

## Cleopatra as Catharsis: Tragic Motifs in Plutarch's Death of Cleopatra

The death scene of Cleopatra as told by Plutarch has an undeniable air of drama and catastrophe. In all the lives written by Plutarch, his work on Antony stands out because, while the main body of the work is dedicated to the Roman general, Plutarch spends a large amount of time deviating from his main character to focus on the Egyptian queen. Plutarch tells us about her physical characteristics, her attitudes and mentalities, her relationship with Antony, and their deaths by suicide. Plutarch is so descriptive of Cleopatra, that his work has become one of the main sources used by historians to learn about the queen. The last part of the work, which details their deaths by suicide, is regularly referenced by historians to learn about both Cleopatra as a queen and Roman ideas about conquest and death. While Plutarch's description is an invaluable resource to historians, it should be read with the understanding that it was written with a didactic purpose and contains clear influences from Greek tragedy.

This presentation will argue that several of the main tenets of tragic style can be seen in the way Plutarch framed and wrote the death scenes of Antony and Cleopatra in the *Life of Antony*. In order to prove this argument, three areas will be explored. First, a brief overview of the tenets of classical Greek tragedy will be provided. Specifically, four main aspects, the use of *Hamartia*, the *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*, pity and catharsis, and desperation speech, will be defined as key features of Greek tragedy. The second portion will focus specifically on the work of Plutarch and analyze the use of tragic themes and motifs in his depiction of the death of Antony and Cleopatra. Finally, a concluding argument will be made that Plutarch used these Greek tragic motifs with the purpose of inspiring pity for Cleopatra and the moral aim of producing a type of Roman conquest catharsis.

Plutarch was a Greek living under Roman rule during the period of 45-120 CE, who received an education in philosophy and rhetoric at the Academy in Athens. His writings, which were undeniably influenced by his Hellenic education, were aimed at not only his fellow elite Greeks, but, more importantly, they were aimed at Roman politicians. The *Parallel Lives* were comparisons of famous Greek and Roman statesmen and military figures with the intent of providing models of behavior for Roman statesmen.

The argument that Plutarch was writing didactically with a Roman political audience in mind then raises the question: why would Plutarch have spent so much time on Cleopatra in his *Life of Antony*? The purpose was not only to provide models of behavior, but a second, and more covert, purpose was to use the tragic motifs, with which educated Greeks and Romans would have been familiar, to build pity for a conquered Greek. Plutarch clearly builds up the emotion and pity before finally writing the death scenes of both Antony and Cleopatra. The moment of catharsis when these two figures are finally released from their suffering is tangible.

Much like the use of pity in classical tragedy, then, the culmination of emotion with the death of Cleopatra would produce a feeling of catharsis for a conquered Greek, but it was perhaps also intended to produce catharsis for the overall Roman conquest and takeover of Greece with Cleopatra representing the last bastion of Greek identity. While Greeks were considered socially inferior to Roman citizens, Greek culture, especially literature and philosophy, was highly valued as an essential part of Roman education. The Romans would have, by no means, regretted the act of conquest itself, as they were proud of the empire they had built and the imperial culture they brought to their conquered territories. But, since they valued Greek culture, educated Romans could regret the damage and subjugation that was caused in the conquest of Greece and the remaining Hellenistic kingdoms, such as Egypt.

The intentionality and audience of Plutarch's work leads to one concluding thought: Any scholar on Roman history and literature should view it through the Greek lens with which the Romans themselves were educated. Doing so may allow us to view comparisons and associations, that while perfectly visible to a Roman living at the time, have since been lost to our modern interpretation. Roman literary style was not developed in a vacuum, although it is often studied as if it were. Any study of Roman literary tradition should have a basis in the Greek tradition from which it grew. This analysis of Greek influences on a Roman era piece of literature can hopefully provide an example of the ways in which these sources can be interpreted.