

MÁRIA VARGA

**Review of Francine PROSE: *Cleopatra: Her History, Her Myth*, E-book ed.,
New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2022, 224 pp.**

Francine Prose's *Cleopatra: Her History, Her Myth* scrutinizes the critical reception of Cleopatra VII throughout history and is unapologetic in its quest to identify, contextualize and disprove the misogynistic, sexist, and politically driven myths and opinions surrounding the infamous Egyptian Queen. Accordingly, when faced with Cleopatra's afterlife, Prose takes a critical approach to Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra, analyzing his text from a perspective that might appear somewhat predictable and, occasionally, even contradictory. Despite these contradictions, Prose's work greatly contributes to the discussion of Cleopatra VII, providing the reader with a clear, in-depth outline of the Egyptian queen's life, with insightful comments and observations on the various interpretations of Cleopatra on film and in literature, and with a feminist narrative which has been greatly lacking in the discourse surrounding Cleopatra.

The introduction of *Cleopatra: Her History, Her Myth* is arguably the most compact and informative chapter of the whole work. Prose lays out the critical reception of the historical figure of Cleopatra in minute detail, starting with how the Romans of her time led what was essentially a smear campaign against her, while later historians, including Plutarch himself, were what is referred to in the text as "apologists for Roman imperial expansion" (7). Despite her warding off the Roman Empire for as long as she did, Cleopatra became well-known for her allegedly seductive nature, supposed beauty, and her love affairs with Caesar and Antony. Prose is quick to point out that such politically driven depictions of her were also infused with sexism and racism; otherwise, Cleopatra's supposedly sexual nature and her contradictory, passionate personality would not have been such central aspects of said depictions. Her political achievements as a queen were written off as the results of witchcraft, seduction and manipulation—the last two often said to go hand in hand. Prose does well in quoting examples and providing them with social and political context in order to explain their—often hateful—nature. The chapter competently lays out the intention of the book and the approach it wishes to take, and although it has the unintentional effect of making some of the other chapters feel somewhat underwhelming when compared to it, it certainly succeeds in drawing the reader in.

Prose has divided the rest of her work into two parts: "The Life of Cleopatra" and "The Afterlife of Cleopatra." "The Life of Cleopatra" begins with an account of the historical background of the dynasty to which Cleopatra belonged, which, while certainly necessary, is at some points somewhat of a dry read. While it is discouragingly easy to get lost in the staggering number of Egyptian leaders by the

name of Ptolemy, Prose does make sure to mention whenever an event or concept appears that has some connection to Cleopatra, reminding the reader whom the book is actually about.

Chapter Two describes the power struggles between Cleopatra and her brother, Ptolemy XIII, which began shortly after their father's death. The chapter mentions names and concepts—such as Auletes, sibling-spouses and the Gabiniani—which makes one glad to have read through the previous chapter and solidifies the necessity of it. Prose gives the reader a detailed account of all of Cleopatra's struggles and achievements, painting a realistic picture of a young queen who not only was up to the task of leadership, but often exceeded expectations. The chapter also describes the tensions between Egypt and Rome at the time, and how the internal struggles of both states influenced their relationship.

Despite having described in the introduction how Cleopatra has often been reduced to her love affairs with Antony and Caesar, Prose, ironically, dedicates a chapter each to both relationships, going as far as to title them “Caesar and Cleopatra” and “Antony and Cleopatra.” However, a reader expecting a simple account of each relationship should be pleasantly surprised; both chapters' focus is mainly on the myths, paintings and writings surrounding the couples, as well as the relevant historical context and political climate. The chapter about Caesar and Cleopatra makes sure to point out how sexism and racism influenced the myths and the various depictions of the couple, while also reminding the reader of the Romans' attitude towards Cleopatra and Egypt, as well as expanding on how this affected both her and Caesar's reputation and life. Prose does an admirable job of depicting Cleopatra not as the lover of Caesar, but as a ruler in her own right. Antony and Cleopatra's chapter greatly draws upon Plutarch's text and heavily focuses on the anecdotes he wrote, understandably—due to the sparsity of ancient sources—lacking in variety when compared to the previous chapter. Still, the explanations and suppositions given for each anecdote makes it an intriguing read.

The following chapters, “The Final Act Begins” and “The Snake,” essentially continue Antony and Cleopatra's story, focusing mainly on the demise of the couple, both as leaders and lovers. “The Final Act Begins” provides the reader with insightful details on the actions Cleopatra took during the conflict with Rome, including speculations on why she fled with her ships during the Battle of Actium, while the concluding chapter of Part I—“The Snake”—lays out the existing discourse around Cleopatra's suicide, as well as later depictions and artistic interpretations of her death. Altogether, other than a few trivial imperfections, Part I, “The Life of Cleopatra,” gives an in-depth retelling of the Egyptian queen's life, the chapters imbued with a rich variety of artistic and historical interpretations and a competent analysis of the political and social climate of Cleopatra's era.

Part II starts with what has all the markings of an interlude, a pause after the excitements of the first half of the book. The seventh chapter, titled “The Pearl,” essentially focuses on speculations relating to the anecdote of Cleopatra crushing

a pearl—an aphrodisiac—into Antony’s drink and the way artists have incorporated said anecdote into their works, which makes for an appealing read. Though this is a rather short chapter—enforcing the idea of it being something of an interlude—Prose makes sure it explains that the anecdote “portray[s] Cleopatra ... as the personification of Eastern licentiousness and dissolution” (143). While it is a pity that Prose did not expand on the topic of orientalist interpretations of Cleopatra beyond the anecdote, the chapter itself still fulfills its purpose.

Chapter Eight, which focuses on Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, curiously differs from the other chapters in that the author’s voice seems more present. In essence, Prose criticizes Shakespeare for showing Cleopatra as a lover instead of a ruler; she also remarks that Shakespeare failed in making Cleopatra more sympathetic than Octavia, or indeed sympathetic in general. Certainly, given that the play itself is something of a more mature version of *Romeo and Juliet*, and that Shakespeare himself sets a tone of domestic dispute with the backdrop of a war in the very first scene, the fact that he portrayed Cleopatra as a lover is indisputable, but also understandable. It is similarly understandable why Antony is the one being put into a military setting, considering that portraying him as both a lover and a soldier was imperative for the sake of showing the audience the character’s inner conflict, as well as Rome’s role in the couple’s demise. Despite her role as a lover, Cleopatra herself does portray some qualities of a leader throughout the play, including the time after Antony’s death when she attempts to trick Octavius (referred to by Prose as Octavian but in the play as Octavius), and even her consequent death, which was only partly due to Antony—otherwise one can assume that Shakespeare would have left out Octavius’s and Cleopatra’s politically charged conversation. Prose’s statement about Octavia being more sympathetic than Cleopatra, although lacking quotes or sources—with the exception of a comment about Dryden fearing that the same phenomena would appear in his play—is a well-known sentiment amongst Shakespeare critics. Yet in the context of the book, the idea of Octavia, who barely has any appearances and who embodies all those Roman qualities of a woman that Prose herself has shown distaste towards, being more sympathetic than Cleopatra, whose strong personality, extensive variety of flaws and clear passion for Antony makes her both alive and more resembling a 21st century woman, seems both baffling and contradictory. Finally, the chapter ends with a quote from Dryden’s *All for Love*, a play based on Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, which Prose greatly praises. While arguably an odd way to end such a thematically important chapter, it does cement Prose’s opinion on Shakespeare’s Cleopatra. Ultimately, in light of the book’s stance on sexualized representations of Cleopatra, the analysis of Shakespeare’s play echoes Prose’s main argument, though it does open itself to criticism.

The closing chapter of Prose’s work, “Cleopatra on Film,” delves into cinematic interpretations of Cleopatra, all of which depict what Prose calls a “crowd-pleasing, orientalist fantasy” (168). Although the paragraphs about the production of movies

such as the *Cleopatra* starring Elizabeth Taylor seem irrelevant at times to the purpose of the book, the chapter itself is still clear in its intention to show how each movie mentioned portrays Cleopatra, and the flaws of such portrayals. Prose ends the chapter and thus the book by wondering how Cleopatra herself might have felt about the various interpretations of her person, which, while whimsical and slightly out-of-tune with the rest of the work, is a contemplative question to end on.

Ultimately, regardless of whether the reader agrees with her analysis on Shakespeare's Cleopatra or not, Francine Prose's text is undoubtedly an informative read to anyone wanting a clearer understanding of why Cleopatra VII has been so harshly criticized and sexualized throughout history.