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Masculinity, Femininity, and the Battle of Actium

Whether literally or figuratively, Cleopatra was bewitching. Plutarch writes that Antony fell so deeply in love with her that he soon "suffered her to hurry him off to Alexandria" (Plutarch 1.28.1) as if he were her "booty" (1.28.1). He no longer had any purposefulness, residing in her palace like a "young man of leisure" (1.28.1) on an everlasting vacation. While Octavian and the Roman Senate occupied themselves with power and allegiance, Antony spent his time with courtship. Cleopatra's character, intellect, the sound of her voice—all were enchanting enough to convince Antony to disregard his planned campaign into Parthia and the troops who awaited his command (1.28.1). It was a pleasure merely to hear Cleopatra's voice (1.27.3), Plutarch explains, and Antony "squandered and spent upon pleasures" (1.28.1) his most valuable resource: Time (1.28.1). To the ambitious Romans, the ex-triumvir's behavior was unnatural; he had lost his militaristic identity and was being mentally influenced by the Queen of Egypt. The concept that he would choose to be buried in Egypt rather than in Rome, too, was inexplicable and revealed the extent of his wife's influence over him. Both possibilities ultimately suggested that Cleopatra's seductive femininity was the cause. To the Roman scholars, Cleopatra's femininity was responsible for weakening his political and military independence from Egypt, and Antony himself had weakened—in his resolve, his body, and his abilities as a man and commander. Recent scholarship of the battle, however, has demonstrated that this may not be the case; W.W. Tarn asserts that Cleopatra and Antony were both driven by

reason and are victims of propaganda. Nevertheless, in their portrayal of the Battle of Actium, the ancient sources contrast Mark Antony and Cleopatra with Antony's soldiers to present the conflict as a struggle between masculinity and femininity. The disastrous defeat, they posit, was caused by the predominance of femininity in military leadership.

Plutarch, Dio, and Paterculus disclose Cleopatra's bewitchment of Antony, suggesting that seduction reduced him into a subordinate for her evil bidding. Cleopatra deceived him into making decisions that he otherwise wouldn't have considered. In his speech to his army, Octavian is adamant in his conviction that Antony was "'bewitched'" (Dio 50.26) by the "'accursed woman'" (50.26) Cleopatra. Antony was no longer the powerful triumvir devoted to Rome. To hold a woman responsible for a betrayal of such magnitude indicates that Cleopatra was not only extraordinary as a woman; she was more powerful than many men as well. Few men could dissuade a prosperous Roman triumvir from turning against his former allies, but Cleopatra—through her intelligence and seduction—was quickly able to set the stage for war. The idea that Cleopatra is 'accursed' implies that she may even have been thought to wield supernatural abilities, as if she were a sorceress. After all, she had enchanted Octavian's predecessor. Femininity itself could not become a source of power, but if it was combined with a lifestyle or motivation that was perceived as malevolent, it could prove to be a formidable force—powerful enough to become responsible for Antony's corruption and subsequent naval disaster.

Octavian then tells the Romans to defeat this "'woman who has designs upon all your possessions'" (Dio 50.28). Instead of Antony, he indicates, Cleopatra is the mastermind behind the war against Octavian's rule. She becomes the dominant antagonist and is attributed a sense of masculinity that overshadows that of Antony. To Octavian, Antony has been reduced to a

puppet—he is almost irrelevant. Because of his love for Cleopatra, Paterculus affirms, Antony's "vices grew upon him" (Paterculus 2.82) to such a degree of wickedness that Cleopatra was eventually able to convince him to wage war against his motherland. Cleopatra is once more portrayed as a manipulative, fiendish source of moral corruption and temptation for power. Paterculus believes that Antony's transformation into an enemy of the state is entirely unnatural. The only explanation, thus, is that Cleopatra set into motion what otherwise never would have occurred: The eradication of Antony's masculinity and the sanity attributed to it.

As he describes the battle, Plutarch asserts that Cleopatra's influence over Antony extends to military tactics as well as politics. Antony's navy ranks were certainly lacking compared to Octavian's, but his land forces were legion and well-equipped (Plutarch 1.62.1). Yet, Antony decided to employ his navy "to please Cleopatra" (1.62.1) as if she was his general or emperor. Since a powerful woman was unheard of, Plutarch firmly declares that Antony was "an appendage of the woman" (1.62.1) without acknowledging that Cleopatra was indeed a naval commander herself—she was analogous to Antony in this regard. He suggests that because Antony listened to his wife's reasoning, Actium was truly fought between Cleopatra and Octavian, and the enchanted Mark Antony was merely the queen's military figurehead. Plutarch's disdain for Cleopatra is undeniably apparent in this passage, which raises concerns over the factual legitimacy of his account. No reasonable commander's strategy would only serve to 'gratify' someone, even a wife, unless that wife was an adept commander herself. Moreover, modern scholars have pointed out that Antony chose to employ his fleet because he was unable to "bring Octavian to battle in the open" (Tarn 187) on land. From this perspective, it is clear why Antony trusted Cleopatra's judgement. Plutarch ultimately fails to consider the rationality behind Antony's decisions, and he loses credibility thereby.

To Vergil and Dio, Cleopatra's femininity itself is a source of weakness that cripples Antony and incites his defeat at Octavian's hands. Although Cleopatra provided Antony with wealth and accompanied him in battle, she becomes a symbol of Antony's vulnerability. As Antony sails towards Octavian's fleet, he is "shamefully [followed by] his Egyptian wife" (Vergil 8.695-696). Cleopatra's decision to sail with Antony is evidently not heroic or worthy of praise. While her Egyptian heritage is partly to blame for Antony's disgrace, her femininity is the primary culprit; had Cleopatra been replaced by a notable Egyptian male, it seems unlikely that Vergil would have deemed Antony's entourage as a source of humiliation in the first place. Indeed, the poem's previous references to the Egyptian navy—composed of males—never imply disgrace. Cleopatra's femininity becomes a defining feature of Antony's military. Consequently, she becomes a symbol that foreshadows Antony's eventual defeat.

Likewise, Dio blames Cleopatra's womanhood as the main catalyst of Antony's downfall. While the battle was uncertain for a time, Dio affirms, the Queen doomed Antony's resistance to Octavian. Cleopatra's decision to flee was "true to her nature as a woman and an Egyptian" (Dio 50.33). The Roman bias against Egyptian blood is once again evident, but it is Cleopatra's femininity—not her husband's military decisions or cowardliness—that ultimately ruins Mark Antony. With a humorous tone, Dio writes that Cleopatra "could not endure the long and anxious waiting" (50.33) and was "tortured by the agony [of] either possible outcome" (50.33). Eventually, her overwhelming emotions prompt her to withdraw her forces. Dio's account is dominated by preconceptions and bias against aggressive women in a way that almost relieves her of blame; the queen could not resist her inherent feminine timidity. She was not selfish, and she was not half-heartedly accompanying Antony—she was just being a woman.

Through Octavian's speech and Antony's abandonment of his troops, the scholars affirm that Antony's emasculation ensured his utter defeat at Actium. Octavian and Antony were both members of the Roman elite, but Octavian is able to distance himself from the latter through a cultural comparison. He declares that Antony "coddles himself like a woman" (50.27) by leading a life of "royal luxury" (50.27) whereas Octavian himself has lived in a down-to-earth, hard-working manner that is truly Roman. The future emperor alludes to Antony's adoption of a new lifestyle—that of the Egyptian royalty. Consequently, Antony has literally become Cleopatra; Octavian insists that it was impossible for the ex-triumvir to "have a manly thought or do a manly deed" (50.27) because of his Egyptian practices (50.27). Octavian, meanwhile, has resisted the temptation of luxury and the femininity attached to indulgence, thus making him more deserving of victory and the respect and allegiance of his men.

To complete Antony's womanization, Octavian boasts that Antony's age made him "effeminate" (50.27), a condition that was worsened when Antony "[wore] himself out with unnatural lust" (50.27). Once more, Octavian asserts his republic's masculinity and indicates the flawed, weak nature of the supposedly pleasure-driven Egyptian elite. Antony's courtship of Cleopatra does not exemplify masculinity. On the contrary, it is absolute proof that the general became a family man whose only purpose was his wife's bidding. Where Octavian was youthful and driven, Antony was tired and aimless. Yet, the bias is apparent: If Antony had been on Octavian's side, his conquest of Cleopatra would be praised as a manly deed. Octavian finds that societal expectations of masculinity can be shaped to support his agenda. According to the future emperor, he embodied Rome's true values—including its sexual self-control—and was thus destined to succeed in battle and rule Rome.

In his description of Actium, Paterculus confirms Antony's half-heartedness and absolute absence of masculinity. While the commander's soldiers were fighting dutifully for his cause, the scholar explains, he abruptly abandoned both his men and everything in which he believed (Paterculus 2.85). Paterculus states that Antony "became a deserter from his own army" (2.85), a charge that rids Antony of all legitimacy as a general and as a man. Antony didn't even deserve to be a soldier of his own legions; that honor was reserved for men. Paterculus says that "Cleopatra took the initiative in the flight" (2.85), accentuating Antony's failure—he didn't even initiate the abandonment of his troops, choosing to rely on his wife's leadership instead. Taking a more direct approach to Antony's femininity, Paterculus asserts that Antony was only able to "[redeem] himself from the many charges of lack of manhood" (2.87) by committing suicide. As a mortal, there was simply nothing that the general could have done to compensate for abandoning his loyal men to the slaughter of Actium (Vergil 8.704). Yet, contemporary analyses of the battle posit that fleeing may have been one of Antony's plans from the beginning (Tarn 189). Tarn indicates that Antony may have signaled to Cleopatra to flee, and once she was out of the enemy's reach, she would wait for him (192). In this case, Mark Antony would have had decision-making control over Cleopatra, which counters the primary sources.

Plutarch and Paterculus compare Mark Antony with his soldiers to accentuate their masculinity, demonstrating the power of resilience and courage in the midst of military disaster. Despite their favoritism of Octavian and his republic, the ancient scholars praise the heroism of Antony's men. To Antony's soldiers, Plutarch recounts, the idea that their general had fled the battlefield was purely "incredible" (Plutarch 1.68.1). The sailors comprised a massive force—both on land and in sea—that included nineteen-thousand legions and twelve-thousand cavalry. Antony's soldiers entered battle with confidence both in their number and leader (1.68.2). Even

if Antony's men appeared to be disadvantaged, they believed in Antony's "vicissitude of fortune" (1.68.2) and were prepared to fight until the tide turned. Through this phrase, Plutarch hints at the ease with which Antony might have defeated his enemy had he resisted the temptation to flee—quickly transforming into the unexpected victor in the midst of battle was Antony's tradition. His men exemplified every desirable trait of a soldier and were only worthy of praise; had their commander been loyal to his own cause, they may likely have had their victory. Indeed, Plutarch's assertion that the men had "an inexpressible desire to see [Antony]" (1.68.3) instills in the audience a sense of compassion for men whose legacy would have otherwise been vilified by the state. Yet, the soldiers are also attributed a sense of unmatched masculinity in their sustained efforts. When even these loyal soldiers finally accepted Antony's flight and were approached by the ambassadors of Caesar (1.68.3), they refused to surrender, remaining "embodied for seven days" (1.68.3). Even when faced with the greatest military disaster possible, the men remained dedicated to their cause. Yet, the factuality of the ancient sources comes into question once more. According to Tarn, this story was "invented to blacken Anthony" (Tarn 194); Antony's soldiers were "negotiating terms" (194) during this period and no longer considered themselves his men. The fabrication that they remained loyal to their deserter was intended to ridicule Antony's decision to abandon such a capable force. Nevertheless, the ancient scholars' praise of Antony's soldiers and their 'masculine' values is distinct and reinforces their bias against femininity.

Plutarch discloses that Antony's soldiers gave the "strongest testimony of their courage and fidelity" (1.68.3), hinting that Antony's legionnaires were fiercer in spirit than Antony—they were perhaps even braver than Octavian and his men. As Anthony's men fought to the death, Caesar—unable to understand their motivation—kept asking "for whom and with whom they

were fighting" (Paterculus 2.85). But the men kept fighting. They needed neither encouragement nor reason to resist the onslaught and die for the man they believed in, demonstrating masculinity's ability to provide resilience in the face of annihilation. In a sense, the soldiers' character provided them with an ability to become autonomous—it allowed them to remain effective even when leadership has vanished. The soldiers ultimately became "the good commander" (2.85), Paterculus explains, while their general became the "cowardly soldier" (2.85). In their desperation, the legionaries' true colors shone in a spectacular display of courage and determination, outshining Antony and every enemy.

Notwithstanding the synthesis of the primary evidence, Tarn declares the factual inaccuracy of the ancient sources' descriptions of Antony's men and their loyalty. Most of Antony's fleet had no intention of fighting, she indicates—hundreds of Antony's ships surrendered where they were or sailed to the harbor when the fighting began (Tarn 195). Antony's men were eager to end the civil war. Only Antony and a handful of his ships engaged the enemy ships commanded by Agrippa, and once Antony recognized that he was losing, he fled (195). In her description of the battle, Tarn indicates that descriptions of courageousness and resilience on behalf of Antony's men are not only false—they comprise a collection of Roman propaganda designed to tarnish Antony's legacy and deprive him of any heroic qualities.

In its various forms, femininity devastates Cleopatra and Mark Antony's resistance to Octavian. This ancient consensus, however, is challenged by Tarn's research concerning Antony's military strategy and the actual events of the battle. While the Roman bias against Egyptians is omnipresent throughout the various descriptions of the battle, the flaws attributed to Egyptian blood are never primarily responsible for the state's unfortunate political and military decisions—that responsibility is given to femininity. When Cleopatra employs her femininity to

influence her husband, it becomes a potent, wicked tool of corruption. Yet, that same femininity—whether channeled through a queen or an ex-triumvir—transforms into a crippling handicap when it is claimed to be present on the battlefield. For ancient scholars, it is clear that femininity itself carried an overwhelmingly negative connotation and harmed those under its influence; whether it was construed as a source of weakness or power, it was effective in spreading misfortune nevertheless. To prove a point, therefore, Roman propaganda often utilized the concept of femininity in a paradoxical fashion: Antony's 'womanizing' nature, which would have been interpreted as masculinity otherwise, is proof that he has become analogous to a woman. Still, descriptions of Antony's legionnaires are the most crucial evidence that scholars were biased towards masculinity concerning the Battle of Actium. Masculinity's extraordinary abilities, according to the scholars, were responsible for transforming Antony's mass of desperate soldiers—once programmed for obedience—into thousands of autonomous commanders of themselves. At the same time, Tarn indicates that Antony may have been one of the only men fighting for his cause. Perhaps Mark Antony, flanked by ships deserting to the harbor, held out until he knew that he had no choice but to return to Egypt. Everyone's actions are driven by reason—even if he or she is under Cleopatra's spell.

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