

The Dynamics of Power and Sexuality: A Reading of *Antony and Cleopatra*

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Abstract

The varied roles that women play in a Shakespearean text cannot be seen in isolation from hidden patriarchal figurations. In Shakespeare's plays, women can be seen pushing against patriarchal strictures. The more active the female characters become, the more negative is their characterization. Women are seen to be caught in a double bind in the Shakespearean play. 'Strong' women are unchaste and unwomanly; 'virtuous' women are confined to playing roles of helpless tools or bystanders, powerless to affect the course of history. Thus the female characters in Shakespeare are confronted with a dilemma: they can be either womanly or warlike. They can be virtuous or powerful, never both. This suggests that the construction (and constriction) of women's roles was well underway in Shakespeare's times, and gender-specific territory was being charted out, with a bit of resistance, no doubt. This paper attempts a close reading of the character of Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* and argues that in the Shakespearean context, female deviancy is best seen as a patriarchal construct. It also argues that though Cleopatra appears to enjoy textual and ideological space, she is ultimately made to submit or subscribe to the patriarchal order.

Keywords: patriarchy, female deviancy, power, sexuality