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Christina H. Roseman
Seattle Pacific University

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THE C. MAY MARSTON LECTURE

1994

"On the Historical Assessment of Notable Women"

Christina Horst Roseman

C. May Marston Professor of Classics,
Seattle Pacific University

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On the Historical Assessment of Notable Women

Welcome to the second annual C. May Marston lecture. As you can see, this year I chose not to wear academic regalia. The robes, which were originally men's outerwear, give a unisex appearance, and this evening I speak for a woman's perspective. I hope my academic credibility will not be too badly impaired.

My early childhood was spent during World War II. I learned to read, beyond the Dick and Jane series, by poring over the newspaper accounts of troop maneuvers and by following the adventures of Terry Lee and the Pirates, Jack Armstrong, and Scorchy Smith in the Sunday comics. My paper doll favorites were WACs and WAVES and army nurses and women pilots. And yes, those of us who read the papers knew that women were serving in the Armed Forces, even if they were not regular military. These women did much more interesting things than cleaning house and changing diapers.

And then came peace. Rosie the Rivetter went home to deal with delayed stress syndrome in her returned men-folk (although we didn't call it that, and there was no support system), and employers made room for America's veterans in the labor force. As I look back on it, a kind of collective amnesia seems to have swept the whole country by 1950, and by the time I finished High School neither I nor my friends remembered that women could do other things besides secretarial and clerical work or the wife and mother bit. Oh yes. We could teach or be nurses. But that was almost a form of failure--"couldn't get a husband," or worse, "couldn't keep a husband, poor thing!"

The retrospection that overwhelms one upon achieving 50 years of life (that's half a century, friends) brought those submerged memories back into conscious thought, and I was struck by an enigma: WHY? Why didn't women of my generation just assume we could go where our older sisters had gone? I don't have satisfying answers yet. But asking the question (as is often the case with academics) led into some fascinating corners of my various disciplinary interests, and so tonight I wish to put before you, not research, but cogitations on various historical figures and the way historians present them.

Most scholarly historians have been men, and women who do succeed in becoming historians must acquire the appropriate mental patterns and writing styles. This is also true of classicists, who frown on speculation of any kind. Tonight I beg the indulgence of historians and classicists, because I am going to take advantage of the generous terms of the Marston endowment, and engage in speculation.

I want to examine several women as the historical record presents them, and then shift the focus and look again at them as women. I have come to believe that motives and goals and values are given different priorities by women, and I suggest that considering this may lead us to rethink how they appear.

As I'm sure you know, very few women have made it into the historical record. For centuries, politics and warfare were the staples of history, and these fields have been difficult for women

to enter. Let us begin with the famous Cleopatra, Cleopatra VII, whose accomplishments should be sufficient to assure her place in history.

Born in 69 BC as a princess of the Greek ruling family of Egypt, Cleopatra was the third daughter born to Pharaoh Ptolemy XII Aulete. She and her brother Ptolemy XIII jointly inherited the throne at the death of their father in 51 BC. When Julius Caesar arrived in Egypt three years later to consolidate his control of the eastern Mediterranean after his victory in the Civil War, he expected to extend Roman "protection" over this independent state by intervening in the political struggle between Cleopatra and her younger brother. She gained access to Caesar's quarters by strategy and deeply impressed him with her intellect and keen perception. In 44, she was a visiting head of state living in Rome when he was assassinated. She returned at once to Egypt, where she was absolute monarch just as her ancestors had been for more than 200 years.

After Caesar died, it was several years before Mark Antony and Caesar's nephew Octavian emerged as rivals for leadership of the Empire. Cleopatra was well aware that Rome was the only power that mattered in contemporary politics: twice she had seen Roman intervention in Egyptian affairs before she came to power, and she chose to ally herself with Mark Antony, who was a proven military leader with long experience of eastern politics. She provided the navy for the final battle, in which the Egyptian fleet took heavy losses to ensure the safe escape of the Queen.

Ultimately, Octavian was able to prevent her communication with Antony, and Antony's access to her treasure. With no possibility of raising more troops without gold and no way to contrive escape to her supporters in Upper Egypt, they both committed suicide, which relieved the victor of an embarrassing situation. Octavian did not wish to present the public image of having won the Roman Empire by defeating a woman and a fellow Roman.

Now, I can say, "Historians have had a field day" with Cleopatra, or I can say, "The media of the time had a field day." Both are true. Implicit in most discussions is the assumption that women don't belong in governance roles because they lack the necessary skills. Explicit is the assumption that her power and influence rested upon her woman's wiles and her sexual skills. The terse words of Cassius Dio are typical: "Cleopatra was a woman of insatiable sexuality and insatiable avarice." Also, "It was by means of the power of love that she acquired the sovereignty of the Egyptians, and when she aspired to obtain dominion over the Romans in the same fashion, she failed in the attempt and lost her kingdom besides."

Romans had much the same horrified revulsion toward the idea of a woman ruler that Catholics would have to the idea of a woman pope. Roman military figures did in reality sometimes fight against women who functioned as shrewd military leaders, but this was always glossed over in the written accounts by a focus on the highest-ranking male known to the writers. Thus Cleopatra is the foreign witch, power-crazed, dependent upon various advisors and (above all) a temptress who manipulated honest Romans. This is

satisfying enough that she can be dismissed as trivial.

But--she is a woman, and presumably had the usual hard-wiring that goes with the equipment, as well as the programming provided by her time and circumstances. Let us look again.

By accident of birth she belonged to the top rank of the Greek ruling class, which had profitably managed the ancient society of Egypt for 260 years. Daughter of Ptolemy Aulete, she was raised to rule as were her sisters: family infighting was common among her ancestors, and the success of the family meant training all offspring, to cover contingencies. In addition to the more usual languages (her native Greek, Latin, Aramaic, Syriac, Median, Parthian), she also spoke Ethiopian, Troglodyte, and Egyptian. She is the only Ptolemy in that 260 year period of whom the records state that she was fluent in Egyptian and had studied the hieroglyphic records of the proud natives her family controlled. Almost the first act of her accession was to attend an important Egyptian religious ceremony in Upper Egypt, although none of her predecessors had ever done such a thing. The natives are said to have offered to rise on her behalf against Octavian, and a cult in her name lasted well into Christian times.

I think that Cleopatra made a conscious decision to appeal to the native Egyptian population, and to enlist their support in her struggle to maintain a prominent role in Mediterranean politics. As she mastered the Egyptian language, she will have learned of other female Pharaohs in the far past: the magnificent mortuary temple of Hatshepsut with its proud descriptions of her achievements is still highly impressive today; it was surely a prominent landmark in Ptolemaic times.

Hatshepsut, almost 1500 years earlier, had controlled an Egypt powerful from the military conquests of her father, the Pharaoh Thutmose I. It was the dominant state in the south-eastern Mediterranean. She was thus at leisure to turn her attention to bettering the lives of her people with canal and reservoir projects, and the exploration of the African coasts. Cleopatra had no such luxury. Her Egypt existed in a different, transitional world in which Rome was the ascendent power. The only question was how much independence from Roman control Egypt would be able to maintain.

None of Cleopatra's siblings show any signs of statesmanship in the historical record. Her father probably recognized this, for it was Cleopatra who was closely associated with him in his final years. What if it wasn't a quest for power that motivated her, but a sense of pride in the achievement of her family, plus a desire to protect the integrity of Egypt in a dangerous time? Certainly she was convinced that without some accommodation with Rome, a way of life, a unique religious perspective, and the longest intellectual tradition in the world could be destroyed. What if she was convinced that no one else had the ability to protect and maintain Egypt? Did she consider herself, as the old Pharaohs certainly did, the embodiment of the country's well-being, and earthly link to nature without whom the Nile would cease to provide and the people would starve?

To put it bluntly, I question whether "power" is usually the primary motivating factor for women. I suspect that a focus on

pragmatic accomplishment as a motivator is more likely to explicate the behaviors documented for women in history. Power, in the sense that gender theorists are now using it, then becomes the necessary tool for accomplishing the end.

Cleopatra clearly tried to create a partnership for Egypt with Rome, an alliance of Roman military strength with Egyptian wealth and culture. Quite reasonably, from a woman's viewpoint, she would have cemented this with children: she bore Caesar a son, Ptolemy Caesar (Caesarion), and to Antony twins, a son and daughter, and then a second son. The political alliance she sought would have had visible form in these children with their dual heritage. But in spite of her intellectual gifts, she was unable to grasp how repugnantly alien such an idea would be to an ordinary Roman.

While she engaged Egyptian resources in warfare on Antony's behalf against Octavian when Rome refused to accept her vision, no military actions took place on Egyptian soil after she was securely on the throne, or created disruptions in the Egyptian economy. Parenthetically, I note that any similar pragmatic concern for populace or economy is notable lacking from other rulers of her generation.

Further, Cleopatra was sufficiently articulate regarding Egyptian interests for enough years, that when her state was added to the Roman Empire after her death, there was some tacit recognition of the unique qualities of Egypt. I think it not impossible that Cleopatra's scholarship and intellectual skills (which all our sources make clear) contributed to Roman recognition that this section of the hegemony was different. Caesar's house in Rome was a place for discussions and lavish entertainment while she was there, and the conversations must have been fascinating. If she actually wrote any of the works attributed to her, her intellectual interests were sweepingly broad. Many Roman nobles paid their respects, noting political nuances for future use; some went away with new understanding of the country from which she came.

Acceptance of responsibility for the household (nation in Cleopatra's case), protection of children, maintenance of traditional values, preservation of the honor associated with lineage--these are motivations for any woman that seem credible to me. Is it not possible that retention of power might be seen as a necessary means to achieving such goals, rather than the goal itself?

I have stressed that Cleopatra was highly educated. What about "the educated woman?" At many points in history this has been considered an oxymoron, but ancient sources do include references to literate and scholarly women. Third millennium Sumer and Akkad, where the culture of ancient Mesopotamia arose, provide my favorite: the princess Enheduanna, daughter of Sargon the Great of Akkad.

When her father created the first extensive empire in Mesopotamian history (approximately 2350 BC), he established her as chief priestess of the moon god, Nanna, at Ur. This was a highly visible public office, and one with much political power. Accomplishing whatever goals she and her father may have had was evidently difficult--possibly even dangerous, for Sargon was

wrestling chaotic conditions into a new kind of order. Enheduanna persevered. She commemorated her experience in the oldest surviving complete poem of which we know the author's name. It is a confessional praise poem--a hymn extolling the gracious power of the goddess Inanna, with whose assistance as the daughter of Nanna, Enheduanna was at length accepted by the temple establishment of Ur.

Now, a woman writing poetry may not be all that surprising (poetry is emotional, women are emotional), but that a poem created by a woman should be written down and preserved with her name is more so; few of the temple hymns of the period are so identified. The fact that this one exists underscores Enheduanna's importance and that for generations after the collapse of Sargon's empire this was still recognized.

The most famous ancient woman poet would be Sappho, of course. She was born in the Greek island city of Mytilene in 612 and lived well into the 6th century BC, when Greeks were industriously founding new city-states throughout the Mediterranean, experimenting with forms of government, and changing their social patterns, economic procedures, and methods of warfare.

The family to which she belonged was engaged in a factional struggle for control of the city with several other noble houses. Sappho mentions that she spent time in exile, as did so many other Greeks in this chaotic century. Everything in her personal experience seems to have gotten into her poetry, for she was perhaps the most successful creator of lyric, a new kind of poetry, deeply personal and vibrant. Sappho distilled images of daily living and emotional responses to people into complex new metrical patterns: a woman's view, a woman's interests, a woman's feelings transformed into lines that--astonishingly--cross gender lines to evoke a common human response.

Ironically, her reputation was so high in Classical Greece that only fragments of her poetry have survived. It was so familiar (note that this means "to men") that a writer needed only to quote a few words, and the audience knew the rest. While we have the names of a few other Greek poets who were also women--enough to know that there were some--only Sappho's work has survived sufficiently to allow a glimpse into her world, to allow us hints of how she thought.

I like knowing that the earliest poem which has survived with a name is that of woman: Enheduanna. Like Hatshepsut, Sappho, and Cleopatra, she was literate, Sappho was the only one who had the benefit of an alphabetic literacy; the others had all mastered complex writing systems, requiring years of training, which means they were allowed by parental authority to spend time acquiring literary skills. And these skills were taught in both Egypt and Mesopotamia by the student carefully copying down a highly complicated body of traditional information. None of these women would have had independent access to this education had their fathers forbidden it.

That brings us to the constraints laid upon women in various ancient societies. There is, of course, a basic physical difference between men and women. For whatever reason, females of our species are usually less physically powerful than males. Small

individuals of most mammalian lines learn very early that strength and size determine that degree to which freedom of action is allowed within the group. In human societies individual strength has usually given males the collective right to determine what shall be acceptable behavior. This will be guided by religious belief, custom and tradition--and most strongly by the laws governing inheritance of goods and authority. With that in mind, let us return to the four women I have been discussing, who lived in quite different societies and who operated within differing constraints.

Enheduanna, around 2350 BC, lived in a society which allowed women considerable freedom of action and recognized their right to own property and speak before the law. They were also in temple administration, which offered control over extensive commercial and economic matters, as well as the psychological impact of religious procedures. Education was available through temple schools and was usually paid for by parents; private tutoring was also an option. If we knew whether Enheduanna received most of her education while her father was still a court official, before he began his rise to power, it would be easier to guess how she obtained her education.

Sumerian women did not do the heavy agricultural work or serve in the armies. Since the females of our species bear the young, one imagines that most women in Enheduanna's city spent a goodly percentage of time bearing and caring for children. As a priestess of Nanna and standing in this role to protect her father's interests with the religious hierarchy, she was not, when we hear of her, serving as wife or mother. Evidently her skills gave her greater value in political roles. It seems very clear to me, however, that her education came with Sargon's permission, if not by his decision.

Chronologically, Hatshepsut is next. When she was born, around 1515 BC, Egypt was strong and wealthy. Contacts with Crete to the north, and military successes in Canaan, linked Egypt to Aegean and Middle Eastern trade routes. Goods and embassies from many states passed through the Egyptian court. Hatshepsut was the daughter of her father's Great Wife, an especially important lineage in New Kingdom Egypt since the maternal line carried the right to pharaonic accession. Her mother was considered a manifestation of the goddess Isis, and her father while alive was the living god Horus; she was thus herself divine (according to Egyptian thinking) and to this tradition she added the claim that the sun-god Re had visited her mother, making her the daughter of Egypt's greatest god.

When her husband the Pharaoh Thutmose II died, she became regent for her step-son the young Thutmose III, and she held the throne as the divine offspring of two fathers and a divine mother; she had also been the Great Wife of the previous pharaoh. Her claim was irrefutable by Egyptian standards, if unusual by reason of her sex, and she remained pharaoh until her death in 1468. That she suppressed or manipulated her co-ruler seems unlikely, since she allotted considerable civil power to him, as well as control of the army.

Because Egyptian law was a matter of individual decisions handed down by representatives of the pharaoh, we cannot say how

free Egyptian women were generally, nor do we know whether Hatshepsut faced significant opposition. She engaged in a number of building projects, and on one of these she proudly records in detail the results of an extraordinary voyage of exploration south along the African coast. It is obvious that her situation was unusual and her education a surprisingly broad one. I have some difficulty, however, believing that every princess of Egypt was interested in geography, ship building, or the medicinal uses of plants--or even was alert to the commercial prospects of new trade items. I think Hatshepsut had an excellent mind, and knowing her own extraordinary abilities, was able to use her opportunities.

Later historians sneered because Egypt fought no extensive wars during her rule, and many would prefer to believe that her co-regency with Thutmose III thwarted him: why else did he not seize power when he became adult? Better understanding of Egyptian traditions casts doubt on this interpretation, based as it is on the assumption that a woman would not be accepted as ruler unless available males had been ruthlessly suppressed.

What if, at the death of her husband, it was apparent that his young heir was sickly, or had a learning disability of some kind? That 22 year co-regency, with responsibilities transferred to him slowly, would then be very reasonable. Even the replacement of her name on various monuments with his own after her death is explainable then: he was co-regent when they were begun, and the name of the living pharaoh who finished those monuments obviously had more protective power than that of the recently deceased one.

Thutmose III went on to become one of Egypt's most vigorous campaigners. Perhaps we should view Hatshepsut as a wise and capable mother-figure without whom his later glory would not have been possible.

What about Sappho? The Greek world in which she lived was dominated by male concerns for warfare and public recognition and honor. Inheritance, especially of citizenship rights, was a key to a man's status. Each small community was independent of others, and warring groups raided each other. Unfortunately (from a Greek standpoint) women were necessary to produce sons who could carry on the family; only if women were prevented from contact with any unauthorized males could a man be certain the sons born were his own. Women were thus tightly controlled by their male relatives. They were not citizens and had no legal right to be heard anywhere. And yet--Sappho.

While it is remotely possible that she wasn't literate, but learned and composed entirely by ear, this is not likely. Literacy was not difficult to acquire in the 6th century BC, and she came from a wealthy family that could certainly have provided a learned slave to educate her. However she got her knowledge, men in her family were agreeable to her doing so. Now, writing poetry takes time--lots of it. Greek women were usually employed in spinning and weaving and the embroidery of fine fabrics, mostly for household use. If they were sufficiently skilled, that skill contributed to family income, added status and made them desirable brides.

I suppose that Sappho could have composed while she worked. (Pursuing that notion evokes the image of patterning in the threads

of the big upright loom: new meters counted out to match the rhythmic flow of color in the woven web?) But if not, male members of her family must have been agreeable to this use of her time.

She was married at least once (note the passive: Greek men "marry," Greek women "are married.") and had a beloved daughter who is mentioned twice in the fragments. She knew a number of other women who were also educated and who were expected to be able to sing, dance, and recite poetry at least in the context of religious celebrations. So it was possible at Mytiline in Sappho's day, though probably not usual, for a Greek aristocrat to allow his daughter to be taught.

By Cleopatra's time, ancient Sumer and Akkad had long been forgotten, but the echoes of Hatshepsut's Egypt and Sappho's Greece were still present. Hers was a highly cosmopolitan world, the foundations of which were laid when Alexander the Great stormed across Asia breaking old patterns, destroying governments and forcing the evolution of new ones. In this variegated culture, the internal community to which a woman belonged would determine what constraints held her. Our surviving sources, which are extensive, suggest as broad a range of social possibilities as that in our own time.

Roman wives, on the other hand, lived in quite a different society from Cleopatra. Roman law and custom recognized the adoption of male heirs without stigma for a variety of reasons, and Roman men were thus much less paranoid about the behavior of their women. Roman women were still totally under the command of their male relatives, but most Roman fathers seem to have been soberly affectionate with both sons and daughters. Women did need legal guardians, but various strategies allowed them to hold property and to divorce rather freely. Also, since they personally educated their children, they were persons of authority in the household, and they were held in high respect by husbands and sons. Most had considerable freedom for travel (properly supervised) and seem to have enjoyed rather comfortable relationships with their menfolk.

Roman custom and respect for tradition provided female role models of modest behavior and efficient housewifery. Their educational background included some Roman history and reading in Roman literature, but subjects like politics and warfare and economic theory would have been lacking. Certainly they had no experience of such matters.

By comparison with the brilliance of Cleopatra in intellect, education and experience, both Caesar's wife Calpurnia and Antony's Octavia were colorless. Virtuously Roman and of impeccable lineage, but colorless. They were limited by their upbringing, in exactly the areas that excited such politically ambitious men. Cleopatra certainly knew this, and she would have been a very stupid woman if she hadn't used it to her advantage. She was, after all, playing for high stakes--the independence of Egypt and the continued existence of her own Ptolemaic line.

From a dynastic standpoint, she twice took a consort. Her early marriage to her brother Ptolemy XIII was a ritual Egyptian requirement necessary to secure her position on the throne. Had young Ptolemy been less willing to plot against her life and more able to accept her assessment of Mediterranean politics as they

involved the Roman presence, Cleopatra might have been willing to retain her association with him. However, his supporters were caught in an assassination attempt aimed at both Cleopatra and Julius Caesar, who succeeded in removing the whole lot. She still needed a royal Ptolemaic male with whom to share titular rank.

Many elements made Cleopatra's choice of Caesar reasonable, as they did his choice of her. Note that from a Roman perspective, Caesar took a mistress--who gave him access to the wealth of Egypt. From an Egyptian perspective, the Pharaoh Cleopatra took a consort--who gave access to Roman might--in order to bear a royal son. The son she bore Caesar was unquestionably intended to serve as her male associate, and indeed, coins from several issues show him in this role as Ptolemy XV.

Three years after Caesar's death, when she judged the time right, she took Mark Antony as consort and bore him three children. None of the ancient sources, however interested in scandal, tell of any other liaisons to justify the usual accusations of "insatiable sexual appetite."

It seems to me that faced with talent, intelligence and high rank in a woman, writers of history have floundered uncomfortably and resorted to "the witch" and "the harlot" to avoid facing the unpalatable truth. Frankly, I don't find this approach academically defensible. And from what I know of my sex, I don't find it psychologically credible, either. Perhaps some of you in the next generation of scholars will create more credible assessments, grounded both on the evidence and sound understanding of female psychology.

The women I have spoken of all came from backgrounds of wealth and high lineage. Even they were subject to social and familial constraints. What then of more ordinary women? However did they survive without the solace offered by an educated mind when everything that mattered to them as women had no value to decision makers? That's another story, one which I plan to address in next year's Marston lecture.

Let me conclude with some final words about Cleopatra. When Julius Caesar left Egypt in 47, he probably had discussed with Cleopatra ways by which her state could cooperate with Rome to control the Mediterranean. Of course, we have no way of recovering these, but our sources have no hint of disagreement between them in the months she spent in Rome before he died. Caesar had just begun to make his future plans clear when he was assassinated, and the large number of important conspirators is a measure of how seriously he misjudged the acceptance of those plans.

Years later, when the conflict between Mark Antony and Octavian began to appear inevitable, most Roman senators seem to have supported Antony until shortly before the naval engagement at Actium, when they abruptly deserted him. Cleopatra was a prominent factor at Rome before Caesar's enemies moved against him, and again in Antony's camp before the desertions at Actium. We can discount the old portrayals of witch and harlot, since they originate in the victor's camp.

Instead, I suspect that something for which she argued in the vision of cooperation and alliance between Egypt and Rome never was formulated in terms that would be accepted by ordinary Romans.

That it involved monarchy at Rome for either Caesar or Antony I frankly doubt: this is an emotional accusation designed to discredit them with the Roman populace. It was highly successful. No, it is instead likely that what caused key political figures to recoil into hostility involved a way of sharing power within the Mediterranean, and very possibly some changes in Roman citizenship rights as well. And while Cleopatra was able to convince those cosmopolitan thinkers Caesar and Antony of the advantages of her vision, no one was ever able to convince her that at Rome, men viewed the world very differently.

SELECT READING LIST

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