senators strain to watch scantily-clad women dance in their turn, and dark-skinned, African dancers disseminate bright yellow incense into the air. As Cleopatra approaches, flower petals rain down from some unnamed source. Women slowly, steadily, leisurely flap golden wings twice the span of their arms while a float behind them releases doves. The crowd, entranced by the display, rushes forward against the soldiers keeping watch. More trumpeters sound their horns. All the while, Julius Caesar sits in his purple robe on what looks like an Egyptian throne, golden from top to bottom with cats adorning the edges, observing with a stoic gaze. Finally, row after row of slaves drag a replica Sphinx through the Forum. Cleopatra is initially obscured from view, but the audience soon gets a glimpse of the back of her golden outfit. Finally, she appears next to her son. They tower above the Roman crowd but do not engage with them. They stare firmly ahead. She is covered from head to toe in gold, her dress covered by golden wings on her arms, a golden headdress sitting on top of it all with more feathers and a tall Egyptian symbol towering above her head. Slaves bear her and her

76 1:21:00.
son down to Caesar. Finally, they disembark and approach. They bow to him, and the crowd responds with a deafening cheer. She does not acknowledge them, but instead winks one glittery eye at Caesar.

Mankiewicz has never spoken about the extraordinary displays in the film, and as a result most viewers tend to attribute them to the movie being from the golden age of Hollywood. The majority of reviews claim it was the most expensive film ever made -- a view popularized by a *Vanity Fair* article describing the problem-ridden film production.\(^77\) In truth, it is not the most expensive film ever made, but it certainly has a high position on the list. Viewers want to romanticize the movie, though, and there is a tendency to almost consider it a part of history just like the ancient texts. In other words, viewers tend to see a great deal of temporal space between themselves and the film, and so they relegate it to the realm of “other”.\(^78\) They then attribute the extreme choices Mankiewicz made -- the grand displays of luxury throughout the narrative -- to the film being part of the past. Any extraordinary displays, in this mindset, are likely because it was this spectacular age in Hollywood’s history and those actors and directors were in the habit of making epic sorts of movies;\(^79\) if nothing else, Elizabeth Taylor was supposed to be a prima donna that insisted everything be over the top, and (the thought goes) she probably insisted that she had sets and a wardrobe worthy of a queen.

Instead of participating in this dissonance, though, viewers ought to question the reasons for Mankiewicz making these extreme decisions. He probably did not “nearly

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\(^77\) Kamp (2011).

\(^78\) Bronfen (2013): 220. For examples of this tendency, see any of the reviews quoted above or any of the many *Cleopatra* reviews.

bankrupt” Fox studios just for the sake of one movie.\textsuperscript{80} What is more likely is that he included all these lavish scenes in order to claim, as Plutarch did, that luxury leads to unfortunate consequences and sometimes even catastrophe. The audience must look closely at the film in order to determine what sort of effect these displays have on the characters, since the characters almost never mention all the luxurious trappings. When they do take the time to look, though, they will find that the effects of these luxurious details are fairly negative.

First of all, the omnipresent luxury in the film makes the queen almost seem childish. The juxtaposition of Cleopatra with a room full of Roman soldiers is unmistakable: She wears her usual long, form-fitting dresses while they wear red and silver armor with swords at their side. She is always ornamented with heavy eye makeup and delicately arranged hair, but their soldiers’ hair is closely cropped and quite plain. Even their airs are different, with the men bouncing ideas off of each other while Cleopatra generally watches the plans being formed. In the war meeting before Actium,\textsuperscript{81} for example, Antony fires off decision after decision while Cleopatra stands several feet behind him, physically separated from the men. They are quite animated, but she is stoic and expressionless. With these differences in appearance and manner, Mankiewicz turns her into an outsider. She seems more like a little sister playing dress up than a queen desiring to rule two major empires. Her lifestyle too is highly contrasted with the Roman soldiers. She takes baths with poets and dancers to entertain her, but Caesar does no such thing. She sleeps in a room with a sheer canopy around the bed, and Antony is so unaccustomed to

\textsuperscript{80} Breihan (2019).
\textsuperscript{81} 3:02:25.
such a device that he is unable to find the opening. Perhaps one of the greatest juxtapositions is of toy boats: Cleopatra idly pushes a little boat around in her bath, but Antony and his men use boat figurines to track a battle’s progress. Mankiewicz, then, subtly suggests from beginning to end of the film that Cleopatra’s preoccupation with luxury makes her fairly foolish. She has chosen to adorn herself with these trappings, but when compared to all the characters around her she sticks out conspicuously, and it seems that she is less worthy of being taken seriously.

If there were a character like this today -- powerful, but a bit self absorbed and focused on appearances -- there likely would be a large cry from feminists that a woman can surely be taken seriously while also expressing her own femininity. However, there is not really a convincing moment in the film that justifies Cleopatra’s indulgence in luxury. She is never shown making legislative decisions, which a viewer would expect to see from someone who fought so hard to reign as sole ruler; nor is her intelligence, reported at the beginning of the film, explicitly shown. She is witty and clever, to be sure, but never really appears as a great administrator. Mankiewicz portrays Cleopatra as a woman choosing to focus on appearance and on her ornaments, and by depicting her in luxurious clothes and scenes he makes her seem silly.

Secondly, these displays make her seem manipulative. Throughout the film, Cleopatra pays close attention to her appearance and carefully constructs the way in which she is perceived. In one of her early meetings with Caesar, for example, she curates the scene in order to elicit the desired emotional effect from him. He arrives to speak with the

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82 This is what can be called the “Elle Woods model”: Elle shows up to law school in magenta, furry jackets, but at the same time she absolves a woman of a murder charge in a trial. She proves that despite her appearance that suggests silliness and vapidity, her peers must respect her.
queen while she has just finished a bath. She lounges in a reclined chair, her maid servants attending to her nails, infusing the air with herbs, dancing before her. Her blind poet recites Catullus in the background. She has orchestrated a feeling of relaxed contentment for Caesar’s arrival. “Oh, it’s you,” she greets him. Yet in a dialogue typical of Taylor’s Cleopatra, who is always quick to get to the point of a matter, she continues with her head resting in her hand, making lazy eye contact with Caesar.

    Cleopatra: Oh, it’s you.
    Caesar: You wanted to see me?
    Cleopatra: I summoned you yesterday to an audience in my throne room. I was told I was not permitted to go there.
    Caesar: For one thing, it’s too close to the quarters occupied by your brother, Pothinus, the auditors, and the rest.

Even more typical of Taylor’s Cleopatra, the tone changes instantaneously. She straightaway sits up and begins shouting.

    Cleopatra: I will not be told where I can go and where I cannot go!
    Caesar: Since there’s obviously nothing you want of me…
    Cleopatra: Except my throne!83

Again, Cleopatra has delicately arranged the entire scene, indicating that her anger does not stem from emotion, but from her own tactical plans. She displays individually chosen facets of a decadent life, and with these she knows she will be able to successfully manipulate Caesar.

    While these ornaments separate her from the men making decisions around her, they also emphasize that she is a queen among regular men. Antony and Caesar may have been two of the most powerful men in Rome, but ultimately Rome recognized no king. The men in charge had to share their power with the Senate. The other men surrounding

83 0:34:0.
Cleopatra were even more regular, just Greek and Egyptian faces filling her court or Romans filling the battle lines. They did not engage in her lifestyle because she lived in a manner literally fit for a queen. As Cleopatra emphasizes this with her own appearance and the appearance of her surroundings, the audience is reminded that, just as when Caesar entered her bathing room, she has purposefully created these illusions. She very well could be hiding ulterior motives or other personality traits under the wigs and golden jewelry. Cleopatra is “something of a chameleon, mimicking Antony’s behavior to secure his favour,” says Hardman,\textsuperscript{84} emphasizing that the audience cannot know how much of her personality is created like a chameleon and how much is her own. The audience trusts that her affairs with Caesar and Antony are based in the love that she presents, but there is no way to know. She has been manipulating the situation to achieve her goals, as she does in the middle narrative of the \textit{Life of Antony}.\textsuperscript{85} In these two ways, then, Mankiewicz argues that Cleopatra’s reliance on luxury creates a negative character. One who is manipulative and childish can never be admired or trusted.

\textbf{Conclusion.}

Mankiewicz uses the pervasiveness of sexuality and luxurious displays in his film in order to encourage his audience to avoid mimicking such a life. Everything built on Cleopatra’s sexuality crumbled as soon as the man disappeared or could no longer hold his own power; in making such a tool the basis for her rule, Cleopatra, according to Mankiewicz, built her empire’s fatal flaw directly into its foundation. Mankiewicz also

\textsuperscript{84} Hardman (2003): 36.
\textsuperscript{85} \textit{Ant.25.5-6}, when she “puts the majority of hope in herself and the magic and love charms around her”.

displayed the negative effects that luxury has on one’s character, since the over-the-top displays emphasized the unfavorable aspects of her personality. Mankiewicz too uses the sexuality and opulence motifs in order to explain exactly why Cleopatra is an agent, for they are the tools with which she expresses her power. She keeps her throne with her sexual abilities, and is able to assert her royal status and manipulate situations to her advantage through the trappings worthy of a queen. Once she has been established as an agent, she can begin to teach his morals as an event never could. Just like Plutarch, Mankiewicz used a historical framework for his moral teachings. However, in giving Cleopatra more agency in the film, Mankiewicz turns the focus away from Antony and thus provides a distinctly modern view on the male-focused history that ancient authors provided.
Chapter Four

Conclusions

Cleopatra cradles Antony’s head in her lap, her gaze avoiding the gash in his stomach. Antony had made that gash but a few moments before, yet she resolutely stares at his eyes. He raises a soft voice, unable to give anything stronger. “A kiss,” he begs, “to take my breath away.” Cleopatra leans down, and by the time she picks her head back up Antony is dead in her arms. During the final moments of his life, Antony focuses not on the power he lost, nor the land he abandoned, but the person he gave it all away for. In his last request he asks Cleopatra to perform an action, transferring the rest of his agency to the queen. With this action, Mankiewicz encourages his audience to reflect on both the messages of his movie and the method that he used to convey them: he used the figures of Mark Antony and Cleopatra to exemplify what happens when one lives a life of luxury and relies on sex to achieve their own goals.

In both goals and method, Mankiewicz mirrored the historian Plutarch, though Plutarch’s criteria for personhood differed a bit from Mankiewicz’s. In Cleopatra one only needs to perform actions to elicit change; when one makes tangible effects on the narrative’s events, an audience can then judge these actions and determine whether they ought to be imitated or avoided. Plutarch, however, adhered to Aristotle’s method of characterization, which claims that a figure’s intrinsic nature is absolutely critical to determining why a character acts in a particular way. A character, Aristotle claims, ought to have a logical progression of thoughts. That way, a viewer can understand the decision-making process that leads to the actions the figure chooses to perform; and when an

86 3:55:00.
audience member can understand a character’s thoughts, they can judge the outcome and decide if they should incorporate similar decisions into their own lives. Plutarch changes Cleopatra’s role throughout his narrative, at first assigning her the status of event but later letting her share in the agency with both Antony and fate. At first, she was simply a figure that allowed Plutarch to place Antony in situations that would reveal his thoughts and allow him to respond. By the end, however, she had become intertwined in Antony’s life so much that Plutarch credited their fall from power to both figures. Plutarch encourages his audience not to yield to one’s vices, or else they might end up just as these two tragic figures did.

Though Plutarch framed his work as a historical biography, and Mankiewicz framed his as a historical love story, neither author truly intended to tell a true history with entirely factual information. Both authors embellished their works to achieve their goals, especially in creating their characters and in crafting the situations they would have to respond to. Audiences today ought to view these two works within the context of their goals to spread morals, and recognize that the Cleopatra of film and literature might not be the Cleopatra that lived in 48 B.C.E. Mankiewicz’s queen and Plutarch’s characters could perhaps represent aspects of the queen, but viewers must remember that these men used the idea of Cleopatra for their own goals.

At the same time, though, the fact still remains that these accounts have determined the character of Cleopatra, queen of Egypt, in the world today. Plutarch’s work, along with similarly biased ancient literary and material accounts, has inspired directors to film movies about Antony and Cleopatra, musicians to sing about her, writers to create historical fiction books about her life. They are the accounts that have kept Cleopatra alive in our modern
memory. Until historians can reconstruct the character of the queen with absolute certainty, reading beyond the goals of ancient historians and recognizing which aspects of a marble bust have been enhanced for public viewing, these views will remain the truth. It is more important to have a biased view of Cleopatra than no view at all; historians should not erase her from the record just because ancient historians exaggerated some facets of her life and used her for their own goals. Similarly, artists do not need to cease from making movies, nor creating other works about her. As long as audiences keep in mind that creators often do use her character for their own goals, Cleopatra should remain in our collective memory and inspire artists to create.


