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# The Fatale Monstrum and the Nasty Woman

*Public Portrayals of Cleopatra VII and Hillary Rodham Clinton*

HISTORICALLY, WOMEN IN POSITIONS OF POWER AND influence tend to generate controversy. Cleopatra VII, the last queen of Ptolemaic Egypt, is an informative example. A famously strong ruler, she dealt with “negative press” and the associated threats to her position from the very beginning of her reign. Modern women who seek positions of power often face similar resistance. This became especially evident in an American context during the presidential campaign of 2016, when a female presidential candidate won a major party nomination for the first time. Although Hillary Clinton ultimately lost the presidential race, because she was the first woman to come close to obtaining the highest office in American government, she remains an important example of how powerful women are perceived. An examination of the political propaganda generated by these two women and their opponents can provide valuable insight into how we view and interact with women in powerful positions today.

Using Cleopatra VII and Hillary Clinton as case studies, this paper examines how gender expectations can influence the construction of public image in negative and positive ways. Through a comparative analysis of aspects of their respective careers, I will try to demonstrate how, historically, negative political propaganda has manipulated public perception of influential women, and how that historical trend continues to have consequences today, contributing to the hostility that is still directed at women who occupy (or seek to occupy) positions of power. Cleopatra and Clinton both represented themselves as strong, masculine women, but they also utilized feminine gender expectations by emphasizing their roles as mothers, complicating the images they created for themselves, or having those images complicated for them by the realities of the traditional, male-dominated power structures within which they were forced to oper-

ate. Their political opponents turned these gendered images against them, which simultaneously characterized the two women as suspicious because they acted masculine and diminished them as feminine sexual objects. By comparing the ways in which these women have portrayed themselves and have been portrayed by their political enemies, this paper explores not only the parallels between Cleopatra and Clinton but also the implications for this persisting perception of women in politics.

Although there are significant differences between Cleopatra and Clinton—they lived millennia apart, on opposite sides of the world, in vastly different cultures—they both had to combat similar gendered stereotypes associated with positions of power. There is a continuity between ancient and modern gender expectations, as has been established by feminist scholars such as Simone De Beauvoir, who drew on a plethora of historical examples to illustrate that “When [women] have intervened in the course of world affairs, it has been in accord with men, in masculine perspectives,”<sup>1</sup> and Mary Beard, a feminist classical scholar who recently published two lectures addressing the connection between the ancient and modern tendencies to silence women in power.<sup>2</sup> Consistent with the historical pattern, Cleopatra and Clinton both engaged with and conformed to this male perspective as they filled, or sought to fill, traditionally male political roles.

Gender expectations have changed and developed over the millennia, and even today there is some debate over what exactly constitutes “gender.” For purposes of this paper, I will use the term “masculine” to refer to traits, actions, and roles that have historically been perceived as being primarily associated with men—traits such as independence, leadership, confidence, assertiveness, decisiveness, ambition, strength, sexual drive, violence, intelligence, and courage.<sup>3</sup> The term “feminine” will primarily refer to traits, actions, and roles typically associated with women—especially the tendency to be nurturing, caregiving, soft, patient, sensitive, emotional, delicate, dependent, and to exercise intuition.<sup>4</sup> Feminism, another important and contested term within this discussion, is notably different from these two genders; the ideology/movement of feminism emphasizes justice and equality for women while celebrating and

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1 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley, *Deuxième Sexe* [1st American ed.] (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 129.

2 Mary Beard, *Women & Power: A Manifesto* (London: Profile Books Ltd: London Review of Books, 2017).

3 Susan M Shaw and Janet Lee, *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2004), 118.

4 Shaw and Lee, 121.

affirming womanhood.<sup>5</sup> While feminism is focused primarily on women, it is not inherently gendered in terms of the masculinity and femininity described above; depending on the situation, an individual may advance feminist ideology through a feminine approach—emotional and nurturing—or through a masculine approach—with leadership and intelligence. In fact, because masculinity is generally ranked above femininity, a “liberated” feminist may act in ways that are traditionally coded masculine.<sup>6</sup> This distinction is particularly significant in an examination of Clinton’s use of gender expectations, because she has often gone out of her way to emphasize that she is a feminist, and she has represented that ideology in varying masculine and feminine terms. Though Cleopatra was certainly not engaged with the modern feminist movement, she likewise used both feminine and masculine roles in her self-portrayal as queen.

Before delving into an analysis of Cleopatra’s and Clinton’s own gendered public images, it is vital to understand the situations within which they have operated. Political offices in general, and especially executive roles, are often seen as inherently masculine positions, so women who seek to fill those positions are required to grapple with the masculine expectations that accompany them. Scholars of political science have found that voters tend to doubt whether a woman is actually “tough” enough to handle the work required of an executive governmental role, even when she is perfectly qualified. They have also found that when women exude an aura of confidence, they are often perceived as “aggressive” or “bitchy;” voters expect female candidates to be “likeable”<sup>7</sup> by aligning with stereotypically feminine qualities, which clash with perceptions of masculine leadership. This “double bind” forces women to walk a fine line between masculinity and femininity to be perceived as qualified yet relatable candidates. Consistent with this pattern, Cleopatra and Clinton both engaged with and sometimes conformed to this male perspective as they filled, or sought to fill, traditionally male political roles.

## Cleopatra

From the beginning of Cleopatra’s reign, she was forced to battle constant threats to her position as queen, both from her own siblings

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<sup>5</sup> Shaw and Lee, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Shaw and Lee, 124.

<sup>7</sup> Kelly Dittmar and Susan J. Carroll, “Cracking the ‘Highest, Hardest Glass Ceiling,’” in *Gender & Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics*, 3rd edition, edited by Susan J. Carroll and Richard L. Fox (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 66.

and their advisors and eventually from outside forces such as Rome. The rarity of independent queens in the Hellenistic world complicated her rule, so she needed to present to her subjects an image of strength to maintain her royal power. She often accomplished this through purposefully gendered iconography, which followed the Ptolemaic pattern of utilizing symbols and images from both the Greco-Macedonian and Egyptian traditions to essentially translate significant ideas between cultures. After her reign ended, her enemies in Rome sought to turn that image against her in order to celebrate Augustus Caesar's victory over her. Their representations often depicted Cleopatra as a symbol of the conquered eastern world, objectifying her as a trophy and depriving her of recognition as a formidable figure in her own right.

Cleopatra was a Macedonian queen in Egypt who ruled over both Greek and Egyptian subjects. She needed to appeal to both cultures in her visual image, so she utilized gendered iconography from both the Hellenistic and Egyptian traditions. Her coins represented her with traditional Ptolemaic masculine iconography. Rather than donning the veil, scepter, and stephane—or crown—of deified Ptolemaic queens, Cleopatra wore only the diadem—a thin band tied around the head that was the symbol of royal power—directly imitating Ptolemaic kings.<sup>8</sup> She adopted similar gendered iconography in Egyptian-style images, such as on an Egyptian stele featuring Cleopatra making an offering to the Egyptian goddess Isis (hereafter referred to as the Louvre stele), dated July 2, 51 BC.<sup>9</sup> In this image, Cleopatra is represented as a traditional Egyptian pharaoh—bare-chested, wearing a triangular kilt and the combined crown of upper and lower Egypt. Depictions like these marked Cleopatra as more than a consort to her sibling/spouse co-ruler: the Cleopatra of these images is essentially an independent king, ruling her own kingdom in her own right. Portraying herself with the iconography of male leaders contradicted the feminine gender roles to which she was expected to comply and asserted her independent authority as a ruler.

Roman poets during the Augustan era tended to portray Cleopatra in a negative light in order to glorify Augustus. Similar to Cleopatra's self-representations as a masculine ruler, these literary representations

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<sup>8</sup> Peek, "The Visual Rhetoric of Kleopatra's Early Coin Images," (forthcoming article), 11–19. Cecilia M. Peek kindly allowed me to read her work in progress and refer to it for this paper.

<sup>9</sup> Stele of Cleopatra VII Offering to Isis, with inscription, Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités Égyptiennes, E. 27113. Image from Cleopatra's Egypt: Age of the Ptolemies (New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1988), exhibition catalog, cat. 78.

often drew on gender stereotypes. The poet, Horace, who was patronized by an advisor to Augustus, wrote an ode which celebrates Augustus' victory over Cleopatra (1.37). Horace introduces Cleopatra as a nameless regina ("queen"), thereby depriving her of her individuality. In his poem, she commands men described as turpium ("foul, shameful")—a sexualized term suggesting that Cleopatra stepped outside of her place by sexually ruling men. Later in the poem, Horace's rhetoric emphasizes Cleopatra's masculinity: she is nec muliebriter ("unwomanly"), ferocior ("fierce"), non humilis ("not humble"), and possessed of ausa ("daring") and fortis ("courage"). She is described as having combi beret—"drunk in"—the venom of the snakes that bit her—using a verb with a masculine, sexualized connotation.<sup>10</sup> These terms all describe a woman who is not womanly at all, by Roman ideals, a woman who has stepped into a realm meant for men.

Cleopatra was not portrayed as exclusively masculine by herself or her opponents. To the contrary, at times, both she and her opponents purposefully utilized feminine iconography and expectations. Cleopatra adopted specific feminine, motherly iconography to emphasize her role as a mother who could produce an heir and ensure the continuation of dynastic power. A coin from Cyprus features Cleopatra holding the infant Caesarion—her son with Julius Caesar. Her iconography here is decidedly feminine, imitating earlier Ptolemaic queens.<sup>11</sup> Cleopatra also portrayed herself as a mother with her son in Egyptian-style artwork, such as in an image on the wall of a temple in Dendera,<sup>12</sup> which depicts a masculine, pharaonic Caesarion with a feminine Cleopatra. A similar example is present on the wall of a temple built at Hermonthis to commemorate the birth of Caesarion: here, Cleopatra is assimilated with Isis while Caesarion is represented as Horus,<sup>13</sup> emphasizing Cleopatra's power as a goddess and mother to the son who would ensure the future and the security of her kingdom. This identification with femininity demonstrates how Cleopatra purposefully complied with gender expectations to secure her power as a ruler. In these images, Cleopatra seems to represent her femininity as a unique strength which kings did not share.

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<sup>10</sup> J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (London, Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1982), 139.

<sup>11</sup> Peek, 23–24.

<sup>12</sup> Relief sculpture of Cleopatra VII and Caesarion on the rear wall of the Temple of Hathor at Dendera. image from *Cleopatra's Egypt: Age of the Ptolemies* (New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1988), exhibition catalog, 56, fig. 24.

<sup>13</sup> Maria Wyke, "Augustan Cleopatras: Female Power and Poetic Authority," in *Roman Poetry and Propaganda in the Age of Augustus*, edited by Anton Powell (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1992), 102.

Horace's "Cleopatra Ode," discussed earlier, also at times portrays Cleopatra in feminine terms—as someone possessed by furor ("rage," which was often seen as feminine) and as a dove pursued by a hawk or a hare pursued by a hunter. In the middle of the ode, Horace refers to Cleopatra as a *fatale monstrum* ("fatale monster"). The term *monstrum* has been linked to the words *prodigium* and *portentum*,<sup>14</sup> both of which were Latin terms describing something monstrous and unnatural, an unexpected occurrence with religious overtones, a portent that required removal in order to correct the natural order of the world. *Monstrum* has also been interpreted simply as a reference to monsters who needed to be conquered to restore order, setting Augustus up as the conquering hero.<sup>15</sup> When this phrase is considered in connection with the sexualized and gendered terms discussed earlier, it seems that Horace may be providing a narrative in which Augustus, as the civilizing hero, is forcing the hubristic foreign queen back into her proper place as a woman, possibly even through sexualized violence. The terms used to describe Cleopatra in this poem are mixed in gender and tone, but Horace is still very clearly using her gender as a way to emphasize the incorrect nature of her actions.

## Clinton

Separated from Cleopatra by time and culture, Hillary Rodham Clinton has faced similar challenges as a female public figure. Throughout Clinton's long public career, she has been deemed "inauthentic,"<sup>16</sup> largely because she has resisted traditional gender norms<sup>17</sup> on which authenticity is judged.<sup>18</sup> This clash between expectations and her own actions has required her to carefully balance her image by appearing powerful and capable in order to be perceived as authentic and trustworthy, especially as she campaigned for the presidency in 2008 and 2016.

Earlier in her career and as a first lady, Clinton represented herself as a more masculine woman and an independent feminist. This was apparent when she defended her choice to be a career woman declaring, "I suppose I could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas, but what I

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14 J. V. Luce, "Cleopatra as *Fatale Monstrum* (Horace, *Carm.* 1. 37. 21)," *The Classical Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (1963): 252.

15 Luce, 253–254.

16 Shawn J. Parry-Giles, *Hillary Clinton in the News: Gender and Authenticity in American Politics* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2014), pg. 1.

17 Parry-Giles, 14.

18 Parry-Giles, 12.

decided to do was pursue my profession.”<sup>19</sup> Clinton’s tendency to portray herself as confident, assertive, and independent—all stereotypically masculine traits—continued through the 2008 election, when her campaign emphasized her resilience as a “tough-as-nails fighter who would never give up.”<sup>20</sup> However, by accentuating her unemotional masculine strength, Clinton may have undercut her own campaign by not appealing enough to her feminine side. The end result was that many perceived the emotions she did show as inauthentic and “calculated.”<sup>21</sup>

While Clinton tried to appear masculine, her political opponents used her masculine-coded independence to paint her in a negative light. News media during her husband’s campaign and tenure as president tended to paint Clinton as “an unruly feminist,”<sup>22</sup> using her “cookies and tea” comment to frame her as being both anti-motherhood and anti-womanhood.<sup>23</sup> Her apparent masculinity was also framed as detrimental to her husband through the so-called “Hillary Factor,” which “served as an umbrella term for what the press and the Republican opposition dubbed as her negative attributes”<sup>24</sup> and which focused on the purportedly negative effect that Clinton would have on her husband’s campaign. By setting up her apparent career focus and independence to be anti-feminine, media outlets reinforced the masculine/feminine gender dichotomy and sent a clear message: women functioning in the political realm should not oppose gender norms. Interestingly, as Clinton later shifted to a feminine appearance, the complaints about her involvement in her husband’s campaign and future presidency began to dissipate,<sup>25</sup> indicating that her reversal of gender expectations was a key factor in the general disapproval she attracted.

In more recent years, Clinton has shifted her use of gender in the formation of her public image to represent herself in a very specific feminine light. Particularly during the 2016 presidential election, Clinton emphasized her femininity as a part of her campaign, arguing that her identity as a woman made her an ideal champion for the interests of women and children. She asserted that her identity as a woman specifically qualified

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19 Hillary Clinton, *What Happened*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 118.

20 Dittmar and Carroll, 66.

21 Dittmar and Carroll, 68.

22 Parry-Giles, 19.

23 Parry-Giles, 36–37.

24 Parry-Giles, 33.

25 Parry-Giles, 52.



her for the presidency,<sup>26</sup> and she made so-called “women’s issues”—such as paid maternal and family leave, childcare, and equal pay—central issues within her campaign,<sup>27</sup> further solidifying her image as a woman who was running specifically to help women.

Clinton also emphasized her femininity visually during the 2016 campaign by highlighting her role as a mother and grandmother. Her Instagram profile simply states, “Doting grandmother, among other things,”<sup>28</sup> emphasizing her prized motherly role. On the day of the 2016 election, she (or her account manager) posted an image of her hugging a young girl.<sup>29</sup> Both were smiling and had their faces turned down in soft expressions. This maternal imagery suggests that her goal in running was tied to this girl, young women throughout America, and her own grandchildren. Through the image, she seemed to say, “I am doing this for you.” This image matched her earlier declaration of her hopes that her granddaughter would have every possible opportunity.<sup>30</sup> By painting herself as a mother and grandmother who fights and sacrifices for the future women of America, Clinton portrayed her femininity as a strength.

While Clinton was creating this positive image of femininity for herself, her opponents were busy using that same femininity to craft a picture of weakness and ineptitude. This effort was especially apparent in remarks made by Donald Trump during the 2016 general presidential election. Trump described Clinton as a “nasty woman” who had to play the “woman’s card” in order to win and asserted that if Clinton were male, less than 5 percent of people would vote for her,<sup>31</sup> though research “indicates that Clinton . . . would have received more of the vote if she were a man.”<sup>32</sup> These comments indicate that Trump portrayed Clinton’s gender

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26 Kelly Dittmar, “Finding Gender in Election 2016: Lessons from Presidential Gender Watch,” Barbara Lee Family Foundation and Center for American Women and Politics, 17, [http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/resources/presidential-gender-gap-report\\_final.pdf](http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/resources/presidential-gender-gap-report_final.pdf).

27 Dittmar, 18.

28 Hillary Clinton (@hillaryclinton), Instagram Bio, Instagram, accessed Nov 7, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/hillaryclinton/>.

29 Hillary Clinton (@hillaryclinton), Photo of Clinton Hugging a Girl, Instagram, Nov 8, 2016, accessed Nov 7, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BMkkQEpgs4q/>.

30 Debbie Jay Williams, “Chelsea’s Mom, Charlotte’s Grandma: Negotiating a New Role in the Presidential Construction of Hillary Clinton,” in *Hillary Rodham Clinton and the 2016 Election: Her Political and Social Discourse*, edited by Michele Lockhart and Kathleen Mollick, 129.

31 Heldman, Conroy, and Ackerman, 119.

32 Heldman, Conroy, and Ackerman, 119.

as a negative aspect of her identity—one which simultaneously disqualified her as a presidential candidate and gave her an unfair disadvantage in the race—while Clinton emphasized her gender as a key reason why she should be the next president. The negative and positive aspects highlighted here reflect the double bind discussed earlier: Trump leaned on the association of femininity with weakness while Clinton relied on the connection between femininity and compassion.

## Conclusion

Although Cleopatra and Clinton were certainly not operating in the exact same situation, the challenges they faced in their attempts to gain and maintain political power do have parallels, particularly in the ways gender functioned in shaping their public images. Both used masculine iconography to show their power and feminine iconography to emphasize their motherly roles. Additionally, their opponents used both masculine and sometimes sexualized feminine language to attack them. These similarities demonstrate that the challenges women are facing in political battles have not changed much in the last two thousand years.

Interestingly, opponents to Cleopatra and Clinton never seemed to address the motherly images these women created for themselves. In Cleopatra's case, this may be because the Romans highly idealized motherhood. Augustus especially emphasized the importance of marriage and childbearing through instituting laws that rewarded women for having children. Additionally, Cleopatra's feminine self-portrayals drew directly on goddess iconography, appealing to a religious realm in which the feminine was highly respected. Clinton's situation was obviously different—one consequence of the modern feminist movement is that today motherhood is viewed by some as inherently inferior to a career, while other women may rush to defend motherhood in response. Still, the negative feedback Clinton received after her "cookies and tea" comment and her later attempts to emphasize her role as a mother and grandmother demonstrate the continued importance of motherhood in current ideas about femininity. The absence of commentary on these motherly images by Cleopatra's and Clinton's opponents may suggest that these specific feminine portrayals cannot be easily twisted into a negative light.

Ultimately, the many parallels between Cleopatra and Clinton demonstrate that women today face the same type of sexist challenges in seeking political office as they did two thousand years ago. As they worked within a masculine (and restrictive) power model and navigated

public perceptions of power, Cleopatra and Clinton, on their part, both tried to create a public perception that somehow satisfied the gendered expectations surrounding political power by posing as strong, “masculine” leaders, but simultaneously contending with the simple reality of their womanhood and trying to highlight the value of that reality, lest it be seen as disadvantageous. The examples of these two women demonstrate that politically powerful women are still constantly dealing with accusations that they are either “too strong” or “too weak,” “too masculine” or “too feminine.” A woman who holds political power must be strong but gentle, tough but likeable, but is never allowed to simply be.

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