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Cleopatra's Corpse: Motivation for Cleopatra's Suicide in the Ancient Texts

Aubyn Eli

INTRODUCTION

Each era has a tendency to reinvent the history of Cleopatra VII, giving her different motivations and inclinations each time. As Lucy Hughes-Hallett wrote, "The vicissitudes of Cleopatra's legend, to which so many different morals have been attached, may act as a reminder that even the simplest piece of information can be made to serve a polemical purpose."[1] In the years directly following the defeat of Cleopatra and Antony by Octavian, it was in the best interests of the Roman Empire to dehumanize Cleopatra and reinvent her as a monstrous, unprincipled seductress. She was a foreigner, an enemy, and there must be no question that the better people had won. The ancient Roman sources all agree on these points.

However, despite the general negativity of the ancient sources, an apparent discrepancy emerges. The prominent Roman authors all chose to depict Cleopatra's suicide in roughly the same way: as a courageous and dignified expression of her desire to die a queen. When the overall portrayal is less than flattering, it's important to ask why the fictional Cleopatra dies so well.

Horace, Plutarch, and Dio Cassius, our three main sources for Cleopatra, all use some fairly harsh language against her before the time comes for her suicide. When

[1]Lucy Hughes-Hallett, *Cleopatra: Histories, Dreams and Distortions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 2.

Cleopatra decides to take her own life, the tone shifts and the portrayal becomes more appreciative. The most dramatic of these tonal shifts occurs famously in Horace's *Ode* 1.37, also called the Cleopatra Ode, where unequivocal condemnation becomes admiration. Yet all three sources soften their words when it comes time to describe the death. This kind of internal contradiction requires some explanation for the author's reasoning other than the conclusion that Horace, Plutarch, and Dio were just very poor writers.

My purpose in this paper is to explore the possible explanations for this single interpretation of Cleopatra's death and the apparent contradiction it creates. Were there other representations the authors could have used but rejected in favor of this one? Through close examination of Roman ideas about suicide and of the Roman depictions of Cleopatra, it may be possible to understand how these attitudes influenced the literature. Making sense of the contradictions within the literary Cleopatra will help us understand the reasons behind her Roman portrayal.

ROMAN VIEWS ON SUICIDE

Suicide in Roman literature was often represented as an act inextricably bound together with the individual's desire to present a certain persona in public. In an attempt to define the difference between suicide in modern thought and suicide in Roman culture, Timothy Hill terms suicide in the modern world "an isolated act…to express a personal alienation so complete that others cannot conceptualize this psychological nadir even in

imagination."[2] This conception of suicide is somewhat lacking in the ancient sources. Cato the Younger falls upon his sword rather than submit to Caesar.[3] Titus Petronius Niger refuses to wait for Nero to kill him, opting for slit wrists and a farewell party with gossip and fun.[4] Arria Paeta encourages her husband's political suicide by plunging a dagger into herself.[5] The Roman suicides show an emphasis both on maintaining control and using suicide as way to define one's place in the social order. The idea of suicide as an escape from the boundaries of society is not discussed, despite the range of suicidal "types" found in the sources, including the loyal slave, the defeated general and the doomed senator. Instead, suicide in the Roman literature is more often an affirmation, rather than a rejection, of a person's social role.

The Roman literary suicidal type most apropos of the suicide of Cleopatra herself is the suicide of the public figure. The suicide of Cato the Younger was an early example of this kind of suicide and became highly regarded, even copied, by the mid-first century C.E.[6] During the Julio-Claudian era, there was a rash of senatorial suicides that were highly public, even flamboyant, in their execution.[7] The suicide of the public figure, such as the general or the senator, was an act that affirmed one's own status and control and "the right to choose a death worthy of a free man."[8] Two of the most common situations that precipitate the aristocratic suicide are the threat of legal condemnation and military

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[2]Timothy D. Hill, *Ambitiosa Mors: Suicide and Self in Roman Thought and Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1-2.
[3]Hill, 6.
[4]Hill, 247-248.
[5]Hill, 257.
[6]Hill, 186-187.
[7]Hill, 1.
[8]Hill, 197.

loss.[9] In both cases, the avoidance of shame is the goal; the person is put into a situation where his honor is threatened and suicide is undertaken to preserve that honor.

Not only was suicide seen as an affirmation of one's own control, there was also the possibility that it would be offered as such by the person formally in control over the perpetrator. Paul Plass defines the optional suicide as "an equivalent to execution…a decisive exercise of power on the emperor's part, while also being, as a substitution for it, a concession to the victim's standing and thus part of a formal trade-off, however one-sided it was in substance."[10] Literary accounts of Tiberius[11] and Nero[12] both demonstrate an idea of suicide offered as a somewhat bitter gift to an offender; he retains his honor and the right to be his own moral judge.[13]

The self-centered nature of the senatorial suicide is not the only lauded method; the practice of suicide out of selfless loyalty to another also appears frequently in the Roman texts. One common literary example is the suicide of the loyal underling.[14] There are accounts in Suetonius, Plutarch, Tacitus, and Velleius Paterculus of slaves and soldiers who commit suicide out of loyalty to their master.[15] In some cases, like that of Antony's evocatively named slave Eros, the underling commits suicide rather than kill his master (Plutarch 76). The loyal servant's thoughts are not mentioned; there is no psychology except loyalty. While these deaths do not have the political power of the

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[9]Hill, 197-198.
[10]Paul Plass, *The Game of Death in Ancient Rome: Arena Sport and Political Suicide* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 96.
[11]Plass, 100, 102.
[12]Plass, 103.
[13]Hill, 209-210.
[14]Anton van Hoof, "Paetus, It Does Not Hurt: Altruistic Suicide in the Greco-Roman World" *Archives of Suicide Research* 8 (2004).
[15]van Hoof, 46-47.

public figure's suicide, they can nonetheless be taken as affirmation of the slave or soldier's social role. They are subordinate and it is natural that they should show willingness to die for those whose lives are more important, even if the death accomplishes nothing.

The other selfless suicide most commonly mentioned is that of the female family member who commits suicide out of loyalty to a man. A mythological example would be Laodamia, who follows her husband to the underworld, but there are historical examples in Paterculus Velleius and Valerius Maximus.[16] Often, these women are wives who die rather than live as widows. In the case of Arria Paeta, the suicide is not only a rejection of widowhood but also an inducement to courage for an indecisive man,[17] similar in effect to the death of Eros. Like the suicides of the slaves, the wives' deaths serve little purpose except as statement. If their deaths are chosen out of psychological grief, this is not emphasized in the Roman accounts. It is their devotion that is important.

When viewed through the Roman idea of the social suicide, the motivations attributed to Cleopatra and the authorial tone taken make more sense. Her suicide may be linked to grief but this is not the main focus in the ancient sources. They present her intention as a political statement against Octavian. All three sources mention Octavian's intent to make Cleopatra part of his triumphal procession (Plutarch *Antony 78*, Dio *Roman History* 51.13, Horace *Ode* 1.37.24), although Horace is less explicit on the subject than when he is within Cleopatra's viewpoint (*Ode* 1.37.37-38). Cleopatra's response is an affirmation of her own control. This also coincides with an affirmation of her queenly status; Dio Cassius and Plutarch both mention the splendor of her funerary

[16]van Hoof, 47.
[17]Plass, 109.

clothes and chamber (Plutarch 85, Dio 51.13). It is not surprising that men who wrote from the vantage point of the higher classes would take an approving tone at this show of aristocracy.

The representations of Cleopatra's suicide are consistent with the notion of a social suicide. However, the question then becomes: is suicide such an admirable action that the men who condemn Cleopatra cannot help praising her for it? Some kind of explanation is still needed for the shift in tone from the "bad" Cleopatra who wants to live to the "good" Cleopatra who wants to die.

CLEOPATRA'S SUICIDE IN HORACE

Of these three sources, Horace is the only one who was alive during Cleopatra's lifetime. He was also under the patronage of Maecenas, Augustus' advisor[18] and he enjoyed a relationship with Augustus that appears to have been amicable.[19] These relationships allowed him access to men who had personally met Cleopatra. This is not likely to have influenced any factual aspects in Horace's Cleopatra Ode[20] for the better. The Romans who were most likely to have met Cleopatra or witnessed some of the mythologized events were also the ones with a vested interest in parlaying their victory over her into pro-Augustan propaganda.

Another aspect to Horace's work that sets it aside from the other major sources is that the Cleopatra Ode was written as lyric poetry and, by definition, more an artistic

[18]Charles E. Passage, *The Complete Works of Horace* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1983), 3.
[19]Sidney Alexander, *The Complete Odes and Satires of Horace* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), xx-xxi.
[20]Translated passages of the Cleopatra Ode are taken from Passage, Alexander, and Commager, as noted.

statement than a factual one, though some of the more inventive of the ancient historians might disprove that idea. This genre distinction might be partly responsible for the dramatic shift in tone, but the change is still so jarring that it deserves attention. In addition, the fact that Horace does not even mention romance, in a piece where he freely makes use of other dramatic epithets and imagery, makes his choices regarding the suicide even more interesting.

The Cleopatra present in lines 1-16 of the Cleopatra Ode is not an attractive creature. Her chief sin for Horace is not her licentiousness but her drunkenness; she is "drunk with the delights of her hitherto good fortune" (12-13) and later, Octavian[21] is said to have "sobered her mind, maddened by Mareotic wine" (16-17).[22] Horace's purpose here appears to be to portray Cleopatra as out of control; she is introduced in the ode as "demented" (7).[23] Her plots against Rome are both sinister and futile, as Octavian appears, both as "hawk" and "hunter" (21-22),[24] ready to frighten her, pursue her, and capture her. She is an ideal enemy, a *fatale monstrum*[25] that can be easily contained by the all-father of Rome, Augustus himself.

However, from lines 25-40, Horace's tone takes a sharp reversal. His voice becomes positively admiring: "She, seeking a more noble death, did not, like a woman,

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[21]Horace, Plutarch, and Dio Cassius all refer to Octavian as Caesar. So as not to confuse Octavian with Julius Caesar, I refer to him as Octavian or Augustus outside of translated passages.
[22]Alexander, 51.
[23]Alexander, 51; Passage, 177.
[24]Steele Commager, *The Odes of Horace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 90; Alexander, 51; Passage, 177.
[25]See J.V. Luce's article "Cleopatra as *Fatale Monstrum*" (*The Classical Quarterly* 13 (Nov. 1963), 251-257.

dread the sword, or search in her swift ship for some secret hiding place" (25-28).[26] This statement is made doubly strange since Horace could easily have made the claim that Cleopatra *did* fear the sword, seeing as how she chose to die from the asp. From then on, his Cleopatra is regal: with "countenance serene" (29) she looks at her ruined palace, "bold enough to take into her hands the irritated asps" (31-33), in "premeditated death fiercer yet she became" (35-36) and ultimately "no longer a queen but a woman unyielding, unhumbled" (39-40).[27]

There are two progressive narratives in the Cleopatra Ode. One is Cleopatra's progression from royalty to mere woman; Horace introduces her as a queen, albeit a crazed one, and leaves her stripped of her status, but still proud. The other progression is an ascent rather than a descent. Cleopatra is initially out of control and out of touch with reality but in the end is a noble woman who can calmly face the ruin of her hopes and a poisonous death. These criss-crossing progressions meet in irony; only when she cannot truly call herself a queen does Cleopatra act like one.

The narrative is clear on the motivation for Cleopatra's suicide. She cannot bear to be "led as a private citizen on board the haughty Liburnian galleys for a proud triumph" (37-38).[28] This Cleopatra values her royal status above everything; Horace does not even bother to mention Antony or the children. Horace is also liberal in his approval of such a step and he lauds Cleopatra's serenity, bravery, and pride. Indeed, of these three texts, Horace is the one with the narrative that is narrowest in focus, as well as the most contradictory. His approval of Cleopatra only appears once she decides to kill herself and

[26]Alexander, 52.
[27]Alexander, 52.
[28]Commager, 90.

he describes the suicide in such a way that it becomes the noblest action Cleopatra can take.

CLEOPATRA'S SUICIDE IN PLUTARCH

Of these three suicidal Cleopatras, the one in Plutarch's *Life of Antony*[29] is arguably the most complex. Since this is officially a narrative of Antony's life, his importance to Cleopatra during and after his death is stressed. During Antony's somewhat botched suicide (sections 76-77), Cleopatra is in agony. Plutarch describes how she "beat and tore her breasts…called him master, husband, and imperator; indeed she almost forgot her own ills in her pity for his" (77). Here, Cleopatra is present in the role of wife, submissive and loyal, so it might have been the logical step for Plutarch to portray her in the role of the subordinate suicide, in a narrative sense if not a political one.[30]

Plutarch does not choose to take this step. He does cast the slaves in familiar suicidal roles. Antony's slave Eros kills himself rather than slay his master (76) and Cleopatra's slaves Iras and Charmian faithfully die with their mistress, Charmian using the last of her strength to adjust Cleopatra's diadem and praise the queen (85). Plutarch is more than willing to show this kind of loyal suicide in the lower ranks but reserves something different for the queen. Cleopatra, though she grieves for Antony, is ultimately

[29]All translated references in this section are from http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Antony*.html. This is an online reproduction of *The Parallel Lives of Plutarch* published in Vol. IX of the Loeb Classical Library edition of 1920.
[30]van Hoof, 43-56.

someone deciding the steps she will take before others can take action, unlike the servants who can only react to their masters' decisions.

Plutarch's Cleopatra is decidedly aware of the dangers inherent in her capture. When Caesar's emissary comes to her, she bars her door against him, notably imprisoning herself rather than being someone else's captive (78). When the emissary gains access to the room, it is revealed that Cleopatra has kept a dagger with her in case of just such event (79). Even the fever that overtakes her is linked somewhat improbably by Plutarch to her own savage chest-beating (77, 82); she causes her illness by her own actions alone. Cleopatra is piteous but she also manages some vestiges of control.

The most explicit motivations for her suicide are described in her speech to Antony's ashes, the last words she speaks in the Plutarch narrative. Despite her grief for him (a grief that Plutarch, unlike Dio, seems to consider sincere), she repeatedly emphasizes the damage done to herself. She mourns for her own change in status, telling the ashes, "I buried thee but lately with hands still free; now, however, I pour libations for thee as a captive" (84). She then claims that these are the last "honours or libations" from "Cleopatra the captive" and mourns that the only portion of his country she will receive is her likely burial there. She is as much the general mourning losses as the lamenting lover. She begs the dead Antony not to "permit a triumph to be celebrated over myself in my person" (84). Plutarch's Cleopatra is painfully aware of her precarious position as captive. In killing herself, she regains control of the situation.

CLEOPATRA'S SUICIDE IN DIO CASSIUS

The Cleopatra found in the histories of Dio Cassius exemplifies some of the contradictions between the hysterical female and the cool, calculating queen that coexist within the ancient sources. Dio explicitly states that during the battle of Actium, "true to her nature as a woman and an Egyptian…tortured by the agony of the long suspense and by the constant and fearful expectation of either possible outcome…she turned to flight herself" (*Roman History* 50.33).[31] The fleeing Cleopatra is naturally unable to be patient or calm; her behavior is attributed to her race and gender. Yet when Cleopatra takes flight again later and goes "suddenly into the mausoleum, pretending that she feared Caesar" (51.10), her object is nothing less than to encourage Antony to kill himself. Rather than becoming the weeping, lamenting wretch found in later Western literature,[32] her thoughts immediately turn to Octavian, with "confidence" (51.11). She is a woman who hedges her bets, canny enough to play on his greed for her treasure while also plying him with the "ardour of her speech" and an "appeal to his passions" (51.12).

The motive for her suicide in Dio is "to die with the name and dignity of a sovereign (rather) than to live in a private station" (51.11). She is aware that Octavian plans to make her part of his victory spectacle and considers the possibility "worse than a thousand deaths" (51.13). Mindful of her high rank to the last, she dies in full regalia. Hers is exemplary of a social suicide; a loser who will retain the dignity of her station even if she cannot remain alive to see it.

Dio never asks why a woman whose nerves cannot stand the strain of witnessing a battle is so calm when faced with her own death. His Cleopatra is similar in her

[31]Http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cassius_Dio/home.html. This is an online reproduction of *Roman History by Cassius Dio* published in Vol. VI of the Loeb Classical Library edition of 1917.
[32]Hughes-Hallett, 114, 122, 170.

irrationality to Horace's Cleopatra; she is of "insatiable passion…swayed often by laudable ambition, but often by overweening effrontery" (51.15) and her faults are the stereotypical faults of a Roman female: overly emotional, easily swayed and all too ready to attempt to sway the men around her. Yet, in the end, his Cleopatra does manage to outwit Octavian, even though the Octavian of Dio Cassius is more controlled in his lusts than his predecessors (51.12, 51.15). Interestingly enough, although Octavian pretends to be completely "unmoved" by her, he does feel "both admiration and pity for her" (51.14). This combination of emotions would not be a bad way to describe how Dio Cassius seems to feel about the suicidal and dead Cleopatra as well. It is the living one that excites his ire and scorn.

CLEOPATRA AND HER MEN

The praise of Cleopatra becomes even more problematic when her portrayal is contrasted with the representation the sources give of Antony's suicide. Antony is the Roman and the man and described by both the historians (Horace ignores him completely) as a character with far more potential for nobility and greatness than Cleopatra. Plutarch speaks glowingly of his "daring and sagacious leadership" (3) and "noble dignity of form" (4). In his summation of the characters of Antony and Cleopatra, Dio Cassius plays a kind of give-and-take with them both, trading them one good or neutral quality for one worse, but still giving Antony the lion's share of the compliments. He is one of "the two greatest Romans of (Cleopatra's) day" (51.15). Antony's "greatness of soul" and "compassion to many" would likely have sounded more laudable to the Romans than Cleopatra's "insatiable passion and insatiable avarice" (51.15). Yet

Cleopatra is the one who maintains the greater courage and control in the face of death in the accounts.

Antony commits suicide by the respectable method of the sword but manages to make it less than glamorous. Not only does he ask his slave to do the deed (Plutarch 76), relinquishing the control his self-killing should allow him, he botches the job and dies a messy, prolonged death in Cleopatra's arms (Plutarch 76-77, Dio 51.10). In Horace's narrative as well, even though Antony does not appear, his one possible claim to greater courage than Cleopatra's, his death by the sword, is stolen. Horace credits Cleopatra with being unafraid of the sword (25-28).[33]

Thus, Cleopatra's dignity in these renditions comes at the expense of both Antony and Octavian, and it's reasonable to ask why. It can be argued that it is Antony's obligation in pro-Augustan narrative to fail, to be weak, and to throw away his own potential in order to show Octavian as the deserving victor. He thus becomes someone who was, at least initially, a worthy adversary as well as a literary foil. Unlike Antony, however, Cleopatra begins with two strikes against her: she is female and foreign. This could possibly be a way of making her a worthy adversary for Octavian as well, by exalting her at the end rather than the beginning. If so, however, why does her moment of glory come at the expense of Octavian? Through deception, she claims the right to dispose of her own life rather than submit to Octavian's control. Suicide may be ennobling for Cleopatra but the dignity of her death by necessity steals the dignity of two Roman men.

[33]Alexander, 52.

While these are reasonable questions, they may be partially answered by the fact that Cleopatra did commit suicide and however creative the historians could be, they were unable to deny that Cleopatra did make the choice to die. While her death alone might not be enough to make her worthier than Antony or Octavian, it does allow her some agency in the narratives.

Another question that arises in a comparison between Antony and Cleopatra is the rather unwomanly death, by Roman standards, that Cleopatra chooses in the sources. Unlike Arria Paeta, she is not portrayed as someone choosing death for someone else's sake. The Cleopatra we find in Horace, Plutarch, and Dio Cassius dies to affirm her own status and character, not someone else's.

This could be explained by the fact that as far as Rome is concerned, Cleopatra exists beyond the boundaries of the family. The Augustan poets, including Horace, even deny her a name, denying her the heritage of her father's line.[34] She is not legally the wife of either Julius Caesar or Antony and the children she bears them are likewise outside the Roman family line. She is completely foreign and thus incapable of understanding the role of daughter, wife, or mother in a proper Roman way.

Another obstacle to portraying Cleopatra's suicide in a more feminine light was her position as the enemy of Rome. The formal declaration of war was against Cleopatra, not Antony. In legal terms, she was the ruler of a client state, higher in many ways than Antony, who had been demoted to private citizen.[35] She was also, at the end of the war, in the position of the defeated general, even if Antony was the actual commander.

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[34]Maria Wyke, *The Roman Mistress: Ancient and Modern Representations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 205-206.
[35]Meyer Reinhold. "The Declaration of War Against Cleopatra," *The Classical Journal* 77 (1981-1982), 97-98.

Military loss is rather inescapably part of Cleopatra's history and so, her death is strongly associated with the controlled suicides of defeated soldiers.[36] In addition, her prominence as the military enemy of Rome seems to necessitate at least some allusion to her in this role or the Roman writers risk downplaying Rome's victory.

CONCLUSION

The suicidal Cleopatra we find in Horace, Plutarch, and Dio Cassius is not a loyal underling or a devoted wife or even the dangerous harlot she was in the preceding pages of those same accounts. This literary Cleopatra dies to maintain control of her own life. In her refusal to live or die under anyone's terms but her own, she rises to the ranks of the dead generals and doomed senators of Roman texts. After looking at the sources and the Roman stereotypes, this portrayal of Cleopatra is not as contradictory as she once seemed. No matter the Roman bias against her, Cleopatra did commit suicide and the authors were forced to take that into account in their narratives. In the end, the authors chose this way of presenting her death because it fit best within that particular way of understanding suicide. The suicidal Cleopatra is not a flaw within the propaganda but a natural literary depiction progressing from Roman culture and Roman literary tropes.

Augustan propaganda and Western history have created multitudes of Cleopatras. Within the subgenre of suicidal ones, there exists a whole range, from chaste martyrs to mourning lovers to cold fatalists. With such an array of types to choose from, finding contradictions within a biased narrative becomes fascinating. The calm and proud Cleopatra who refuses to be a part of Octavian's triumph seems like an example of a

[36]Hill, 200.

breakdown within the Roman propaganda. Yet an examination of these inner contradictions within the narratives of Horace, Plutarch, and Dio Cassius reveals that however incompatible the *fatale monstrum* and the dying queen may appear, within the Roman understanding of suicide, Cleopatra's death must be her greatest act.

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