

Cleopatra and Berenice: The Perception and Presentation of Two Queens

by Shlomit Heering

completed under the supervision of Julia Wilker

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This paper focuses on two queens who lived and ruled on the periphery of the Roman world: Cleopatra and Berenice. Cleopatra, the last Ptolemaic queen, lived in the mid-first century BCE, while Berenice, the last Herodian queen, lived in the mid-first century CE. My project analyzes the ancient and modern texts about them in order to determine how they are perceived and presented in texts in terms of their power and agency. While there are similarities between the two queens, there are also important and telling differences in the ways ancient authors discuss them that continue to have implications for how they are perceived.

I was first introduced to Berenice, the last Herodian queen, about two years ago, when an article I was reading mentioned Theodor Mommsen's description of her as a "mini Cleopatra"¹. Already being familiar with Cleopatra from both popular culture – including historical fiction novels and *Asterix* comics – and academic research during my years at Penn, I had a reference point with which to make sense of this description. However, I was automatically struck by the fact that while there definitely was validity to this statement, it very clearly conveyed a paternalistic nineteenth-century view wherein two ancient queens were assumed to be exactly the same in all aspects other than scale. In order to understand how similar Cleopatra and Berenice really were and how different their circumstances and actions might be, I decided to pursue research on both queens to see how they are received and discussed in ancient² and modern scholarship.

As I delved into my sources, I realized that an interesting way in which to frame this overarching question would be to look at how the power and agency of these queens is portrayed by ancient and modern authors. Although the terms "power" and "agency" are used all the time without explanation, they are actually quite subjective and difficult to define. In this paper I use "power" to mean, more or less, the authority, influence, and ability that someone has both inherently and by virtue of their social position. "Agency," meanwhile, I use to mean the active implementation of power. Power can be seen as simply existing – just like any other trait – and can have an effect without the person wielding it trying to do so, but agency requires that the person who has this power make conscious use of it to affect their surroundings and circumstances. Thus, while it is possible to have power without expressing agency, agency is an extension of this

¹ Theodor Mommsen, *The History of Rome: The Provinces, from Caesar to Diocletian, Part II*, trans. William P. Dickson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887), 238.

² All translations provided in this paper are my own, with reference to older translations such as the Loeb. Looking at the original texts allowed me to gain a familiarity with them that cannot be acquired from translations and to pay attention to the individual words used and what these might signify.

prerequisite power. Ancient authors do not use the language of “power” and “agency” outright in their texts, yet these ideas underlie any discussion of Cleopatra and Berenice and provide a framework that enables a study of these queens to delve deeper than simple biographical facts and descriptions. Additionally, in order to further focus my research I only refer to a specific set of ancient writers. Few authors discuss Berenice in any detail, so I use all but one in this paper: Suetonius, Tacitus, Quintilian, Dio Cassius, Josephus, and the Book of Acts. Although there is a reference to Berenice in Juvenal, I omit poetry entirely in this paper and rely almost exclusively on historiographical texts in order to avoid the problem of artistic license as much as possible. Additionally, because such a plethora of sources exists about Cleopatra, in contrast to Berenice, sticking to more historical sources – Suetonius, Dio Cassius, Plutarch, Josephus, and Strabo – enables this paper to retain clarity and purpose, instead of getting bogged down in attempting to cover every source comprehensively. Additionally, limiting my circle of sources to a select few, many of which discuss both queens, allows a comparison between the two to be more easily drawn.

Berenice and Cleopatra are almost complete opposites in terms of how much scholarship exists about them, both ancient and modern. Berenice survives in only a few lines of ancient texts, and even modern scholarship about her has been very limited. Therefore, I aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of how she is discussed in sources (except Juvenal, as explained above) so that a clearer picture of the queen can emerge than has generally been provided. By looking at multiple and varied sources it is possible to understand Berenice as existing and acting in different spheres, not simply either with Romans (which most writing focuses on) or with Jews (as is Josephus’ main interest). Because so few sources about Berenice exist, my main objective is to establish the fact that she really did possess power and exercise agency on many occasions, and to determine what sort of power she held. Although, in contrast to Berenice, there is almost an

overabundance of scholarship on Cleopatra, a discussion of this queen is also integral to this paper. By drawing from a specific set of sources, I am able to create a concise and at the same time thorough examination of the texts. Cleopatra's power is much more obvious than Berenice's: in fact, Cleopatra is often endowed with exaggerated amounts of power as a way to make her seem more threatening to Rome. Therefore, while I do again aim to determine what and of what sort her power was and whether and when she exercised agency, I go beyond this to focus on how this power and agency is talked about. Although the ancient sources I use are mostly historiographical, this is not to say that they are objective. Bias against Cleopatra comes across very clearly in these texts (some more than others): in establishing her power and agency I work with and around this bias, paying attention to the way in which she is discussed in order to figure out what traditions and ideas about her are really being presented and preserved. Because, unfortunately, no Egyptian written source exists about Cleopatra, there is no text that discusses events from her perspective. However, although the existing sources would have been affected by the Augustan propaganda that had been, for some, entrenched in Roman thought for over a century, it is still possible to pick out differing perspectives on the queen, not all negative. Additionally, non-written sources, such as coins and temple decorations in Egypt, provide a glimpse into Cleopatra's own propaganda and an opposing view of the queen.

I begin this paper with some brief biographical information about each queen in order to provide some broad context about their lives and both the local and global climates with which they interacted. I then move on to an analysis of the multitude of sources about each, first going through those on Berenice and then examining the wider range of writing about Cleopatra. I ultimately return to Mommsen's statement to ascertain its value for understanding the similarities

and differences between these queens and the texts about them, and I end by establishing the greater implications and importance of this project.

Biographical Context

Cleopatra was the last ruler of the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt, founded by one of Alexander the Great's generals after his death at the end of the fourth century BCE³. Cleopatra was born in late 70/early 69 BCE to the king Ptolemy XII and an unknown mother, "probably a member of the Egyptian priestly family of Ptah"⁴. She was named her father's coregent in 52 and inherited the throne with her younger brother Ptolemy XIII after their father's death in 51⁵. Besides having inherited large debts from her father and facing food shortages due to low levels of Nile flooding, she also conflicted with her brother and his advisors and eventually was driven out of Alexandria in 48. That same year Cleopatra gathered an army and Caesar came to Egypt as a result of hostilities with his rival Pompey. Caesar reinstated Cleopatra as joint ruler first with Ptolemy XIII and, after his death, nominally with her youngest brother Ptolemy XIV⁶. Caesar remained in Egypt until 47, during which time Cleopatra became pregnant, giving birth to a son, called Caesarion, later that year⁷. The queen was then in Rome at certain points between 46 and Caesar's death in 44⁸. After the civil war instigated by Caesar's assassination was resolved, with Octavian obtaining control of the West and Antony of the East, Cleopatra was summoned to meet Antony

³ Duane Roller, *Cleopatra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 30.

⁴ Ibid., 15.

⁵ Walter Ameling, "Cleopatra VII, Last Ptolemaic queen, suicide in 30 BC", *Brill's New Pauly*; Roller, 27+53.

⁶ Ameling; Roller, 53-67.

⁷ Ameling; Roller, 67-68.

⁸ Roller, 71-74.

at Tarsus in 41. Antony soon came to Alexandria and stayed there until 40, and Cleopatra's twins with Antony, Alexander Helios and Cleopatra Selene, were born the following year. Cleopatra and Antony met again in 37 and were together for the next few years. Cleopatra gained extensive territorial concessions from Antony in 37/36 and 34, and another son, Ptolemy Philadelphos, was born to them in 36⁹. By this time relations between Antony and Octavian were deteriorating, and they ultimately came to a head in 31 at the battle of Actium. Cleopatra and Antony both left the battle, and the victorious Octavian followed them to Egypt. Realizing that his situation was hopeless, Antony killed himself in August of 30, and a few days later, recognizing that her kingdom was lost, Cleopatra died as well¹⁰.

A century later, Berenice was the last Herodian queen, descended from Herod the Great, king of Judaea and Cleopatra's contemporary¹¹. Berenice was born in around 28 CE to Agrippa I, who was given rule of Judaea by Claudius in 41¹². She was married first to Marcus, the son of the alabarch of Alexandria, and then, after his death, to Herod, king of Chalcis and also her uncle; her father died during this second marriage, when she was sixteen. Berenice lived with her brother Agrippa II for a while after the death of Herod and later married Polemo, king of Cilicia, whom she soon left to return to her brother¹³. She met Titus, with whom she had a fairly long-term relationship, at some point when he was in Judaea putting down the Jewish revolt from 67 to 71¹⁴. Berenice joined Titus in Rome in 75, but she was dismissed for good after he succeeded his father Vespasian as emperor in 79¹⁵. It is unknown what happened to Berenice afterwards, and how or when she died.

⁹ Roller, 76-101.

¹⁰ Ibid., 134-148.

¹¹ Klaus Bringmann, "Herodes I; Herod the Great", *Brill's New Pauly*.

¹² Bringmann; Meret Strothmann, "Iulia Berenice", *Brill's New Pauly*.

¹³ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 19.277+354, 20.145-146.

¹⁴ Werner Eck, "Imperator Caesar Titus Vespasianus Augustus", *Brill's New Pauly*.

¹⁵ Strothmann.

Analysis

Berenice

Although Berenice survives mostly in brief mentions by a few ancient authors, it is nevertheless possible to see multiple ways of interpreting how her agency was perceived. On the most basic level, Berenice is presented as having power due to her estimation by important Romans. Suetonius in his *Life of Titus* mentions the Roman's "notorious love for Queen Berenice, to whom it was said that even marriage was promised" and specifies that when Titus sent Berenice away from Rome, it was against both of their wills¹⁶. While Suetonius does not state whether Titus' love for the queen affected his actions and choices, Tacitus suggests that it did. When Titus was on his way to Rome to pay his respects to the new emperor in 69, he was informed that Galba had died. After deliberating whether he should continue on and play into the hands of Vitellius or Otho, who were now vying for the throne, Titus decided to turn back to Judaea from his journey to Rome: according to Tacitus, some people thought that this was due to "his ardent desire for Queen Berenice", rather than political considerations¹⁷. However, Tacitus then goes on to clarify that although Titus' "youthful spirit did not shrink back from Berenice," this did not stop him from doing whatever needed to be done¹⁸ - his love for Berenice did not affect him when it came to important matters. Tacitus also mentions that Berenice was valued by Vespasian: "nor with less spirit did Queen Berenice help the faction, blossoming in youth and beauty, and also dear to old

¹⁶ Suetonius, *Life of Titus*, 7.1-2 ("insignem reginae Berenices amorem, cui etiam nuptias pollicitus ferebatur").

¹⁷ Tacitus, *Histories*, 2.1-2 ("accensum desiderio Berenices reginae").

¹⁸ Ibid., 2.2 ("neque abhorrebat a Berenice iuvenilis animus").

Vespasian by the grandeur of her gifts”¹⁹. While it is possible to view this as being said in a sarcastic way – she ingratiated herself with Vespasian by essentially bribing him – it can also be seen as providing a glimpse into Berenice’s political acumen. Tacitus nowhere implies that Berenice gave gifts to Vespasian because she had to. Rather, it was entirely her own decision to do so, and a smart one at that, since it got her on good terms with the soon-to-be emperor.

An appreciation of Berenice for this sort of savviness and knowledge can, perhaps, be seen further in two mentions of her presence in councils in Roman settings. In the Book of Acts it is clear that Berenice was present at the trial of Paul with Agrippa, the procurator, “the tribunes and the foremost men of the state”²⁰. Although Berenice is a silent figure in this story – she does not speak and only Agrippa is directly addressed – she appears in Quintilian as a more active figure in council. In Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* a passage appears which “recounts [his] startling confession that, when he appeared on behalf of Julia Berenice...he actually pleaded before her”²¹. It is difficult to imagine that Berenice served as an actual judge, since there were strict regulations on Roman law, but it is possible that she was invited to join a council on matters relating her, similar to her presence at Paul’s trial²². In this situation, then, Berenice could have served as a sort of expert witness, since she “would have proved useful in providing a repository of essential experience and information on Jewish practices. Therefore her appointment to an imperial *consilium* might be defended on grounds of temporary necessity, in which Vespasian was able to combine the advantages of personal choice with the maximum of practical experience”²³. However, Quintilian himself does not seem to think that his statement needs any explaining: he

¹⁹ Tacitus, 2.81 (“Nec minore animo regina Berenice partis iuvabat, florens aetate formaque et seni quoque Vespasiano magnificentia munerum grata”).

²⁰ *Book of Acts*, 25.13+23 (“σύν τε χιλιάρχοις καὶ ἀνδράσιν τοῖς κατ' ἐξοχὴν τῆς πόλεως”), 26.30.

²¹ Michael R. Young-Widmaier, “Quintilian’s Legal Representation of Julia Berenice”, *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 51, no. 1 (2002): 124.

²² *Ibid.*, 125-127.

²³ *Ibid.*, 129.

simply asserts that he “pleaded on behalf of Queen Berenice before her herself (*apud ipsam eam*)”²⁴ and moves on with his work. Regardless of how modern scholars choose to interpret this text, it is clear that Berenice held a prominent position of power and that Quintilian – and, presumably, his contemporaries, since none of them comments on this story either – found nothing unusual in this.

Thus far the discussion has only focused on Berenice’s power in a Roman context; however, she is also perceived in other instances as having agency of her own. Grace Macurdy writes that Berenice “is always vital and in action, subduing the hearts of men by her charm and cherishing the ambition to be the greatest in the great world” and implies that it was her goal to marry Titus²⁵. While Macurdy’s assessment seems to get a little bit carried away – she is not quite depicted as a serial seductress in the ancient sources – the queen nevertheless is shown as having power beyond what has been seen previously. As has already been mentioned, Suetonius records the belief that Titus promised to marry Berenice when she was in Rome. Dio recounts a similar situation, but he ascribes the initiative to Berenice rather than to Titus: while she was in Rome “she lived on the Palatine and lived together with Titus. And she expected to be married to him, and she already did everything as if being his wife”²⁶. Although neither author claims that they were indeed married, Dio expands on the possibility mentioned in Suetonius and has Berenice acting to bring about this promise and expectation. Josephus also recounts a story of Berenice taking initiative to bring about a marriage. According to the *Jewish Antiquities*, after the death of her second husband Herod, king of Chalcis (her uncle), Berenice went to live with her brother Agrippa. However, after a while “a rumor [took] hold that she had intercourse with her brother,”

²⁴ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 4.1.19 (“et ego pro regina Berenice apud ipsam eam dixi”).

²⁵ Grace H. Macurdy, “Julia Berenice”, *The American Journal of Philology* 56, no. 3 (1935): 252-253.

²⁶ Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 65.15.4 (“ἡ δὲ ἐν τῷ παλατίῳ ὤκησε καὶ τῷ Τίτῳ συνεγίγνετο. προσεδόκα δὲ γαμηθῆσθαι αὐτῷ, καὶ πάντα ἤδη ὥς καὶ γυνὴ αὐτοῦ οὕσα ἐποίει”).

so she “persuaded Polemo...king of Cilicia, upon being circumcised to take her in marriage”. Polemo agreed to this plan, “mostly on account of her wealth” – another instance of Berenice’s power due to riches, as with her gifts to Vespasian. This story ends with Berenice exercising agency to the opposite effect as well, leaving Polemo of her own volition after setting up a marriage with him²⁷. Such active involvement in determining her own circumstances, be it who she was married to or where she lived, would have been unusual for any woman at the time, and is especially remarkable when contrasted to her earlier marriages – two before the age of sixteen, with one to her own uncle.

While Josephus’ view of Berenice in the *Jewish Antiquities* is less than laudatory – he preserves rumors that she both had an incestual relationship with her brother and abandoned Polemo “on account of licentiousness”²⁸ – he depicts Berenice as exercising agency in a positive way in the *Jewish War*. Here Josephus provides multiple stories where Berenice tries to use her position of power to intercede between the Jews and Romans. In one instance Berenice, who was in Jerusalem to fulfil some vows, upon seeing

“the habitual law-breaking of the [Roman] soldiers...and often sending both her cavalry generals and bodyguards to Florus, begged him to stop the murder...And the violence of the soldiers even raged against the queen...[and] they would have destroyed her, if she did not make haste to flee for refuge to the royal court...And Berenice approached Florus as a suppliant, barefoot, in front of the tribune, and, she herself not meeting with respect, danger made an attempt on her life”²⁹.

²⁷ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 20.145-146 (“φήμης ἐπισχούσης, ὅτι τὰδελεφῶ συνείη, πείθει Πολέμωνα, Κυλικίας δὲ ἦν οὗτος βασιλεὺς, περιτεμόμενον ἀγαγέσθαι πρὸς γάμον αὐτήν... καὶ ὁ Πολέμων ἐπέισθη μάλιστα διὰ τὸν πλοῦτον αὐτῆς”).

²⁸ Ibid. (“ἀλλ’ ἡ Βερενίκη δι’ ἀκολασίαν, ὡς ἔφασαν, καταλείπει τὸν Πολέμωνα”).

²⁹ Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.310-314 (“καὶ τὴν παρανομίαν τῶν στρατιωτῶν θεωμένην...καὶ πολλάκις τοὺς τε ἱπάρχους ἑαυτῆς καὶ σωματοφύλακας πέμπουσα πρὸς Φλῶρον ἐδεῖτο παύσασθαι τοῦ φόνου...ἡ δ’ ὁρμὴ τῶν στρατιωτῶν ἐλύσθη καὶ κατὰ τῆς βασιλίδος...ἀλλὰ κὰν αὐτὴν ἀνεῖλον, εἰ μὴ καταφυγεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλικὴν αὐλὴν ἔφθη...Βερενίκη γυμνόπους τε πρὸ τοῦ βήματος ἰκέτευε τὸν Φλῶρον, καὶ πρὸς τῷ μὴ τυχεῖν αἰδοῦς αὐτὴ τὸν περὶ τοῦ ζῆν κίνδυνον ἐπέιρασεν”).

Later, when Florus tried to instigate war, Berenice again interceded together with the “leaders of Jerusalem” and “wrote to Cestius about those things which Florus committed as outrages in the city”³⁰. Josephus also shows her using her agency in conjunction with that of her brother Agrippa: they both urged the Jews “not to fight with the Romans” and, once they persuaded them (temporarily), helped to rebuild the Temple colonnades³¹. Although Berenice’s efforts did not succeed in averting war between the Jews and Romans, these stories in the *Jewish War* show that she had the power to at least try to influence the outcome of events. Yet while she ultimately failed to lastingly defuse tensions, her agency in making attempts to do so is clearly portrayed by Josephus.

Despite the instances of Berenice’s agency demonstrated above, there are those who argue that she really did not have much agency at all. The biggest argument in support of this view is that Berenice’s situation was in Titus’ hands and that she was subject to the power struggles in Rome in the 70s CE. According to Crook, Titus brought Berenice to Rome after a change in the political climate in 75 (perhaps the death of Mucianus), but later dismissed her as “a gesture of conciliation” to his opponents; she returned to Rome shortly thereafter, but he again dismissed her in order to win over the public when he became emperor in 79³². Although Rogers disagrees with some of Crook’s historical readings, he similarly states that Titus brought Berenice to Rome when Vespasian was settled in his reign and allowed him to do so, but ultimately he chose the stability of the empire over Berenice and sent her away from Rome for good³³. Braund also contends that Titus waited until Vespasian was secure as emperor before bringing Berenice to Rome, since he

³⁰ Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.333 (“οἱ τῶν Ἱεροσολύμων ἄρχοντες... τῷ Κεστίῳ περὶ ὧν Φλῶρος εἰς τὴν πόλιν παρηγόμησεν ἔγραφον”).

³¹ Ibid., 2.402+405 (“οὐ Ῥωμαίοις... πολεμεῖν”).

³² John A. Crook, “Titus and Berenice”, *The American Journal of Philology* 72, no. 2 (1951): 166-172.

³³ Perry M. Rogers, “Titus, Berenice, and Mucianus”, *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 29, no. 1 (1980): 94-95.

knew that the Romans would not approve of a foreign queen; however, when he had to secure his own succession he sent her away³⁴. Keaveney and Madden sum up this view of Berenice succinctly: they write that “while Berenice’s position may have been exalted, it rested on a flimsy foundation. She owed everything to the grace and favour of Titus and, as the sources make clear, once that was withdrawn she ceased to be of any consequence”³⁵. While it is true that Berenice vanishes from any sources after her last dismissal from Rome, since the ancient authors were writing from a male and mostly Roman perspective, to claim that she entirely depended on Titus gives too little credit to Dio’s statement that “Berenice was at the height of her power and on account of this also went into Rome with her brother Agrippa” (65.15.3-4). Most scholars assume that Titus brought Berenice to Rome, but Dio’s account implies that she came on her own. If she really was at the height of her power at the time, rather than postulating that Berenice waited for Titus to be able to summon her to Rome, there is no reason not to propose that Berenice was busy in the intervening years between Titus’ victory in Judaea and her arrival in Rome and that she only came to the city when it suited her.

Regardless of how much agency Berenice is seen as having, the fact that she is called queen automatically connotes her importance. In the texts of Suetonius (*Titus*, 7.1), Tacitus (2.2+81), and Quintilian (4.1.19) Berenice is referred to as *regina*, as well as in a Latin inscription from Beirut³⁶. In Greek she is called βασιλίδος (from βασιλῆς) in the *Vita* (119) and the *Jewish War* (2.312) and βασίλισσα in an inscription for a statue of her in Athens³⁷. Additionally, Josephus refers to Berenice and Agrippa together as οἱ βασιλεῖς in both the *Vita* (49, 50, 180-182) and the

³⁴ D.C. Braund, “Berenice in Rome”, *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 33, no.1 (1984): 122-123.

³⁵ Arthur Keaveney and John Madden, “Berenice at Rome”, *Museum Helveticum : schweizerische Zeitschrift für klassische Altertumswissenschaft* 60 (2003): 42.

³⁶ Macurdy, “Julia Berenice”, 247.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 246.

Jewish War (2.598). Although he clearly uses a plural form of βασιλεύς in all these instances, older translations sometimes render this as “the king and queen” or “the king and his royal sister”³⁸. While these translations are not wrong, they do lose the sense that Josephus is referring to both Agrippa and Berenice on equal footing. The new Brill translation rectifies this by consistently retaining the plural form in Steve Mason’s translation of “οἱ βασιλεῖς” as “the royals”, while in my own translation I prefer the more literal translation of the term as “the rulers”. Although βασιλεύς means “king”, Josephus’ use of the term is a bit ambiguous: does he really mean that both Agrippa and Berenice were ruling in an active sense, or is Berenice equated with her brother in a more symbolic capacity as a member of the royal family? Either way, it is important to note here that the fact that ancient authors referred to Berenice as “the queen” does not necessarily mean that they respected her – Josephus’ negative view of the queen in the *Jewish Antiquities* has already been noted, and it is clear from her dismissal(s) from Rome that she was not well-liked by most Romans – but rather that they recognized her position. Nevertheless, based on what has already been discussed, it seems clear that Berenice had agency beyond the bare minimum of what would have been expected from her as a Hellenistic queen. She acted of her own volition in many instances – giving gifts to Vespasian, trying to alleviate the tense situation in Judaea, coming to Rome, planning her own marriages – and while the fact that she was a queen enabled her to do this, it did not mean that she *had* to. It is for this reason that I render “οἱ βασιλεῖς” as “the rulers”. Referring to Berenice as one of “the royals” acknowledges her symbolic power, but referring to her as one of “the rulers” recognizes the active agency that she employed on multiple occasions.

³⁸ Translations of G. A. Williamson (Penguin Classics) and H. St. J. Thackeray (Loeb edition).

Cleopatra

In contrast to Berenice, Cleopatra survives in a plethora of accounts by ancient authors, some of them quite lengthy. In all of these texts Cleopatra is shown as having power due to a variety of reasons and manifested in a variety of ways. In one of Plutarch's first mentions of the queen, she can already be seen displaying and gaining power by virtue of her boldness:

“and, only taking Apollodorus the Sicilian of her friends, going on board a small boat she landed, indeed, at the palace when it was already growing dark; and, it being impossible otherwise to be unnoticed, she, indeed, going into a sack for linens stretched herself out as much as possible, and Apollodorus, tying the sack together with leather straps, carried her through the doors towards Caesar. And it is said that he was taken in by this first device of Cleopatra, appearing bold, and being unable to resist the delight of other intercourse he reconciled her towards her brother in order that they might rule together.”³⁹

According to this account, Caesar was enamored of Cleopatra because of her bold appearance before him, rather than because of the way she looked when she did so. However, Dio – perhaps more expectedly than Plutarch – does ascribe power to Cleopatra based on her looks. In his account, Caesar was “enslaved”⁴⁰ by Cleopatra's beauty, which enabled her even “to undo everyone both stony-hearted and elderly”, since she was “brilliant both to look at and to listen to” and “otherwise she was most beautiful of women, and at that time in the height of youth she was very striking”⁴¹. Dio also points out that Cleopatra herself believed that her power lay in her

³⁹ Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, 49.1-3 (“Κάκείνη παραλαβοῦσα τῶν φίλων Ἀπολλόδωρον τὸν Σικελιώτην μόνον, εἰς ἀκάτιον μικρὸν ἐμβῆσα τοῖς μὲν βασιλείοις προσέσχεν ἤδη συσκοτάζοντος· ἀπόρου δὲ τοῦ λαθεῖν ὄντος ἄλλως, ἢ μὲν εἰς στρωματόδεσμον ἐνδῦσα προτείνει μακρὰν ἑαυτὴν, ὃ δὲ Ἀπολλόδωρος ἱμάντι συνδήσας τὸν στρωματόδεσμον εἰσκομίζει διὰ θυρῶν πρὸς τὸν Καίσαρα. καὶ τούτῳ τε πρώτῳ λέγεται τῷ τεχνήματι τῆς Κλεοπάτρας ἁλῶναι, λαμυρᾶς φανείσης, καὶ τῆς ἄλλης ὁμιλίας καὶ χάριτος ἥττων γενόμενος διαλλάξαι πρὸς τὸν ἀδελφὸν ὥς συμβασιλεύσουσαν.”).

⁴⁰ Dio, 42.35.1 (“ἐδουλώθη”).

⁴¹ Ibid., 42.34.4-5 (“ἄλλως τε γὰρ περικαλλεστάτη γυναικῶν ἐγένετο, καὶ τότε τῇ τῆς ὥρας ἀκμῇ πολὺ διέπρεπε... λαμπρὰ τε ἰδεῖν καὶ ἀκουσθῆναι οὖσα, καὶ τούτου πάντα τινὰ καὶ δυσέρωτα καὶ ἀφηλικέστερον ἐξεργάσασθαι δυναμένη”).

appearance, since “she placed all her justifications in her beauty”⁴². Plutarch provides an interesting contrast to this view: although his Cleopatra was “a woman haughty and wonderfully conceited about her beauty,”⁴³ “her own beauty by itself, indeed, was not entirely incomparable, not of the sort to amaze those seeing”⁴⁴. So, while Plutarch agrees that Cleopatra herself valued her own looks greatly, this does not necessarily mean that other people did so as well. It is worth noting here that the ascription of power to Cleopatra because of her beauty and seductiveness by many Roman authors was possibly meant to detract from a view that ascribed her power to intelligence. Nevertheless, it still adds to her agency in a different way, since in this conception she decides if and how to employ her beauty for her own ends. For example, the fact that she chose her own lovers caused her power to be viewed as sexual⁴⁵, and although this is derogatory in some contexts, it can also be seen as empowering.

Another, more negative view of Cleopatra’s agency is seen in her supposed use of magic and drugs to exercise power. Plutarch suggests that Cleopatra made use of such things on multiple occasions: she came to Antony in Cilicia “putting the greatest hopes in herself and the charms and spells around her”⁴⁶; Antony bungled his Parthian campaign because, “just as under some drugs or enchantment,” he was “always looking towards her”⁴⁷; and Octavian, when declaring war on Cleopatra, said “that Antony, indeed, was under drugs and not master of himself”⁴⁸. It is unclear whether Plutarch really believed that Cleopatra had drugged Antony. After all, the “charms and spells around her” might refer to her personality (rather than to actual magic), the speculation about

⁴² Dio, 42.34.4-5 (“καὶ πάντα ἐν τῷ κάλλει τὰ δικαιώματα ἔθετο”).

⁴³ Plutarch, *Life of Antony*, 73.1 (“γυναῖκα σοβαρὰν καὶ θαυμαστὸν ὅσον ἐπὶ κάλλει φρονοῦσαν”).

⁴⁴ Ibid., 27.2 (“καὶ γὰρ ἦν... αὐτὸ μὲν καθ’ αὐτὸ τὸ κάλλος αὐτῆς οὐ πάνυ δυσπαράβλητον, οὐδὲ οἶον ἐκπλῆξαι τοὺς ἰδόντας”).

⁴⁵ Lucy Hughes-Hallett, *Cleopatra: Histories, Dreams, and Distortions* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990), 52.

⁴⁶ Plutarch, *Antony*, 25.4 (“τὰς δὲ πλείστας ἐν ἑαυτῇ καὶ τοῖς περὶ αὐτὴν μαγγανεύμασι καὶ φίλτροις ἐλπίδας θεμένη”).

⁴⁷ Ibid., 37.4 (“ἀλλ’ ὥς ὑπὸ φαρμάκων τινῶν ἢ γοητείας παπταίνοντα πρὸς ἐκείνην ἀεῖ”).

⁴⁸ Ibid., 60.1 (“ὥς Ἀντώνιος μὲν ὑπὸ φαρμάκων οὐδὲ αὐτοῦ κρατοίη”).

Antony's distraction in Parthia is clearly a simile, and Octavian's statement can be safely seen only as propaganda. Dio also provides a few mentions of Cleopatra's use of magic: Antony was "a slave to both his love and to the bewitchery of Cleopatra"⁴⁹ and he "seemed to have become senseless before her from some enchantment[,] for thus she bewitched and enchanted" him⁵⁰, so that even Octavian says that he believes "that he has been enchanted by that abominable woman"⁵¹ (i.e., Cleopatra). Although Dio's use of words relating to magic seem less metaphorical than Plutarch's, it is difficult to claim that he believed that she literally bewitched Antony, rather than simply sticking to euphemistic or propagandistic terms. Regardless of what the ancient authors truly believed about Cleopatra's magical skills, their mentions of enchantments and drugs serve to enhance her power while partially absolving Antony of guilt for falling under her "spell": if Cleopatra exercised her agency by means of supernatural forces, then Antony never really stood a chance. However, this simultaneously diminishes Cleopatra's personal power and abilities, claiming that she needed extra help from magic and drugs in order to effectively implement this power to achieve her own ends.

One additional way by which Cleopatra wielded power is through her wealth. While this is not negative per se, it does not show a positive view of her qualities either: she could choose how to make use of her wealth, but for the most part she did not create this wealth, but rather inherited – or stole – it. It is clear in ancient sources that the queen held sway over Octavian, at least for a short time, primarily because of his concern for her wealth and fear that she might destroy it, "for Cleopatra had gathered all this in her tomb...and all, if she should fail utterly in

⁴⁹ Dio, 49.34.1 ("Καὶ ὁ μὲν ἔτι καὶ μᾶλλον τῷ τε ἔρωτι καὶ τῇ γοητείᾳ τῇ τῆς Κλεοπάτρας ἐδοῦλενε").

⁵⁰ Ibid, 50.5.3-4 ("Ἐκφρων ὑπ' αὐτῆς ἐκ μαγανείας τινὸς γεγονέναι ἔδοξεν...οὕτω καὶ ἐγοήτευσε καὶ κατέδησεν").

⁵¹ Ibid., 50.26.5 ("ὅτι ὑπ' ἐκείνης τῆς καταράτου μεμάγευται").

anything, she threatened to burn down with herself”⁵². Cleopatra did not just hoard her wealth, though – she used it to help, and consequently gain power over, Dolabella and, especially, Antony⁵³. Interestingly, it is not quite clear how wealthy Cleopatra actually was: conflicting accounts say that she was anywhere from bankrupt and having to resort to theft to fill her coffers (as in Dio, 51.5) to having ships full of money. Perhaps the easiest way to solve this is to consider that, just like everything else, wealth is relative, and what was considered financial straits for Egypt was seen as extravagant wealth by the Romans⁵⁴.

Although there is a persistently unflattering view of Cleopatra in sources, especially in terms of Octavian’s propaganda against her (what is mentioned above is just a small sampling of this⁵⁵), it is nonetheless possible to extract more positive views of her influence. One of these is that Cleopatra had power on account of her intelligence. Plutarch goes on at length about the queen’s intellectual capacities. He states that Cleopatra appeared before Antony “in the time in which women...are at the prime of understanding” and goes on to explain that “her tongue, just as some many-stringed instrument, easily turning to which language she should want, she conversed with few barbarians wholly through an interpreter, and to most she gave back her answers through herself, such as to Ethiopians, Troglodytes, Hebrews, Arabs, Syrians, Medes, Parthians. And it is said that she knew well the languages of many others,” and implied that she was the first (and last) of the Ptolemies to bother learning Egyptian⁵⁶. Even Romans who actively disliked Cleopatra

⁵² Dio, 51.8.6 (“ἡ γὰρ Κλεοπάτρα πάντα τε αὐτὰ ἐς τὸ μνημεῖον...ἡθροίκει, καὶ πάντα, ἂν γέ τινος καὶ ἐλαχίστου διαμάρτη, κατακαύσειν μεθ’ ἑαυτῆς ἡπείλει”); also Plutarch, *Antony*, 74.1-2+78.3.

⁵³ Ibid., 47.30.4+49.31.4; Plutarch, *Antony*, 51.

⁵⁴ Roller, 140-141.

⁵⁵ Cleopatra is viewed especially negatively in poetry, but I rely on more historical sources in this paper because they are more comparable to the existing sources about Berenice and less subject to artistic license. Additionally, poetry written during Augustus’ reign is more immediately affected by his propaganda against her.

⁵⁶ Plutarch, *Antony*, 25.3 (“ἐν ᾧ μάλιστα καιροῦ γυναῖκες ὥραν...τὸ φρονεῖν ἀκμάζουσι”) + 27.3-4 (“τὴν γλῶτταν, ὥσπερ ὄργανόν τι πολύχορδον, εὐπετῶς τρέπουσα καθ’ ἣν βούλοιο διάλεκτον ὀλίγοις παντάπασι δι’ ἐρμηνέως ἐνετύγγανε βαρβάρους, τοῖς δὲ πλείστοις αὐτὴ δι’ αὐτῆς ἀπεδίδου τὰς ἀποκρίσεις, οἷον Αἰθίοψι, Τρωγλοδύταις, Ἑβραίοις, Ἀραβί, Σύροις, Μήδοις, Παρθυαίοις. πολλῶν δὲ λέγεται καὶ ἄλλων ἐκμαθεῖν γλῶττας”).

admitted that she was smart: Cicero, whose antipathy towards the queen is preserved in his letters, writes that “her promises were all things that had to do with learning”⁵⁷. This makes sense, since she had a tutor in philosophy, oratory, and rhetoric named Philostratos, and there are several fragments of medical and cosmetic writing, some preserved in Galen’s work, that “are attributed to a Cleopatra” – arguably Cleopatra VII⁵⁸. In a similar vein, Cleopatra is also shown as being clever and having a personality that enabled her to respond appropriately in different situations. In Plutarch’s account, “intercourse [with her] had an inescapable grip” and “delight came over her voice” when she spoke⁵⁹, and she especially knew how to interact with Antony to her best advantage: when she observed that Antony had traits of “the soldier and the base man, she also acted towards him in this way, at ease now and boldly”⁶⁰, flattering him in many ways and entertaining him⁶¹. Even Octavian, who was not purported to be madly in love with Cleopatra, was taken in by her cleverness. Afraid that she would kill herself before his triumph, Octavian came to visit Cleopatra and make sure that she was not planning anything; he left convinced that she wanted to live and “that he had deceived,” but rather “having been deceived” by her⁶². Dio corroborates that “she had the most refined voice, and she knew how to converse with everyone through grace”⁶³, and adds that before she came to Caesar “she arranged and adorned herself so as to appear most distinguished and most pitiable” – obviously a smart move, since Caesar was so “enslaved” upon “seeing her and hearing her speak” that he “acted as an advocate for her”⁶⁴. Although Cleopatra’s wits did not enable her to similarly win over everyone with whom she interacted, they

⁵⁷ In Hughes-Hallett, 72.

⁵⁸ Roller, 45+50-51.

⁵⁹ Plutarch, *Antony*, 27.2-3 (“ἀφὴν δ’ εἶχεν ἡ συνδιαίτησις ἄφυκτον... ἡδονὴ δὲ καὶ φθεγγομένης ἐπὶ τῷ ἤχῳ”).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.1 (“ἐχρήτο καὶ τοῦτω πρὸς αὐτὸν ἀνεμένως ἤδη καὶ κατατεθαρρηκότως”).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 29.1.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 83.5 (“ἐξηπατηκέναι μὲν οἰόμενος, ἐξηπατημένος δὲ μᾶλλον”).

⁶³ Dio, 42.34.5 (“τό τε φθέγμα ἀστειότατον εἶχε, καὶ προσομιλῆσαι παντὶ τῷ διὰ χαρίτων ἡπίστατο”).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.34.6 (“κατεκόσμησέ τε ἑαυτὴν καὶ ἐξήσκησεν ὥστε σεμνοπρεπεστάτη καὶ οἰκτροτάτη αὐτῇ ὀφθῆναι”) + 42.35.1 (“ἰδὼν τε αὐτὴν καὶ τι φθελγυμένης ἀκούσας οὕτως εὐθὺς ἐδουλώθη ὥστε ... τότε ταύτη συνεδίδει”).

allowed her to interact with the most powerful Romans of her day on the same level, perhaps substituting for other common ground, such as military training, which she lacked.

This intelligence and clever personality are combined in Cleopatra's political astuteness. Rather than being passively swept up in events, she consistently responded wisely and effectively made use of her agency in maneuvering through the ever-changing political climate. This astuteness of Cleopatra's is evident early on: Ptolemy, at the urging of his councilors, had driven Cleopatra out of Alexandria in the spring of 48, yet that same year she managed to gather an army "and confront the forces of her enemy at Pelusium". Although there is no direct evidence about where she went and collected troops from, it is clear that she had important connections and power outside of Alexandria and at age twenty one was already "a figure of esteem and a force to be reckoned with"⁶⁵. The next year, Cleopatra and Caesar took a cruise up the Nile⁶⁶. Although many scholars suggest rather leisurely motives for this excursion – Cleopatra wanted to show off her country to Caesar, who wanted to show off his authority⁶⁷, or she wanted to see more of her country while he searched for the source of the Nile⁶⁸ – Peek ascribes more political reasoning to Cleopatra. According to her view, Cleopatra sailed down the Nile in order to check the border with Ethiopia and publicize her control of the situation in Egypt – after all, one presumably does not travel with 400 ships and an army just for fun⁶⁹. Cleopatra's use of a naval show to assert and maintain her control (whether real or purported) is seen again after Actium, when she "hurried into Egypt" and "wreathed the prows with garlands as though having conquered and sang odes of victory to the sound of flute-players" so that the Egyptians would not hear about her defeat and revolt⁷⁰. Perhaps

⁶⁵ Erich Gruen, "Cleopatra in Rome: Facts and Fantasies", in *Myth, History and Culture in Republican Rome*, eds. David Braund and Christopher Gill (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2003), 263-264.

⁶⁶ Suetonius, *Deified Julius*, 52.1; Appian, *The Civil Wars*, 2.90.

⁶⁷ Sally-Ann Ashton, *Cleopatra and Egypt* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 55.

⁶⁸ Roller, 65-66.

⁶⁹ Cecilia Peek, "The Queen Surveys Her Realm", *The Classical Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2011): 600-607.

⁷⁰ Dio, 51.5.3-4.

one of the best examples of Cleopatra's political savvy is the way she played the field after Caesar's assassination. While the factions were fighting and it was unclear who would ultimately gain control of Rome, she hesitated to throw her lot definitively with one side or the other: she sent the legions that Caesar had left behind in Egypt to Dolabella, who supported the Caesarian camp, and prepared a fleet to send to him as well, although it never set sail due to bad weather. She also sent a fleet to Octavian and Antony, which was damaged by a storm and delayed by the queen being ill. However, when Cassius, one of the assassins, asked for her help, although she did not refuse him outright, she told him that she was unable to do so because of problems in Egypt – perhaps this was true, but either way it makes sense that her interests would be more aligned with the faction loyal to Caesar⁷¹. Cleopatra's political astuteness can also be seen in her interactions with rulers closer to home, such as Herod. Josephus records that she not only was involved with Herod's familial matters, but also meddled in the political matters of neighboring kings⁷²: she persuaded Antony to give Herod control of war against Malchus in Arabia so that, if Herod won, she might become ruler of Arabia, and if Malchus won, she might become ruler of Judaea, “and by one of the rulers she might depose the other”⁷³.

Until here the discussion of Cleopatra's power has focused mainly on its perception by, and influence on, Romans. However, there were other dimensions of her power that would have been more potent in an Eastern context. The most important one of these is Cleopatra's presentation as a goddess. This identification of the queen with divinity can be seen in Roman sources and even in Rome itself, where a statue of Cleopatra, perhaps with Caesarion on her shoulder, in the temple of Venus Genetrix connected her with Aphrodite and possibly her role as

⁷¹ Roller, 75; Grace Macurdy, *Hellenistic Queens* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1932), 193-194.

⁷² Roller, 118-121.

⁷³ Josephus, *Jewish War*, 1.365.

Eros' mother⁷⁴. This statue suggested that “the ultimate mother of the Roman people was associated with the mother of Caesar's child” and that “Cleopatra, like Venus, was a divine mother goddess”⁷⁵. However, it also “subtly connected Isis, historically associated with the Ptolemies, with Roman religion”⁷⁶, and this connection to Isis would obviously have been especially important in Egypt. Royal women in Egypt had been associated with both Isis and Hathor for a long time, especially in their capacity as not only mothers, but mothers of kings: in this model, Cleopatra and Caesarion were representations of Isis and her son Horus⁷⁷. Cleopatra, shown with attributes of Isis, is depicted at Dendera offering with Caesarion to Hathor and her son, and she minted coins that depicted her as Isis nursing her son⁷⁸. She also took this connection with Isis further than was typical: she “assumed a robe sacred to Isis and was called the New Isis”⁷⁹, which implied “special powers and a rebirth of a standard goddess”⁸⁰. Even though Cleopatra was clearly associated with Isis, none of her Egyptian titles refer to her as a goddess – it was already implied in her role as queen. Nevertheless, she was presented “as a divine being” from early on in her reign with her Greek titles of θεά (goddess) and θεά νεώτερα (younger/newer goddess), and her personal cult lasted at least until the late 4th century CE, showing her continued importance in Egypt⁸¹. Cleopatra's power was also perceived as that of a savior figure, based on Sybilline oracles that talked about a woman coming to save the East from Rome and bring about a new era of peace⁸². Perhaps an echo of these oracles can be seen in Plutarch's report that, when Cleopatra came to

⁷⁴ Ashton, 142.

⁷⁵ Roller, 72.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ashton, 112+138-140; Prudence Jones, “*Mater Patriae*: Cleopatra and Roman Ideas of Motherhood”, in *Mothering and Motherhood in Ancient Greece and Rome*, eds. Lauren Hackworth Petersen and Patricia Salzman-Mitchell (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 166+169; Roller, 70.

⁷⁸ Jones, 169-170; Roller, 113+117.

⁷⁹ Plutarch, *Antony*, 54.6 (“στολήν ἱερὰν Ἴσιδος ἐλάμβανε καὶ νέα Ἴσις ἐχρημάτιζε”).

⁸⁰ Ashton, 138.

⁸¹ Ibid., 131-132.

⁸² Maria Wyke, *The Roman Mistress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 204-205; Hughes-Hallett, 92-93.

Antony in Cilicia, “some story was spreading that Aphrodite was coming to revel beside Dionysus for the good of Asia”⁸³. Lastly, on a more basic level Cleopatra can be seen as having the ability to exercise agency by virtue of living in Egypt: Egyptian women generally had more agency than their Roman counterparts, as they could buy and sell property, borrow and lend money, and submit petitions to the government⁸⁴. Additionally, there were precedents going back over a millennium for female pharaohs, most importantly Hatshepsut, who ruled the 18th Dynasty as king in her own right from about 1473 to 1458 BCE⁸⁵. More immediately, Cleopatra could look to some of her own ancestors for examples of Ptolemaic queens who expanded the power associated with their role, and even to her own sister Berenice IV, who seized the throne while Ptolemy XII was in Rome and was ultimately executed upon her father’s return⁸⁶.

While it has been established that Cleopatra consistently responded effectively to what was happening around her, she also made use of her agency in a very active manner and took initiative on multiple occasions. As with Berenice, Cleopatra made a trip – or trips – to Rome. According to Suetonius, Cleopatra was “summoned to the city” by Caesar and sent back after “having been enriched with great honors and rewards”⁸⁷. However, Dio, here too, seems to ascribe initiative to the queen: he says that Cleopatra came to Rome with her brother Ptolemy XIV and that Caesar wrote them among the friends and allies of Rome⁸⁸. According to Gruen and Roller, this makes perfect sense. Cleopatra came to Rome in 46 BCE for political purposes, since it was not unusual to establish “formal bonds between Rome and foreign principalities” and for foreign

⁸³ Plutarch, *Antony*, 26.3 (“αἱ τις λόγος ἐχώρει διὰ πάντων ὡς ἡ Ἀφροδίτη κωμάζοι παρὰ τὸν Διόνυσον ἐπ’ ἀγαθῶ τῇς Ἀσίας”).

⁸⁴ Hughes-Hallett, 50.

⁸⁵ Joyce Tyldesley, “Hatshepsut”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

⁸⁶ Roller, 22-25; Macurdy, *Hellenistic Queens*, 102-184.

⁸⁷ Suetonius, *Deified Julius*, 52.1 (“quam denique accitam in urbem non nisi maximis honoribus praemiisque auctam remisit”).

⁸⁸ Dio, 43.27.3.

rulers to come to Rome in order to affirm these “official diplomatic relationships”⁸⁹; in fact, “a trip to Rome by the reigning Ptolemy or any eastern monarch was perfectly expected and had been normal for generations”⁹⁰. So, then, Cleopatra came to Rome in order to gain formal recognition of her new reign – following the example of previous Ptolemies, including her father – and then went back home to exercise this rule⁹¹. However, Cicero’s letters show that Cleopatra was in Rome at the time of Caesar’s assassination in 44 BCE. This does not seem to imply that the queen stayed in Rome continuously from 46 to 44 – an unlikely proposition, since leaving a recently unstable kingdom unattended for so long could easily lead to a disaster, which did not occur. Rather, it seems that she initiated a second trip to Rome around this time to ensure her continued control of Egypt, since Caesar was recently returned to the city and likely to deal with the organization of the provinces⁹². Cleopatra also can be seen taking initiative later at the battle of Actium. Plutarch recounts that “Cleopatra prevailed to decide the war through the ships, already providing for flight, and putting those answering to her not where they would be useful for winning, but from where they could go away most easily, matters being lost”⁹³. Although Plutarch depicts Cleopatra as fleeing from Actium, he does ascribe agency to her in making decisions about her position and involvement in the battle, even if he personally considers these to have been cowardly or traitorous – though she probably was driven more by strategic reasons, realizing that she could not defend Egypt (her priority) well from her current location⁹⁴. This agency of hers is hinted at even more strongly in Strabo’s account of the battle. Although Strabo, like Plutarch, views her actions in a

⁸⁹ Gruen, 267.

⁹⁰ Roller, 71.

⁹¹ Gruen, 268.

⁹² Ibid., 270-273; Roller, 74.

⁹³ Plutarch, *Antony*, 63.5 (“Οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ ἐξενίκησε Κλεοπάτρα διὰ τῶν νεῶν κριθῆναι τὸν πόλεμον, ἤδη πρὸς φυγὴν ὁρῶσα, καὶ τιθεμένη τὰ καθ’ ἑαυτὴν, οὐχ ὅπου πρὸς τὸ νικᾶν ἔσται χρήσιμος, ἀλλ’ ὅθεν ἄπεισι ῥᾶστα τῶν πραγμάτων ἀπολλυμένων”).

⁹⁴ Roller, 140.

negative light, he ascribes initiative for these actions primarily to Cleopatra. In his brief discussion of the queen he mentions that Antony “undertook the battle of Actium with her and fled with her”⁹⁵: in Greek this reads “τόν τε Ἀκτιακὸν πόλεμον συνήρατο ἐκείνη καὶ συνέφυγε”. Although Antony is the subject of this sentence, the use of verbs with the prefix συν- (“with”) and the dative ἐκείνη (from ἐκείνη, “that woman”) - he did these things *together with her* – indicates that Cleopatra was the primary instigator of action, with Antony going along with her decisions.

All of the preceding instances provide clear, though by no means exhaustive, examples of Cleopatra’s perception as being powerful and able to exercise agency. That being said, there are still certain views and points that can be seen as detracting from this power of hers. The most pervasive of these is the view presented in many modern iterations of the queen that she was really “only an appendage to her two Roman lovers” and an erotic object of sexual desire⁹⁶. Although there is no way that the ancient authors discussed here could have truly known what Cleopatra looked or sounded like, it is often exactly such descriptions of her beauty and voice that continue to shape perceptions of the queen. Additionally, the view of Cleopatra solely in relation to the Romans of her day does make sense in light of the focus of the sources: as has already been mentioned, these were written primarily by Roman men about Roman men for Roman men, so they tend to skip over portions of Cleopatra’s life that happened before or in between her relationships. However, once this bias is recognized it is clear that Cleopatra’s importance extended beyond the Roman sphere. To ignore the fact that she ruled an entire kingdom on her own is simply not good scholarship, especially considering the fact that she was in effect the “only

⁹⁵ Strabo, 17.1.11.

⁹⁶ Wyke, 197-199.

woman in classical antiquity to rule independently” – though she was nominally co-ruler with her two younger brothers and her son – and “not merely as a successor to a dead husband”⁹⁷.

In recognition of this fact, Cleopatra is occasionally referred to as queen in the sources discussed above: in Greek she is called βασιλίδα by Dio (49.41.1, 50.25.1, 51.12.2), βασίλισσα by Strabo (14.6.6, 17.1.11) and Plutarch (*Antony*, 54.4), βασιλευούσης (“ruling woman”) by Josephus (*Jewish War*, 7.300), and in Latin *regina* by Suetonius (*Deified Augustus*, 17.5). As with Berenice, this is a reflection of Cleopatra’s inherent power and ability to exercise agency based on her role as queen. However, in Cleopatra’s case “queen” serves almost exclusively as a job description, rather than as a title – she is clearly the queen of Egypt, and this fact is recognized by all of the ancient authors, but she is almost never called Queen Cleopatra. Rather, she is more often referred to in less respectful, and sometimes outright derogatory, ways. Throughout the sources, Cleopatra is called just by her name, without any title attached. At other points, though, she is referred to as “the woman” (forms of ἡ γυνή)⁹⁸, “the Egyptian woman” (forms of τὴν Αἰγυπτίαν)⁹⁹, and even, in Dio (50.26.5), “that abominable woman” (ἐκείνης τῆς καταράτου). While no one denies that she, in fact, was queen, the ancient authors’ dislike of Cleopatra – especially Dio’s – is palpable in these other ways in which they refer to her. It does make sense that these sources are biased against Cleopatra to varying extents: after all, they are written from a Roman perspective where Cleopatra was accepted as having been a threat to both Rome itself and its values of *virtus*¹⁰⁰.

Such a negative view of Cleopatra was largely influenced by Octavian’s propaganda against her and framing of his civil war with Antony as an external war with Egypt. While this might detract from Cleopatra’s likeability, at least from a Roman perspective, by removing Antony

⁹⁷ Roller, 2.

⁹⁸ Such as in Plutarch, *Antony*, 62.1+74.3; Dio 50.26.5.

⁹⁹ Plutarch, *Antony*, 25.2; Strabo 13.1.30; Dio 48.24.2, 50.3.5, 50.6.1, 50.26.2.

¹⁰⁰ Literally, “manliness” – and obviously a woman, and a queen at that, would be antithetical to this.

from the picture and depicting him as subservient to the queen, it almost over-represents her power and endows her with large amounts of agency. Additionally, while Rome was fighting ostensibly against Cleopatra, her power was such that it had an effect even within Rome and forced the Romans to respond to it not just in battle but also at home. It was at this time that language was developed in Rome to represent important women, particularly Octavian's wife Livia and his sister Octavia, but only as virtuous women and wives, in direct contrast to the created perception of Cleopatra¹⁰¹. While Octavian attempted to paint Cleopatra as unsympathetically as possible, he presented his own family as an example for model behavior by drawing on Cleopatra for inspiration: Livia "began to appear on coins, reliefs, and statues"¹⁰², and she was later "appealed to in poetry as the *Romana princeps*, a guide to the appropriate public virtues for women"¹⁰³. Both Octavia and Livia were also granted "the right to administer their affairs without a guardian" – perhaps a response to the greater freedom of women in Egypt – and the erection of their statues – an unusual honor for women, with only Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi brothers, having received this before – seems to have been a response to the statue of Cleopatra in the temple of Venus Genetrix¹⁰⁴. Lastly, Cleopatra's defeat seems to have initiated a period of popularity for Egyptian elements in Rome, similar to the "Egyptomania" of the early twentieth century that was instigated by the discovery of Tut's tomb. Octavian brought a 6th century BCE obelisk to Rome to serve as the gnomon of the sundial near his mausoleum, and Egyptian stylistic and architectural designs became popular throughout Roman society. Additionally, Dio says that "Cleopatra,

¹⁰¹ Wyke, 218-219.

¹⁰² Jones, 178-180.

¹⁰³ Wyke, 219.

¹⁰⁴ Roller, 95; It is useful to note here that such a statue did not necessarily exist. Although it is usually taken as a fact, it would have been beyond even Caesar's pushing of boundaries to erect a statue of a foreign queen in a Roman temple, and Gruen points out that it is unlikely that a statue of Cleopatra in the temple of Venus Genetrix would have survived her defeat. He instead proposes that this was an item taken from Egypt among the spoils and erected as a victory monument, but was later attributed to Caesar (259).

although defeated and conquered, was extolled, seeing that her ornaments are dedicated in our shrines and she is seen in gold at the temple of Aphrodite”¹⁰⁵. As has been shown in a multitude of examples, Cleopatra was very powerful, and her frequent employment of agency to influence her personal and political affairs – from her purported use of magic to her savvy political maneuvers after Caesar’s death and her expedient trips to Rome – went beyond what was required of her as the queen of Egypt. Thus, although this could not ultimately save her, it ensured that she continued to live on in scholarship and popular imagination long after her death.

Discussion

A cursory glance at the major biographical details of Berenice and Cleopatra’s lives shows some obvious similarities between them: both were queens in the East, both were the last females descended from powerful dynasties, both had affairs with influential Romans, both came to Rome, both were in some way involved in a war being fought by Romans. However, there is a clear difference in the scale of their importance on the global stage. Cleopatra was effectively the sole ruler of a large kingdom that had existed for almost three hundred years. She also was a major player in the Roman world in the first century BCE and affected the course of Roman history by actively fighting, and eventually losing, in a Roman civil war: had she and Antony won at Actium, the Roman empire would have looked quite different. Berenice, in contrast, did not rule a kingdom on her own, and any kingdoms she might have been involved in ruling – whether those of her husbands or brother – were small and on the periphery of Judaea. Also, while she was involved in

¹⁰⁵ Dio, 51.22.3 (“ἡ Κλεοπάτρα καίπερ καὶ ἡττηθεῖσα καὶ ἀλοῦσα ἐδοξάσθη, ὅτι τὰ τε κοσμήματα αὐτῆς ἐν τοῖς ἱεροῖς ἡμῶν ἀνάκειται καὶ αὐτὴ ἐν τῷ Ἀφροδισίῳ χρυσῇ ὀρᾷται”).

the Jewish revolt, she did not fight against the Romans: instead, her brother provided troops to the Roman side¹⁰⁶ and Berenice herself supported Vespasian's cause¹⁰⁷, which she would not have done if he was considered her enemy. Even though Josephus mentions instances where Berenice tried intervening between the Jews and Romans when tensions were running high, once war broke out she seems to be more firmly on the latter's side, although there is no record of her active involvement in the war. From this perspective there is merit to Mommsen's description of Berenice as a "mini Cleopatra", as it provides a reference point for understanding Berenice in terms of Cleopatra – they were similar, but of different magnitudes.

However, Mommsen's statement was clearly not meant to be a scholarly evaluation of the queens, and therefore cannot be taken as such. The more thorough analysis of the queens presented above shows that there are nuanced differences between them, not just in the details of their lives but in the texts that survive about them. Cleopatra is one of the most well-attested women in ancient history, mentioned not just by the authors already discussed but also by others, such as Horace and Lucan in their poetry. Nevertheless, despite the fact that many of these texts describe the queen at length, much of what they say cannot be taken at face value. Of all the writers used as sources here, only Strabo was contemporaneous with Cleopatra. The rest were scattered over the next three centuries, drawing on older accounts of the queen in order to construct their own versions – even Strabo had to rely on the information of others, as he did not personally know the queen. Therefore, when Plutarch discusses how many languages she knew or Dio says that she was incredibly beautiful, all that can be determined for certain is how people thought about Cleopatra. This is even true in her own depictions of herself in Egypt, since the stylized portrayal of Cleopatra with Egyptian iconography does not necessarily reflect how she appeared in real life.

¹⁰⁶ Josephus, *Jewish War*, 3.29+68.

¹⁰⁷ Tacitus, 2.81.

While Cleopatra's actual appearance is not what is at stake here, the inability to truly know any specific details about her affects the ways in which the ancient sources must be interacted with and interpreted. Additionally, none of the ancient sources are interested in Cleopatra outside of her interaction with Rome. A number of these sources are biographies of famous Romans (Suetonius' *Deified Julius* and *Deified Augustus* and Plutarch's *Life of Caesar* and *Antony*), where Cleopatra appears as but one person involved in the title character's life, and even those that are more historical are primarily interested in what was happening in and related to Rome. Thus there is very little indication of how she ruled her kingdom and occupied her time when Caesar and Antony were away, other than a few documents (papyri and stelae) and dedications¹⁰⁸. This in no way implies that Cleopatra was irrelevant outside of the Roman sphere, though: rather, it means that it is difficult to form a continuous picture of her life, as opposed to very thorough reconstructions of certain periods. Based on the usually second-hand and unverifiable nature of the texts and their focus on limited time periods within Cleopatra's life, I have not attempted to create a detailed reconstruction of her entire life. Rather, I have used the limitations of these sources as guides for my research and, together with what biographical facts have been determined about her, analyzed the Cleopatra that has been presented and passed down – regardless of whether she is the “real” Cleopatra. This textual Cleopatra is clearly very powerful, though at some points this power is exaggerated and at others downplayed. Both negative and positive traditions about her power and the instances in which she employed agency persisted past her defeat by Octavian: ultimately these were assimilated into accounts that, though biased against her (albeit to different extents), continue to preserve the varying and at times opposing views of the queen.

¹⁰⁸ Ashton, 51+73-77.

Although there is much less ancient material about Berenice than about Cleopatra, it is actually possible to gain a more varied picture of Berenice from the texts alone. Because Josephus provides a rare glimpse of native perspective on events in Roman history, details exist about Berenice and her actions outside of her relationship with Titus. Josephus tells us about her marriages, her involvement in Jewish-Roman tensions before the war, and even her petty disagreements with her younger sister. Interestingly, what Josephus does not mention at all is Berenice's affair with Titus, even though this relationship is the primary reason why Roman sources are interested in Berenice and Josephus must have known about it. It does not seem to be the case either that Josephus was hesitant to say anything derogatory about the queen, since he records the rumor that she and Agrippa had an incestuous relationship – a story that other sources ignore, although they too must have heard the same rumor, since Juvenal mentions it in his *Satires* (6.158). Perhaps Josephus felt comfortable relaying petty rumors about Berenice, but to go into the relationship between a Jewish queen and the Roman destroyer of the Second Temple was simply too politically charged for both sides. An important question that arises here is why the sources do not make use of these negative traditions to explain why the Roman populace disliked Berenice to such an extent that Titus dismissed her from Rome. In fact, the ancient authors do not give any reason for this, although it would have been easy enough to say that it was because she was a queen, or Hellenistic, or both. Mommsen's statement about Berenice would actually have provided an excellent rationale for the Roman's dislike of her. Describing Berenice as another Cleopatra would have been an obvious comparison to make, since by the time any of the sources were writing Cleopatra was entrenched as the epitome of what the Romans disliked – a powerful woman, a queen, from the hedonistic East. The fact that this comparison is not made implies that the two were not perceived as being essentially the same, and that perhaps the dislike of Berenice

stemmed from a completely different source. It is possible, for example, that people doubted her ability to bear Titus an heir, considering that she was more than a decade older than him. Either way, the sources' silence regarding the causes for Roman sentiments about Berenice indicates that they might not have known of any. While the fact that Berenice survives in texts at all shows that she continued to be famous in some capacity for at least a century or two, the lack of much in-depth information about her implies that she was not a major celebrity. Ancient sources do not hesitate to embellish stories and relay dubious information, but they generally do not make things up outright. Therefore, although later Romans still knew Berenice's name and discussed her affair with Titus and eventual dismissal from Rome, it is possible that more detailed information simply did not exist. Due to the superficial nature of most of this existing material about Berenice, I have focused on developing a fuller understanding of her person by closely examining what the sources do say, extrapolating clear indications and instances of her power and agency from the scarce evidence that remains for them.

Conclusion

Although Cleopatra and Berenice's lives are interesting on their own, and especially in comparison and conjunction with each other, the purpose of this paper goes beyond the individual queens. There is much to be gained by the separate analysis of each: for Berenice, a more comprehensive understanding of her character than has generally been presented, and for Cleopatra, a more digestible presentation and evaluation of some of the most significant sources about her. The joint discussion of the two also provides perspective on Theodor Mommsen's

description of Berenice as a “mini Cleopatra” and, more importantly, the similarities and differences between their lives and the sources that discuss them. More than the superficial points for comparison between Berenice and Cleopatra’s lives, it is the difference in scale of their importance both during their own lives and afterwards that stands out most. Cleopatra’s looming presence (both literal and figurative) in Rome during the chaotic time of civil war is reflected in the extent of sources about her, as well as in what they say. While Octavian’s negative portrayal of the queen influenced her depiction in ancient texts, his emphasis on her as a main figure in the war ensured that she continued to be discussed until, ironically, she became one of the most enduringly popular ancient characters. Berenice, though, seems to have never had such a commanding presence and grip on the Roman imagination. She was a significant part of Titus’ life and famous during her own day, but this was not enough to support a continued fascination with her. Knowledge about her and interest in preserving her story eventually receded, leaving her name to survive in texts while all but disappearing from popular lore.

Accordingly, the greater importance of such a project lies in its directed study of women in the ancient world. While there is plenty of scholarship available about Cleopatra, this consists mostly of either book-length projects or articles that focus on a specific instance or aspect of her life. What I aim at instead is creating a short yet thorough analysis that demonstrates the queen’s presentation in sources without going through every detail in every source. As for Berenice, though, only a dozen or so articles have ever been written about her, and I try to remedy this by providing a comprehensive analysis of what ancient and modern scholarship reveals about her.

Although ancient sources do not deny the existence of women, there are very few individual women about whom any details – even their names – are recorded. Therefore, when two such queens as Berenice and Cleopatra come along who are preserved in multiple texts, it is

important to make use of these sources and take the opportunity to learn as much as possible about both the women themselves and the ways in which the ancient authors related to them. This is especially the case for these two queens, but for opposite reasons. Berenice has all but disappeared from modern society's memory. Her story faded into the background at some point over the past two thousand years, but the existence of sources allows her to be (at least partially) resurrected. Cleopatra, in contrast, has maintained her hold on the public imagination. This makes her name well-known and identifiable, yet the image of her that is presented is often exaggerated and sometimes faulty, preserving the worst biases found in the ancient sources. Thus, a reevaluation of her character provides the opportunity for her to be viewed not as a caricature, but as a complex and nuanced figure who did more than lounge on a gilded barge waiting for her lovers. Ultimately, the focused study of these two queens, by untangling the perception and extent of their power and agency from the complicated biases and limited accounts that characterize ancient texts, helps to shift the discussion of individual women from the marginalization and misinterpretation that has often translated from ancient to modern scholarship towards greater and more complete understanding.

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