

Unmanning Rome: Cleopatra and Cross-Dressing the Body Politic in Lucan's *Civil War*

When Lucan first introduces Cleopatra in *De bello civili* (*BC*), he presents her as a consummate and conniving woman, intent upon conquering Rome and asserting Egypt's dominance. Lucan's Cleopatra has been equated to both Dido (Vinken and Lowrie 2022) and Helen (Feldherr 2021), but, while these women are undoubtedly precedents to Lucan's Egyptian queen, this paper argues that Lucan stylizes Cleopatra most closely upon Homer's Hera in book 14 of the *Iliad*, who also poses a momentary threat to patriarchal rule (Romano 2025). Both Hera and Cleopatra rely on speech sprinkled with references to erotic desire to seduce Zeus and Caesar, respectively. Hera speaks of "the marriage-bed and love" (*εὐνής καὶ φιλόμητρος*) as she beguiles Zeus, and Cleopatra offhandedly mentions her marriage to her brother (*et thalamos cum fratre dedit*) in her seductive speech to Caesar. The Homeric Hera is adroit at carefully arranging her appearance so as to arouse Zeus, and, following her example, so too does Cleopatra artfully arrange her hair, knowing that Caesar will be impacted by the combined efforts of her words and her appearance (*formae confisa suae*). Both the queen of the gods and the queen of Egypt, then, rely upon conjugal imagery and chaste-yet-amorous appearances to obliquely rouse the desires of their respective lovers while never tipping them off that their goal is to seduce them.

Drawing primarily upon linguistic parallels in the Greek and the Latin, this paper both outlines the similarities between the depiction of Hera in the *Iliad* and the depiction of Cleopatra in the *BC*, as well as analyzing how Lucan's Cleopatra unmans Rome and "cross-dresses" the body politic. I perform this work by relying upon both textual analysis as well as gender theory (Millett 2000, Keith 2000, Coole 2013, Butler 2015), which informs my reading of the sexual politics at play in book 10 of the *BC*. By controlling Caesar's body, which is the metaphorical

body politic of Rome, Cleopatra performs a cross-dressing of the body politic, changing that which is masculine into feminine political power, a power that is predicated upon sexuality. The parallels between Homer's depiction of Hera's seduction of Zeus and Lucan's depiction of Cleopatra's seduction of Caesar underscore the instability of male rule, in both the mortal and divine realms. If even the king of the gods is threatened by the seductive forces of female sexuality, then it is little wonder that Caesar is so completely undone by the allure of Cleopatra.

To Lucan and his audience, Cleopatra is fundamentally a destabilizing figure, a threat to Caesar and thus the very fabric of Rome. She corrupts Caesar with her wily words and seductive appearance, making him forget that he is supposed to be a triumphant Roman general, immune to such depravity. Cleopatra confuses sexual hierarchies, making Caesar a slave to his desires and thus unmanning him. Lucan's Cleopatra, through her seduction of Caesar, is singlehandedly responsible for the unmanning of Rome and the defilement of Roman values which were responsible for the success and safety of the republic. Much like Hera, I argue, Cleopatra is a master at exerting power through sexuality, using her body to achieve her wishes.

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