

# MASCULINITY, POWER, AND DEATH: CLEOPATRA IN BOCCACCIO'S *DE MULIERIBUS CLARIS*

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## ABSTRACT & INTRODUCTION

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While the Roman Republic collapsed, Cleopatra VII ruled Egypt as the most powerful woman in the world. Nearly 1400 years later, Giovanni Boccaccio wrote *De Mulieribus Claris* to honor women who overcame the limitations of their sex with a *virilis animus*, a “manly spirit.” Cleopatra was a puzzle to Boccaccio: while she undeniably displayed the “manly” characteristics of intelligence and bravery, Boccaccio’s Roman sources portrayed her as an uncontrollable corrupting influence. This paper will explore Cleopatra’s masculinity and power in *De Mulieribus Claris*, specifically through her interactions with men. By comparing Boccaccio’s work to his classical sources and examining the differences between them, we discover how Boccaccio used Cleopatra’s story to articulate his views on women who were not only “masculine,” but *too* “masculine.” Because Boccaccio’s intended audience was educated men, his Cleopatra could not seem to justify female sexuality and ambition,

lest she be seen as a threat to her male reader's power. The result is a vilified and demeaned Cleopatra, who must be destroyed by honorable men.

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Boccaccio wrote *De Mulieribus Claris* between 1361 and 1375, intending it to honor those women who “take on a manly spirit,” despite their “soft, frail bodies and sluggish minds.”<sup>321</sup> Although he claims that he writes for the education of women as well as men in the Preface, he never again addresses women. For this reason, as well as the fact that the text was written in Latin, we can assume it was intended for an educated male audience. Stephen Kolsky argues that the lives of the women were not written for women to interpret as positive or negative examples of female behavior, but instead were written for men to interpret as “a guide to men on how to improve women’s conduct [and] a confirmation of the reader’s own views and sense of maleness.”<sup>322</sup> An overwhelming number of Boccaccio’s biographies treat women negatively. While he claims to honor women who act in “masculine” ways, he sees masculine women as a threat, and portrays the events of their lives in ways that criticize female authority and power. Boccaccio’s biography of Cleopatra is particularly negative because she exemplifies the combination of “femininity, greed, and sexual appetite” that he finds “disastrous for civic stability.”<sup>323</sup>

Before we examine Boccaccio’s portrayal of Cleopatra, it is necessary to review the basic events of her life as told by the classical sources Boccaccio had access to. It is nearly impossible to find a purely objective account of Cleopatra’s life because the vast majority of the ancient sources are Roman and written after Octavian’s war on Cleopatra, and thus portray Cleopatra negatively. We can, however, still outline the main events of her life, and I will provide a brief summary of each period according to the narratives of Cassius Dio, Josephus, Pliny the Elder, and Plutarch before I analyze the corresponding period in Boccaccio’s narrative. Boccaccio’s account of Cleopatra’s life heavily mirrors the ancient accounts, but deviates from them to explicitly condemn Cleopatra’s “masculine” authority.

Cleopatra assumed the throne with her brother Ptolemy XIII in 51 BCE,<sup>324</sup> but by 48 BCE the relationship between the two had completely deteriorated and Cleopatra was in exile in Syria, attempting to raise an army.<sup>325</sup> While Cleopatra was absent from Egypt, the Roman civil war between Pompey and Caesar came to an end as Pompey fled to Egypt for protection and was promptly killed by Ptolemy XIII’s men.<sup>326</sup> When Caesar arrived in Egypt he declared that he would mediate the conflict between Cleopatra and Ptolemy XIII, and Cleopatra returned to Egypt, where she met Caesar.<sup>327</sup> At this point, the ancient sources’

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<sup>321</sup> I quote sources in translation to provide an accessible account of the major similarities and differences in the narratives of Boccaccio and the ancient sources.

<sup>322</sup> Stephen D. Kolsky, *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio’s De mulieribus claris* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003), 72.

<sup>323</sup> Glenda McLeod, *Virtue and Venom: Catalogs of Women from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 70.

<sup>324</sup> Duane W. Roller, *Cleopatra: A Biography* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010), 53.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-59.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

intent to portray Cleopatra as a seductress is especially prominent. Cassius Dio claims that “She put on all her finery...and approached the palace at night... When Caesar saw her and heard her speak, he was immediately captivated.”<sup>328</sup> Here we also find Plutarch’s infamous story of Cleopatra sneaking herself into the palace in a “bedding sack” so that Caesar was “no match for her charm and the pleasure of associating with her.”<sup>329</sup> Ptolemy XIII’s advisors, angry with Caesar’s favoritism towards Cleopatra, started the Alexandrian War, and by the end of the war in 47 BCE, Ptolemy XIII was dead.<sup>330</sup> Caesar returned to Rome and Cleopatra gave birth to his child, Caesarion.<sup>331</sup>

Boccaccio’s account of Cleopatra’s early reign condemns her sexuality. He alters the timeline of Cleopatra’s rise to power so that her first act is to poison Ptolemy XIV, an event that did not actually take place until 44 BCE and was not carried out by Cleopatra herself. In Boccaccio’s narrative, however, Cleopatra is “burning with the desire to rule” and poisons the “innocent fifteen-year-old boy.”<sup>332</sup> This alteration strips Boccaccio’s Cleopatra of any entitlement to the throne; he portrays Cleopatra as a tyrant rather than a queen by birthright. After Pompey’s death, Boccaccio expands on the ancient sources by reporting that Cleopatra seduced Caesar with “little trouble bringing the lusty prince to her bed.”<sup>333</sup> Caesar then gave her the throne of Egypt “as a kind of recompense for the nights they had spent together.”<sup>334</sup> Both Ptolemy XIV’s murder and Caesar’s seduction seem to be motivated by Cleopatra’s sexuality; her lust for both power and men make the two synonymous. Cleopatra gains power by taking it from men, emasculating them by taking Ptolemy XIV’s life and Caesar’s conquest. This is unacceptable to Boccaccio. He does not find the idea of a woman being in power fundamentally dangerous, as he does include positive depictions of female leaders in *De mulieribus claris*.<sup>335</sup> Rather, the problem is that Cleopatra uses her sexual power to take power away from men, and in Boccaccio’s eyes “power assumed as a matter of duty is legitimate, while that acquired through the pursuit of personal ambition is not.”<sup>336</sup> Cleopatra is vilified because she takes her “manly spirit” a step too far; her seizure of power from men is reprehensible to the male readers of Boccaccio’s work, and thus Boccaccio must provide an answer to Cleopatra’s power. Herod, and later Antony, become his answers.

After the formation of the second triumvirate Cleopatra met Antony in Tarsos in 41 BCE, hoping to establish her authority with Rome’s new leadership.<sup>337</sup> Here the ancient

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<sup>328</sup> Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 42.34-35, in *Cleopatra: A Sourcebook*, trans. Prudence J. Jones (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 56-57.

<sup>329</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Caesar* 49, in *Cleopatra: A Sourcebook*, trans. Prudence J. Jones (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 57-58.

<sup>330</sup> Roller, *Cleopatra*, 63-64.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>332</sup> Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 363.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.

<sup>335</sup> For example, Boccaccio writes an extremely favorable biography of Joana I of Naples, who he hoped would be his patron. Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 466-473.

<sup>336</sup> Margaret Franklin, *Boccaccio’s Heroines: Power and Virtue in Renaissance Society* (Hampshire: Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 8.

<sup>337</sup> Roller, *Cleopatra*, 76-77.

sources again emphasize Cleopatra's seductiveness, Plutarch describing Cleopatra as reclining "beneath a canopy embroidered with gold, decked out to resemble a painting of Aphrodite."<sup>338</sup> Cleopatra is depicted as the source of Antony's moral failings: "the love of Cleopatra that befell him was the final ruin...and, if anything good or protective remained, obliterated and destroyed it."<sup>339</sup> Cleopatra invited Antony to spend the winter with her in Egypt, and after a few months of lavish vacation in which the two called themselves the "Inimitable Livers," she gave birth to his twins in the fall.<sup>340</sup> Antony began giving territory to Cleopatra in 37 BCE, including Jericho, where Herod was located.<sup>341</sup> The Roman Parthian expedition began in 36 BCE, and Cleopatra followed Antony to the Euphrates before starting her own tour of her new acquisitions, including visiting Herod in Judaea.<sup>342</sup> Here, after leasing Jericho back to Herod, Josephus reports that Cleopatra "attempted to have sexual relations with the king," but Herod thought "she was making such advances in order to trap him." He wanted to kill her, but his friends prevented him from doing so because "Antony would not tolerate such action."<sup>343</sup>

Boccaccio describes the beginning of Cleopatra's relationship with Antony in much the same way he described her relationship with Caesar, drawing upon the classical sources' negative portrayals. According to Boccaccio, Cleopatra is a seductress who keeps Antony "miserably enthralled,"<sup>344</sup> and uses her sexuality to gain power over Antony. She then uses that power to advance her political goals, "[making] bold to ask him for the kingdom of Syria and Arabia," which Antony then gives her.<sup>345</sup> Cleopatra takes the powerful, "masculine," role in their relationship, persuading Antony to do her bidding through her sexuality. Antony is a "vile"<sup>346</sup> man for being seduced by Cleopatra, and weak compared to Herod.

Boccaccio's account of Cleopatra's visit to Herod largely follows Josephus's account, and uses Herod as a model of what his male readers should do when confronted with a "masculine" woman like Cleopatra. While Antony notices that Cleopatra's request is "excessive and quite inappropriate," he still gives her territories to "satisfy her desire."<sup>347</sup> Herod notices that Cleopatra is trying to seduce him in order to further her own ambitions, and refuses her, ready "to kill her with his sword." This detail of which weapon Herod plans to kill Cleopatra with is absent from Josephus's account, and the phallic connotation of "sword" is clear. Herod's response to Cleopatra's masculine use of her sexuality is an immediate desire to assert his own masculinity. While Herod neither sleeps with nor kills

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<sup>338</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Antony* 24-27.1, in *Cleopatra: A Sourcebook*, trans. Prudence J. Jones (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 102.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>340</sup> Roller, *Cleopatra*, 82-84.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-94.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-96.

<sup>343</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities, Volume VI*, trans. Ralph Marcus and Allen Wikgren (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1943), 303-305.

<sup>344</sup> Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 365.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*

Cleopatra, his recognition of Cleopatra as a villain and his impulse to defend both his and Antony's masculine honor make him a hero for Boccaccio. While Caesar is "lusty"<sup>348</sup> and Antony is "vile,"<sup>349</sup> Herod is a true masculine king, intelligent and brave.

In 34 BCE Cleopatra and Antony celebrated a ceremony known as the Donations of Alexandria, where they divided their territories between themselves and their children.<sup>350</sup> This further destroyed the already hostile relationship between Octavian and Antony, and the propaganda war that would ultimately influence all later Roman sources on Cleopatra began. Octavian's allies depicted Cleopatra negatively, putting the blame for Antony's misdeeds on her alone.<sup>351</sup> This can be seen in Cassius Dio's rendition of Octavian's speech, "Antony himself, twice a consul, many times a commander...who would not weep to see that he...bows before that woman?"<sup>352</sup> Octavian and Antony's triumvirate expired at the end of 33 BCE, and the following year Octavian took the Senate while Cleopatra and Antony raised a naval fleet.<sup>353</sup> Cleopatra and Antony lost the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE,<sup>354</sup> and Octavian invaded Egypt in 30 BCE. Antony's fleets defected to Octavian, and he committed suicide.<sup>355</sup> After Antony's death, Cleopatra had a final meeting with Octavian in which she attempted to defend herself and blame everything on Antony, to no avail. She then locked herself in a room with two attendants, and died. While her physician Olympos' account never mentions a cause of death, later ancient sources such as Plutarch state that she died after offering her bare arm to an asp.<sup>356</sup>

Boccaccio follows the asp anecdote in his account of Cleopatra's suicide, saying she, "determined to die... opened the veins in her arms and placed asps on the wounds."<sup>357</sup> Boccaccio sees her suicide as a good decision, stating that "the wretched woman put an end to her greed, her concupiscence, and her life."<sup>358</sup> While Cleopatra's Roman contemporaries respected her suicide as a noble, dignified way to avoid being further humiliated in Octavian's triumph, Boccaccio respects Cleopatra's suicide because it seems to him to be the first good decision she made. By ending her life, Cleopatra destroys her own greed and lust, preventing her from being more of a danger to society. However, Boccaccio spends comparatively little time on this narrative of Cleopatra's death. He prefers his alternative death scene, where Antony kills Cleopatra with her own poison.

The story of the poison flowers comes from Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*. Pliny reports that Antony feared being poisoned, and Cleopatra played a trick on him by poisoning the flowers in his crown and inviting him to dip his crown in his drink after his taster had already tasted it. Cleopatra stopped him before he drank, and "ordered a prisoner

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<sup>348</sup> Ibid., 363.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 365.

<sup>350</sup> Roller, *Cleopatra*, 99-100.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid., 129-131.

<sup>352</sup> Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 137.

<sup>353</sup> Roller, *Cleopatra*, 134.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid., 139-140.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid., 144-145.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid., 147-148.

<sup>357</sup> Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 371.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid., 372.

who had been led in to drink it and he promptly expired.”<sup>359</sup> In Boccaccio’s version, however, Antony has Cleopatra “taken into custody and [forces] her to drink the same cup that she had prevented him from imbibing.”<sup>360</sup> Antony defeats Cleopatra with her own trick, negating her “masculine” power and regaining the agency he lost when she seduced him. Cleopatra’s “manly spirit” is her death; there would be no poison sitting in front of her if she did not attempt to play her power game with Antony. By killing Cleopatra, Antony shows that even a woman with a “masculine” spirit can never reach the same level of power as a man; while Antony has been emasculated by Cleopatra, he can still physically overpower her when it counts.

While Boccaccio claims the purpose of his work is to honor women with “masculine spirits,” he ultimately finds Cleopatra’s “masculinity” unacceptable. Cleopatra exemplified the intelligence and bravery Boccaccio praised in his Preface, but she used her sexuality as a means of limiting men’s power and furthering her own ambitions. Cleopatra has a “manly spirit,” but she also has a manly sexuality, which is unacceptable to Boccaccio’s fourteenth century perspective on women. Boccaccio praises the concept of a “manly spirit,” but he also praises Christian women’s “virginity, purity, holiness, and invincible firmness in overcoming carnal desire.”<sup>361</sup> As a sexual pagan woman, Cleopatra could never be the ideal famous woman in Boccaccio’s eyes, even with her “boldness, intellectual powers, and perseverance.”<sup>362</sup> To deal with this disconnect, Boccaccio makes Cleopatra’s masculinity her downfall, thus degrading the idea of a woman with a “*virilis animus*.”

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<sup>359</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 21.12, in *Cleopatra: A Sourcebook*, trans. Prudence J. Jones (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 108-109.

<sup>360</sup> Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 373.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

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