The Political Context of Michelangelo's Cleopatra for Tommaso De'Cavalieri

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I argue that Michelangelo’s *Cleopatra* drawing for his friend Tommaso de’Cavalieri has been isolated from its historical circumstances, its literary and visual context, and ultimately its political context as well. Michelangelo’s depiction of the ancient queen Cleopatra at the moment of her suicide fits into a substantial literary and visual tradition. Working through this extensive tradition, I provide multiple examples of powerful Renaissance patrons utilizing the image of Cleopatra for political ends. In this thesis I suggest that Michelangelo also utilized the complex iconography of Cleopatra’s suicide to make a statement about his and Cavalieri’s shared political beliefs.

The meaning of Michelangelo’s *Cleopatra* can best be understood by considering the historical context of the artist’s relationship with Cavalieri. I provide in this thesis a new understanding of Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s relationship based on both men’s civic-mindedness, demonstrated through an active involvement in the government of their respective cities. In light of the significant role politics played in Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s friendship, the artist’s reference to a pivotal figure in the history of the Roman Republic takes on new meaning. I argue throughout this thesis that the *Cleopatra* conveyed heightened political meaning for the two friends. This study not only illuminates the meaning of the drawing, but also adds to our understanding of how politics informed Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s life-long friendship.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 1532 Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) met Tommaso de’Cavalieri (1509-1587), a young and politically ambitious Roman nobleman. Following this meeting, the two men shared a lifelong friendship, which may be traced through poems, letters and, most importantly for art historical discussion, drawings. One such drawing, the *Cleopatra*, depicts the ancient Egyptian queen at the moment of her suicide encircled by an asp, the instrument of her death (Fig. 1; Florence, Casa Buonarroti. Black chalk. 234 x 182 mm). The *Cleopatra* forms part of a group of highly finished drawings referred to as presentation drawings that Michelangelo executed for his closest friends beginning in the 1520s and continuing to the early 1540s. While several of Michelangelo’s presentation drawings for Cavalieri have received much attention, the *Cleopatra* has never been treated with the same level of critical scholarship afforded the more famous drawings. Consequently, the meaning of the drawing has never been successfully determined. I suggest that the *Cleopatra* has been isolated from its historical circumstances—its

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literary and visual context, and ultimately its political context as well. In order to understand the
drawing, and indeed Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s life-long friendship, I situate the *Cleopatra*
within its appropriate historical moment. I provide a new reading of Michelangelo and
Cavalieri’s friendship that accounts for both men’s active involvement in the government of their
respective cities. In light of the significant role politics played in Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s
friendship, the artist’s depiction of a pivotal figure in the history of the ancient world, and one
whose life and death was decisive for the Roman Republic, takes on new meaning. I argue
throughout this thesis the drawing of *Cleopatra* carried heightened political significance for the
two friends. My study of the *Cleopatra* not only illuminates the meaning of the drawing, but also
adds to our understanding of how politics informed Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s life-long
friendship.

The *Cleopatra*: Misdated and Miscategorized

In contrast to the *Cleopatra*, the other drawings Michelangelo gave to Cavalieri are well
documented and have been the subject of much scholarship. Three are based on ancient myth as
recounted by Ovid—the *Rape of Ganymede*, the *Fall of Phaeton*, the *Punishment of Tityus*—and
two others often included in this group, the *Bacchanal of Putti* and *Il Sogno*, are clearly
allegorical. The drawings after Ovid in particular are more readily studied due to two factors; the
first is a dating issue, the second a matter of semantics. In the first instance, contemporary letters,
as well as copies after the originals, date the aforementioned three drawings to between the
winter of 1532 and the autumn of 1533. Where the *Cleopatra* fits in the chronology of
Michelangelo’s friendship with Cavalieri, however, is still uncertain.

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Profane: Masterpiece Drawings from the Casa Buonarroti (Williamsburg, VA: Muscarelle

3 For the dating of the *Rape of Ganymede*, the *Fall of Phaeton* and the *Punishment of Tityus* see
de Tolnay, *Corpus*, 2:108-110. The dating of the *Rape of Ganymede* as well as the *Punishment of
Tityus* is generally held to be December of 1532 based on a letter Cavalieri sent to Michelangelo
on 1 January 1533. Cavalieri thanks Michelangelo for the two drawings he had recently received
and promises to spend at least two hours every day contemplating them. Although Cavalieri does
not mention the drawings by name, scholars generally assume that they are the *Ganymede* and
the *Tityus*. See Michael Hirst, *Michelangelo: The Achievement of Fame, 1475-1534* (New
Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 261. The letter may be found in *Il Carteggio di
Michelangelo*, ed. Paola Barocchi, Giovanni Poggi, and Renzo Ristori (Florence: Sansoni, 1965),
3:445-446, DCCCXCVII (hereafter *Carteggio*).
The dating of the *Cleopatra* is generally held to be ca. 1533 in keeping with the drawings after Ovid. However, there is no extant documentation to confirm a date when the drawing was created or when Michelangelo gave it to Cavalieri. The only verifiable references to the drawing appear in relation to the 1562 transfer of the drawing from Cavalieri to Cosimo I de’ Medici.

All three of the drawings after Ovid are mentioned by name in a letter from Cavalieri to Michelangelo dated 6 September 1533. Cavalieri thanks Michelangelo for “il mio Fetonte assai ben fatto” (my Phaeton, very well done), which he had received three days earlier. He goes on to say that Pope Clement VII as well as Cardinal Ippolito de’Medici had come to see the drawing of the *Phaeton*, the *Tityus*, and the *Ganymede*. Most interestingly, Cavalieri reports that the Cardinal wanted copies of these drawings to be made in rock crystal. Cavalieri writes, wistfully, that he was unable to prevent Ippolito from copying the *Tityus*, and further that he worked very hard to keep the *Ganymede* from being copied. The letter may be found in *Carteggio*, 4:49, CMXXXII. From this letter, we can deduce that Cavalieri had all three of the drawings by September of 1533. Since we know that the two men met in the winter of 1532, the dating of these three drawings is firmly between that time and autumn of 1533. For a more detailed discussion of the letter and the dating of the Ovidian drawings see E.H. Ramsden, *The Letters of Michelangelo Translated from the Original Tuscan Edited & Edited* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1963), 1:298-299; Frommel, *Michelangelo und Tommaso dei Cavalieri*, 55-58; Hirst, *Michelangelo and His Drawings*, 105-118; Gnann, *Michelangelo*, 275-280; and *Michelangelo’s Dream* ed. Stephanie Buck (London: The Courtauld Gallery, 2010), 84-86. Ultimately, Giovanni Bernardi executed all three of the drawings after Ovid in rock crystal. For the crystals, see Vilhelm Slomann, “Rock Crystals by Giovanni Bernardi,” *Burlington Magazine* 48 (1926): 9-23.

For the dating of the *Bacchanal of Putti* see de Tolnay, *Corpus*, 2:106. A *Bacchanal* is mentioned in both the 1550 and 1568 version of Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists* alongside the *Phaeton*, the *Ganymede* and the *Tityus* see Giorgio Vasari, *La Vita di Michelangelo nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. Paola Barocchi (Milan and Naples: R. Ricciardi, 1962). For the dating of *Il Sogno* see de Tolnay, *Corpus*, 2:102-103. Although it is not mentioned in the 1550 version of Vasari’s *Lives, Il Sogno* is documented in the 1568 edition of Vasari’s text alongside the *Phaeton*, the *Tityus*, the *Ganymede*, the *Bacchanal*, and two other drawings done for Vittoria Colonna, the *Pieta* and the *Crucifix*. Vasari’s list appears in his *Life* of Marcantonio Raimondi as examples of the types of designs printmakers culled from Michelangelo’s corpus of drawings Vasari (Barocchi), 5:1984. For a thorough discussion of the allegorical meaning behind *Il Sogno* see Maria Ruvoldt, “Michelangelo’s Dream,” *Art Bulletin* 85, no. 1 (2003): 86-113; Francoise Viatte, “‘To show him his hand’: Michelangelo’s Drawings for Tommaso de’ Cavalieri,” in Buck, 10-26; and Joanna Milk Macfarland, “‘Still Clothed in Flesh’: Renewal and Resurrection in Michelangelo’s *Dream*,” in Buck, 48-66. It is generally held that the *Bacchanal of Putti* as well as *Il Sogno* were made sometime during 1533 in keeping with the drawings after Ovid. However, it should be noted that there are no surviving letters between Michelangelo and Cavalieri to confirm this date. Moreover, these two complex drawings differ in both style and composition from the trio of drawings after Ovid.
Duke of Florence, which I will discuss further in chapter two. The date of this forcible exchange proves only that Cavalieri was in possession of the drawing before January 1562.

Surviving letters documenting Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s friendship cease in 1533, save one letter from Cavalieri to Michelangelo written in 1561 that appears after the two men had a minor falling out.4 Aside from the 1561 letter, the two additional surviving letters from Cavalieri to Michelangelo and the two from Michelangelo to his friend are all dated in the years 1532 and 1533, during the earliest moments of their friendship. Moreover, both letters from Cavalieri to Michelangelo, as well as one of the letters from Michelangelo to Cavalieri, were written when the artist was forced by Pope Clement VII to return to Florence in April of 1533 in order to continue work on the Medici Chapel at San Lorenzo.5 Almost immediately after Clement’s death on 25 September 1534 Michelangelo left Florence for Rome, never to return.6 After Michelangelo’s definitive move to Rome, there is no further surviving correspondence between the two save the aforementioned letter. Either there were letters sent back and forth while Michelangelo was living in Rome and they have not survived, or, more likely, as the two men were now living in the same city, there was no longer a need for written correspondence.

Although we have no further correspondence between the two men to document their friendship, it is clear that they continued to remain in each other’s company for the rest of

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4 Michelangelo took offense to something that Cavalieri inadvertently did. When Cavalieri visited his home, Michelangelo made it clear that he was distressed over the imagined slight. In response to this Cavalieri wrote a letter reaffirming his friendship. He writes on 15 November 1561, “I assure you, if you do not want me for a friend you can say so, but you will never prevent me from being a friend of yours or from seeking to serve you.” Carteggio, 5:273-274, MCCCLXVII; translation Ramsden, The Letters of Michelangelo, 2:xix-xx.

5 A complete list of the letters between Michelangelo and Cavalieri (excluding drafts) is as follows: Carteggio, 3:443-444, DCCCXCII, End of December 1532, Michelangelo (in Rome) to Cavalieri (in Rome); Carteggio, 3:445-446, DCCCXCIII, 1 January 1533, Cavalieri (in Rome) to Michelangelo (in Rome); Carteggio, 4:26-27, CMXVI, 28 July 1533, Michelangelo (in Florence) to Cavalieri (in Rome); Carteggio, 4:30-31, CMXIX Cavalieri (in Rome) to Michelangelo (in Florence); Carteggio, 4:49, CMXXXII, 6 September 1533, Cavalieri (in Rome) to Michelangelo (in Florence); Carteggio, 5:273-274, MCCCLXVIII, 15 November 1561, Cavalieri (in Rome) to Michelangelo (in Rome).

6 Wallace, Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man and his Times, 165. Wallace also cites a letter from Michelangelo to his friend (and perhaps the object of his affection) Febo di Poggio in which Michelangelo states that he is leaving and will never return to Florence. See Carteggio, 4:66, CMXLIV. The letter is dated 26 September 1534 and was sent by Michelangelo (in Florence) to Febo di Poggio (in Florence).
Michelangelo’s life. Vasari even writes that Michelangelo loved Cavalieri “infinitely more than any of the others [friends].”  

The most compelling evidence for their enduring friendship is the fact that Cavalieri was one of only three men present at Michelangelo’s deathbed on February 18, 1564. In light of this fact it is possible, and I believe probable, that Michelangelo continued to produce drawings for his friend that he presented in person and thus they remained unrecorded. Indeed, there is no evidence that Michelangelo ever stopped producing drawings for Cavalieri. As there is no documentary evidence to support the date of 1533 for the Cleopatra that is often claimed, I argue that it is likely that the drawing was created and gifted later than has been previously suggested. In the third chapter of this thesis I provide two viable options for a later date than ca. 1533 for the Cleopatra.

Aside from the dating issues surrounding the drawing, the Cleopatra has also been mistakenly categorized in the literature. Scholars continually align the drawing with the testa divine, or ideal heads, described by Vasari rather than with the presentation drawings. Vasari writes that Michelangelo executed many ideal head drawings, “in order to show Tommaso how to draw.” Despite the fact that Vasari never mentions the Cleopatra by name as an ideal head, scholars of Michelangelo’s drawings have associated it with these instructive exercises rather than with the presentation drawings. Perhaps because the Cleopatra is a single-figure drawing, the designation as an ideal head has been sustained throughout the literature. This identification has led to the Cleopatra not receiving serious consideration. As an ideal head, the Cleopatra is relegated to a didactic position, rather constituting a finished work of art in its own right. Throughout my thesis, I counter this traditional view and argue that the Cleopatra is best defined as a presentation drawing due to its identifiable classical subject matter and its highly finished technique.

Unlike the ideal heads that have no defined subject, the Cleopatra depicts an identifiable historical figure. Moreover, as Hirst has suggested, the figure has been cut off below the chest in

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7 Vasari (Barocchi), 1:118.
8 Ramsden, Letters of Michelangelo, 2:xx. Confirmation of Cavalieri’s presence at Michelangelo’s death is found in a letter from Diomede Leoni to Michelangelo’s nephew, Lionardo Buonarroti, written three days before Michelangelo’s death. Leoni tells Lionardo not to risk his own health in making the journey to Michelangelo’s side because himself, Cavalieri and Daniele (da Volterra) were in attendance.
9 Vasari (Barocchi), 1:122.
a curved manner recalling antique bust portraits. Clearly this drawing was meant to evoke classical allusions to the ancient narrative of Cleopatra and her death; it was not merely intended to teach Cavalieri how to sketch the female face. Most significantly, though, the *Cleopatra* looks different than the ideal heads.

The ideal heads are always depicted in profile, and they tend to lack the subtle modeling in light and shade that characterizes the presentation drawings. They are two-dimensional, still, and schematic. Furthermore, they exhibit a far sketchier quality that befits their didactic function. In contrast, the *Cleopatra* is finished and volumetric. Michelangelo’s *Cleopatra* twists her head across her body to look over her left shoulder. The three-dimensionality of this pose allows us to see her face in three-quarter view, not merely in profile. In finishing both of her eyes, as well as her brow, lips and nose, Michelangelo is able to present Cleopatra’s most intimate emotions as conveyed by her physiognomic expression. At the moment of Cleopatra’s death, her face does not display any signs of pain or fear. There are neither worrisome furrowed brow nor contorted lips crying in despair. Rather, lips slightly parted, Cleopatra opens her eyes and gazes over her shoulder, off the right side of the sheet. She is decidedly dignified and peaceful as she meets her death. In the end, Michelangelo’s *Cleopatra* is a heroic woman in control of her own fate.

The level of polish exhibited by the *Cleopatra* further recommends its consideration as a presentation drawing. Michelangelo purposefully used heavier pressure when articulating Cleopatra’s face and headdress to produce darker and more defined markings, and lighter pressure when he sketched out her shoulders and breast, as well as when he drew the asp coiling around her body. Michelangelo utilized this approach several other times in his drawings. Most pertinently for this discussion, he used it when drawing the *Ganymede* and *Il Sogno* for Cavalieri. In both of these drawings and again in the *Cleopatra*, Michelangelo used darker, more definite lines to emphasize the central figures of his main narrative and used a lighter finish for the background figures to create a distinct contrast between the two groupings. These varying levels of definition are best seen as evidence of Michelangelo’s innovative drawing technique that guides the viewer through the composition. Without the aid of a broad spectrum of colors to guide the viewer’s eye, Michelangelo used gradations of black and grey, as well as differing levels of precision, to underscore what he saw as the most important elements in the drawing.

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10 Hirst, *Michelangelo and His Drawings*, 116. Hirst was the first to propose that the Cleopatra figure was executed in *all’antica* bust fashion.
The careful thought that went into the composition of the *Cleopatra* suggests that it is more than just a rote exercise in drawing, and is rather a finished work of art.

An additional issue that arises when dealing with the *Cleopatra* as a presentation drawing is the presence of another single-figure drawing on the verso side of the sheet. Turning the drawing over, one finds on the reverse the depiction of an open-mouthed female figure (Fig. 2; Florence, Casa Buonarroti). The verso drawing was made widely known after the restoration of the sheet in 1989 when it was removed from its mount. Although the recto and the verso drawings are clearly related in terms of their general figural composition—they both share similar elaborate hair arrangements and a contorted neck position—the two drawings are very different in both technique and psychological tone. The verso drawing is executed in a far sketchier hand and it does not share the careful modeling or use of light and shade of the recto. Moreover, the female figure on the verso has been turned from three-quarter to full frontal view so that her ghastly empty eyes and open mouth seem to address the viewer directly. The meaning of the verso drawing, as well as who executed it, whether it was Michelangelo, Cavalieri, or a later hand, remain open questions that add to the enigmatic nature of the drawing.

**State of the Literature**

**Michelangelo’s *Cleopatra***

As previously mentioned, because the *Cleopatra* has been isolated from the group of presentation drawings, it has not received the same level of scholarly attention as the others. That is not to say, however, that it has been ignored. Indeed, the *Cleopatra* is consistently mentioned in the literature surrounding Michelangelo’s drawn œuvre, almost always as an “ideal head.” The first scholar to associate the *Cleopatra* with the ideal heads was Johannes Wilde. In his seminal book on Michelangelo’s drawings published in 1944, Wilde also coined the term presentation drawing that we continue to use today to differentiate drawings Michelangelo created as finished works of art from others that served as studies and exercises. Following Wilde’s identification,

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scholars including Charles de Tolnay (1975), Michael Hirst (1988), William Wallace (1989), Hugo Chapman (2005), Achim Gnann (2010), and John T. Spike (2013) continued the association. Michael Hirst and Paola Barocchi also adopt this description in the only work devoted solely to the *Cleopatra*, a pamphlet published to accompany an exhibition of the work after its conservation (1989).\(^\text{12}\)

Most recently, the *Cleopatra* figured as one of the showpieces of the Muscarelle Museum’s exhibition entitled “Michelangelo Sacred and Profane: Masterpiece Drawings from the Casa Buonarroti.” The accompanying catalogue features contributions by Pina Ragionieri, Director of the Casa Buonarroti, Aaron DeGroft, Director of the Muscarelle Museum, and John T. Spike, Assistant Director of the Muscarelle Museum and Michelangelo scholar. In their essays the *Cleopatra* represents not only the “sacred” component of the exhibition by way of its juxtaposition with another one of Michelangelo’s famous figure drawings, the *Madonna and Child* of ca. 1524 (Florence, Casa Buonarroti), but also contains within itself the dichotomy of sacred and profane. Where the recto of the drawing represents mortal beauty and nobility, the verso of the drawing provides a terrifying vision of the dangers of sensual pleasures—anguish, shock, and destruction. Ultimately, for Spike, the *Cleopatra* functions on an allegorical level, the two oppositional drawings point to platonic philosophic ideas about divine or sacred love and earthly or profane love.\(^\text{13}\)

**The Representation of Cleopatra throughout History**

The second chapter of this thesis is devoted to placing Michelangelo’s *Cleopatra* within the art historical tradition of representing Cleopatra. In order to do this, I take into account the multiple types of representations of Cleopatra that Michelangelo would have known. In considering the tradition of representing Cleopatra in text and image, this thesis profits considerably from the scholarship of Mary Garrard and Jaynie Anderson who have both compiled extensive treatments of the visual and literary representations of Cleopatra from


antiquity through the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Although my own conclusions about the meaning of Michelangelo’s *Cleopatra* ultimately depart from those of Garrard and Anderson, their proposal that the image of Cleopatra was constantly shifting to suit the needs of various artists, patrons and authors allows me to argue for a specific, historically appropriate meaning for Michelangelo’s drawing.

Both Garrard and Anderson suggest that Michelangelo’s *Cleopatra* fits into, and for Garrard even founds, a tradition of representing Cleopatra as an erotic figure. Considering the stakes of their arguments, it is fitting that both authors place Michelangelo’s drawing into the category of eroticized representations of Cleopatra’s death. In the first instance, Garrard is concerned with establishing the Baroque female artist Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Cleopatra* of ca. 1621-22 (Milan, Amedeo Morandotti Collection) as an example of the artist’s engagement with antique texts and statues—an argument I make myself for Michelangelo. By situating Michelangelo’s *Cleopatra* as an erotic villain, a *femme fatale*, Garrard is able to argue for the singularity of Artemisia’s vision. Indeed, Garrard argues that Artemisia is the only artist to interpret Cleopatra as heroic, even goddess-like, in her suicide. Garrard furthers her argument for Michelangelo’s *Cleopatra* as an image of a *femme fatale* by comparing the subject of the drawing to the mythical figure of the gorgon Medusa. Garrard cites the nineteenth-century British poet Charles Swinburne as the first viewer to draw the comparison.

For Anderson, Michelangelo’s *Cleopatra* serves as a comparative image for the main subject of her book, Tiepolo’s *Banquet of Cleopatra and Antony* of 1744 (London, National


Gallery). Her visual analysis of the drawing leads her to categorize it as one of “Michelangelo’s erotic drawings.”\textsuperscript{17} Anderson goes on to cite the snake’s fangs piercing Cleopatra’s breast as a metaphor for homosexual love. In this, Anderson presents a reading of the drawing that attempts to account for the personal meaning behind the drawing through her interpretation of the narrative moment depicted. Although I would suggest that this reading oversimplifies the issue of eroticism, as well as the issue of Michelangelo’s personal relationship with Cavalieri, I am indebted to Anderson’s thoughtful consideration of the visual tradition of depicting Cleopatra.

The issue of whether or not Michelangelo’s \textit{Cleopatra} constitutes an erotic image is complicated. It is an issue that must be addressed, however, especially considering Cleopatra’s bared breast that seems to suggest an erotic intention. A profitable comparison to illuminate the vague terms of eroticism is one between Michelangelo’s \textit{Cleopatra} and Piero di Cosimo’s so-called \textit{Portrait of Simonetta Vespucci} (Fig. 3; ca. 1485-1490, Chantilly, Musée Condé). The comparison is useful because many scholars have pointed to Piero’s painting as Michelangelo’s source.\textsuperscript{18} In response to these arguments, I propose a closer reading of the two images that destabilizes this traditional assumption.

In the first place, Piero’s image is a profile view of an idealized female sitter. As Patricia Simons has shown, the profile view of a female in the Renaissance was never benign, but was always charged with issues of sexual politics and the male gaze.\textsuperscript{19} The profile view automatically denies the female sitter agency of gaze as her single eye will always be averted from the viewer. At the same time, the profile view also turns the female sitter into what Simons terms “an object of display culture,” that is, she is visually consumed as the property of either her father or her husband.\textsuperscript{20} In contrast to Piero’s representation, Michelangelo depicted his female figure in dramatic three-quarter view, which allowed him to imbue her face and eyes with lifelike emotion. The soft, subtle shading of Cleopatra’s deep-set eyes convey to the viewer a sense of steady, calm determination. The figure’s downward gaze off the right side of the sheet suggests a

\textsuperscript{17} Anderson, \textit{Tiepolo’s Cleopatra}, 62.


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 8.
moment of sadness, perhaps a reference to Cleopatra’s despair over her lover Marc Antony’s suicide just moments before her own. It is the emotion in the *Cleopatra* that is truly captivating and it also sets it apart from Piero’s profile view of the same subject (and, indeed, the ideal head drawings). Michelangelo’s three-quarter view not only grants his figure agency in being able to display individualized emotion, but also allows the viewer to see the humanity of Cleopatra rather than just a symbol of lust and luxury.

The essential point is that readings of Michelangelo’s drawing as a sexualized representation of the dying Cleopatra do not allow for a consideration of the personal stakes of the drawing for both Michelangelo and Cavalieri. They also do not allow for Michelangelo’s engagement either with the ancient literary accounts of the event or the earlier Renaissance depictions of Cleopatra’s death. In the first chapter of this thesis, in addition to providing a consideration of the visual sources for Michelangelo’s Cleopatra, I also examine the antique texts that Michelangelo would have likely consulted in developing his image of the ancient queen. I suggest that Michelangelo utilized the texts of Horace and Plutarch in order to present the Cleopatra of the ancients.

**Tommaso de’Cavalieri**

In the third chapter of this thesis I discuss the relationship between Michelangelo and Cavalieri in terms of their public association in the civic life of Rome, as well as their personal friendship. In contrast to the scholarship devoted to Michelangelo’s presentation drawings, and in many ways the literature dedicated to the *Cleopatra*, the literature surrounding Tommaso de’Cavalieri is sparse and revolves almost entirely around his intimate relationship with Michelangelo. Christoph Luitpold Frommel, the first scholar to address Cavalieri and his life and relationship with Michelangelo (1979), focused attention on the Ovidian drawings as part of a consideration of the two men’s relationship. Frommel’s account is crucial to my own study of Cavalieri as it lays out much of the known information about the Roman nobleman.

Cavalieri was born in Rome in 1509 to Mario Cavalieri degli Orsini and the daughter of the Florentine banker Tommaso Baccelli whose name is unknown. The patrician family lived in the modern Largo Argentina in a small square known as the Piazza dei Cavalieri. Born into a family of means and position, Cavalieri started his career in 1535 as a local official, *caporione* of

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San Eustachio. He rose through the ranks of government office to be elected twice to the most powerful position in Rome’s civic government, conservator, first in 1564 and again in 1571. The conservators were the chief magistrates and thus occupied the highest level of municipal power in the city. The conservators’ council of Rome was made up of three elected members (each serving a three-month term) who headed Rome’s Communal Council.

Cavalieri spent the majority of his career overseeing the execution of Michelangelo’s designs for the restoration of the Capitoline Hill. On 13 June 1548, he was appointed as one of the two Deputati speciali alla fabbrica del Campidoglio (Special Deputies to the Works of the Capitol.) He continued to hold offices related to the project until well after Michelangelo’s death in 1564. Indeed, it is likely that Cavalieri was entrusted with bringing Michelangelo’s designs to fruition after the artist’s death. From at least as early as 1548, then, Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s careers intertwined on the Capitoline Hill. In the third chapter of this thesis I reconsider Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s joint projects for the city of Rome—the Capitoline Hill restoration as well as the interpretation and display of the rediscovered inscriptions known as The Fasti Consulares et Triumphales. I demonstrate that their personal and professional relationship revolved around mutual engagement with the grand sites and physical remains of the ancient Roman Republic.

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22 Ibid., 75.
23 Ibid., 78.
24 Emmanuel Rodocanachi, The Roman Capitol in Ancient and Modern Times (London: W. Heinemann Press, 1906), 123. In the last quarter of the fifteenth century, the Communal Council became more organized and took on a more distinct role in the government of Rome. Composed of more than fifty magistrates, the Communal Council held great authority in the city. The Council was primarily responsible for edileship, that is, the maintenance of public buildings as well as the regulation of public events/festivals (the term edileship is derived from the office of Aedile, which had been an official government office during the Roman Republic). The Communal Council also oversaw all questions of municipal finances. According to Rodocanachi, the Communal Council of Rome was so powerful that its members often went toe-to-toe with papal authority—most notably with Sixtus V. The Conservators were elected from, and presided over, the Communal Council.
25 Warren Kirkendale, Emilio de’Cavalieri “gentiluomo romano” His Life and Letters, his Role as Superintendent of all the Arts at the Medici Court, and his Musical Compositions (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2001), 52. Kirkendale even deems Tommaso “the executor of Michelangelo’s legacy.”
The role that Cavalieri played in the civic government of Rome was complemented by his dedication to the arts as a collector and as an art expert. As I will discuss in more depth in chapter three, Cavalieri’s knowledge of these matters likely aided him professionally. He had an active role in collecting and assembling his family’s antiquities and natural curiosities collection. He also became quite well known as a connoisseur serving as an advisor to multiple artistic projects throughout his life. These accolades recommended him to positions involving the artistic remnants of the ancient Roman Republic. His involvement in the display of the *Fasti*, ancient lists recording civic magistrates during the Republic, at the Capitoline Hill, as well as his prominent role in the placement of the ancient bronze bust believed to represent Lucius Junius Brutus, the legendary founder of the Republic, in the Conservator’s Palace on the Capitoline Hill point to more than just a cursory interest in the antique (Figure 4; Rome, Musei Capitolini, Palazzo dei Conservatori). Indeed, Cavalieri spent most of his career among the relics of the ancient Roman Republic, serving as a powerful civic officer. In light of Cavalieri and Michelangelo’s joint involvement in the civic government of the city of Rome, I suggest that the *Cleopatra* carries a weighty political message for the two friends.

Précis of Chapters

This thesis consists of four chapters: Chapter One: Introduction; Chapter Two: The Image of Cleopatra: Considering the Stakes of Representation; Chapter Three: Michelangelo, Cavalieri, and Politics; Chapter Four: Conclusion

Chapter Two: Cleopatra: Considering the Stakes of Representation

In this chapter I examine Michelangelo’s drawing against the history of Cleopatra in text and image as it concerns the representation of her death. The shifting imagery of Cleopatra throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance has been well documented and analyzed, particularly by Mary Garrard and Jaynie Anderson. I engage this rich tradition by elucidating the motivations of the author, artist or patron responsible for these various representations of Cleopatra. I am interested in the historical circumstances that frame each image of Cleopatra.

Working through the extensive tradition of representing Cleopatra, and particularly her death, I provide multiple examples of powerful Renaissance patrons utilizing the image of Cleopatra for political ends. In light of these examples, I suggest that Michelangelo also utilized the complex iconography of Cleopatra’s suicide to make a statement about his political beliefs. I argue that the image of Cleopatra is never a static representation of a female figure. Rather, it
was used throughout history, from the very moment of the queen’s suicide up to Michelangelo’s own time, to convey potent political ideas. The place of Michelangelo’s rendering of the subject within the larger tradition of Cleopatra imagery can best be understood by considering the historical context of Michelangelo’s relationship with Cavalieri, which I address in the third chapter of this thesis.

Chapter Three: Michelangelo, Cavalieri, and Politics

Building on the material of the second chapter, I propose that the political meaning of Michelangelo’s *Cleopatra* emerges when we consider the historical circumstances surrounding its execution. Weaving together Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s activities in the politics of both Florence and Rome, I argue for their shared interest in republican forms of government. I argue that scholars have failed to acknowledge the significant role politics played in Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s friendship, and that this has impeded a full interpretation of the *Cleopatra*. I ultimately suggest in this chapter that the *Cleopatra* functioned as a thinly veiled political message between two highly political friends.

Throughout his life and career, Michelangelo consistently acknowledged his sympathy and support for republican government. His role in the designs for the seat of the civic government of Rome at the Capitoline Hill is just one of many instances in his œuvre that suggests sympathy for republican political ideals. His appointment as military engineer (Governor and Procurator General of the city’s fortifications) for the city of Florence in 1529, during the Second Florentine Republic, is the most explicit instance confirming Michelangelo’s engagement with contemporary politics. In this role, Michelangelo took on the responsibility of defending the city from the threat of the papal army and eventually, the army of Charles V. In the

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end, Florence did surrender in August of 1530. However this surrender was the result of famine, disease and treachery, not the failure of Michelangelo’s fortifications. Moreover, it has been proposed that the statue of David of 1501-1504, as well as the bust of Brutus from the late 1530s are other examples in which he expressed political beliefs in his art.  

Michelangelo’s criticisms of Medici tyranny in the form of his active resistance to the Medici forces in Florence, the Florentine David, and the Brutus parallel Cavalieri’s own active role in the civic government of Rome. That Cavalieri was a supporter of republican rule is made clear in his family history, his career in civic government and his engagement with antiquities dating to the Roman Republic. Taking into consideration Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s biographies, careers and the social circles they occupied, I argue that politics, and especially sympathy to the republican cause, continually played a role in their friendship.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I propose a novel reading of Michelangelo’s drawing of Cleopatra’s suicide that casts new light on the artist’s political opinions as well as his relationship with Tommaso de’Cavalieri. Moreover, this thesis adds to an extant discourse concerned with establishing a tradition of representation for the historical figure of Cleopatra. The figure of Cleopatra as depicted by Michelangelo has a complex meaning, one that unfolds only with the close examination this thesis presents.

CHAPTER TWO

CLEOPATRA: CONSIDERING THE STAKES OF REPRESENTATION

When Michelangelo created the Cleopatra, he was working within a well-established tradition of depicting the ancient queen. Representations of Cleopatra’s life and death first appear during the Roman Empire, they continue through the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. A remarkable feature of this extended tradition is how easily the meaning of Cleopatra was manipulated and altered to suit the needs of each author, artist, or patron. As such, the image of Cleopatra, particularly the image of her suicide, is neither a static nor a neutral representation of an historic event. Over time, literary as well as visual representations of Cleopatra’s suicide have served multiple, often contradictory, purposes. To date, Michelangelo’s Cleopatra has not been considered a part of this visual and literary tradition. The Cleopatra has been isolated from its own historical circumstances, its literary and visual context, and ultimately its political context as well.

I suggest that Michelangelo intended his drawing to represent a tribute to his and Cavalieri’s shared veneration of republican government. In order to fully grasp the nuanced political meaning of the drawing that I propose we must first consider the trajectory of visual and textual representations of Cleopatra. As will become clear, the image of Cleopatra has never been a stable signifier. In this chapter I look critically at some of the most influential literary sources regarding Cleopatra’s life and suicide that Michelangelo would have known. This chapter is organized thematically and works to provide the background for understanding Michelangelo’s own depiction of Cleopatra’s suicide. I first address the most popular theme in representations of Cleopatra—the depiction of her as a personification of excess sexuality and greed. I then consider how various artists and authors worked to subvert this traditional representation by revisiting the ancient sources on Cleopatra’s death that emphasize her courage and nobility in taking her own life. Through a careful parallel reading of the ancient accounts of Horace and Plutarch alongside Michelangelo’s drawing, I ultimately argue that Michelangelo intended to present the authentic Cleopatra of the ancients.
Cleopatra and Luxuria: The Pervasiveness of Propaganda

The association of Cleopatra with excessive pride and lust began almost immediately following her death. Several Roman authors following the final war of the Roman Republic, including the famed poet Virgil, worked to construct an image of the threatening queen as charming, but ultimately inept. Importantly, these accounts were always intended as propaganda in support of Octavian, Cleopatra’s archenemy. From the beginning, the image of Cleopatra as a seductive beauty, a *femme-fatale*, was no more than a slanderous political campaign. Nevertheless, the association of Cleopatra with amoral behavior became commonplace throughout the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. I argue in the following section that the conflation of Cleopatra with Luxuria—the cardinal sin of Lust that also references excess—during the Middle Ages ultimately stems from the propaganda campaign mounted by Octavian. In compiling the texts and images related to this theme I intend to make clear by comparison that Michelangelo consciously worked against the constructed image of Cleopatra as a fallen woman in his own representation. Indeed, Michelangelo’s *Cleopatra* should be read as a response to both the ancient and contemporary sources concerning Cleopatra’s suicide.

In 33 B.C. Octavian declared war against Cleopatra and her lover Mark Antony.¹ What followed was the final war for the Roman Republic. In the end Octavian won the war, bringing to a close to some 500 years of republican rule in Rome. Over the ensuing years, Octavian assumed increased power in the city. Although he was always careful to maintain the semblance of republican traditions in his accumulation of power, there is no doubt that Octavian worked to consolidate power under his sole authority.² He steadily amassed territory throughout Egypt, Gaul, Spain and Syria and by 27 B.C. had skillfully diminished the power of the Senate to an administrative status. That same year, the Senate granted Octavian the honorific title of Augustus, the majestic one. With his new title, the way was open for Octavian to gradually assume full imperial power under the guise of republican ideology.³

² Octavian’s first appointment as *princeps* (first citizen) appeared to be in keeping with Republican values. However, although his title remained modest, he continued to increase his power.
³ Grant, *History of Rome*, 204.
Augustus’s consistent utilization of Egyptian imagery in his commissions to cement his moral and military victory suggests that he was very conscious of Cleopatra’s death as a significant marker in his political career as well as a key moment for the construction of his empire. His very elevation to Augustus and his ensuing consolidation of power were only made possible by the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra. Indeed Egypt was Augustus’s greatest conquest and triumph; he even had the Senate declare the province his personal domain in 27 B.C.\textsuperscript{4} Furthermore, almost immediately after Cleopatra’s death Augustus had images of himself inserted into Ptolemaic temple narratives at the Temple of Hathor at Dendera, Cleopatra’s personal temple. On the east exterior wall of the temple Augustus is shown participating in the foundation and dedication ceremonies for the temple. Augustus literally assumes the mantle of an Egyptian ruler in this image and, by extension, claims for himself the right of deification entailed to all Egyptian Pharaohs.\textsuperscript{5}

Augustus was arguably the first agent to manipulate the image of Cleopatra in moralistic terms. Almost immediately upon his victorious return to Rome after defeating Cleopatra at Alexandria, Augustus began to utilize the greatest poets of his day to frame his political struggle for power as a moral and nationalistic battle against a depraved queen. For example, in the \textit{Aeneid} Virgil casts Cleopatra as the nameless goddess of Egypt and the Arabians who is swept into the sea by the powerful god of Rome. Virgil describes Cleopatra as a “monstrous god” and a “barking Anubis” while Augustus is the “great god of Rome.”\textsuperscript{6} In Virgil’s account, the epochal shift from Republic to Empire becomes a mythologized battle in which the virtuous Roman god Augustus justly disposes of the heathen Egyptian queen. Thus Cleopatra’s death marked not only the extinction of the ancient lineage of Pharaohs, but also the end of the Roman Republic. Due to Augustus’s careful manipulation of Cleopatra’s image following her death, her formidable political significance was subsumed by her alleged sexual and moral deviance.

Working two hundred after Virgil, the Roman historian Cassius Dio continued and expanded on the poet’s vilification of Cleopatra in his own \textit{Roman History} of ca. 200 A.D. In

\textsuperscript{4} Grant, \textit{History of Rome}, 203.


recounting the fall of the Roman Republic, Dio presents Cleopatra as an arrogant, greedy fool. He writes, “Cleopatra was insatiate for love and insatiate for wealth. Her ambition and love of glory was great, and so was her audacious arrogance. She gained the throne of Egypt through love, and through love she hoped to gain monarchy at Rome; she failed on the second and also lost the first.” Dio takes the propagandistic claims of his predecessors one step further to suggest that it was Cleopatra’s love—and here it is more likely that Dio is referencing her sexuality—that brought her ultimate downfall.

By the sixth century A.D., Cleopatra had become an almost universal signifier of sexuality and lust. If Dio suggested that Cleopatra was brought down by her manipulation of love, the late antique writer Fulgentius conflates Cleopatra’s love for Antony and her death. Fulgentius’s book, On the Ages of the World and of Man of the late sixth century, is a grand narrative of the history of the world from Adam to the Julio-Claudian Emperors. Throughout the text Fulgentius stretches and shifts the details of history to suit his ethical formulation that the just will of God always prevails against the wickedness of man. In keeping with this, Fulgentius rewrites the narrative of Cleopatra’s suicide.

Despite the fact that Plutarch specifies that Cleopatra died after receiving a deadly snakebite to her arm, Fulgentius claims, “Augustus forced Cleopatra, the vanquished queen of Egypt, to submit her breasts to be suckled by the snakes.” This short sentence comes as an aside to Fulgentius’s extended praise of Augustus’s military prowess. It works to diminish Cleopatra’s own political power at the same time that it sexualizes her suicide. Fulgentius’s account is the earliest example of this eroticized view of the queen’s suicide. He begins a tradition of representation that persists throughout the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance where the bite site is almost unanimously Cleopatra’s breast.

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Fulgentius’s moralizing was continued and expanded upon with further criticism by Boccaccio in two of his most famous texts—*De Casibus Vitorum Illustrium* or *The Fates of Illustrious Men* (1359) and *De Mulieribus Claris* or *Concerning Famous Women* (written ca. 1361 and first published in 1374). Both texts focus on the pitfalls of pride and lust for famous men and women throughout history, and they were both known throughout Western Europe. In *De Mulieribus Claris* Boccaccio proves his particular distaste for Cleopatra by introducing the *Life of Cleopatra*, “She was the whore of the Kings of the Orient, insatiable in her lust for gold and jewels. She was splendid in her beauty and capable of ensnaring whoever she desired by the fascination of her sparkling eyes and the seduction of her speech.” In Boccaccio’s equation Cleopatra’s only power lay in her seductive charms, and her goal was accumulation of luxurious material goods.

In *De Mulieribus Claris*, and similarly in *De Casibus Vitorum Illustrium*, Cleopatra fulfills a two-fold function. First, for Boccaccio’s male readers, Cleopatra is a satisfactorily punished woman whose desire for entrée into a man’s world was the primary cause of her downfall. Second, Cleopatra’s tragic death presents a moralistic warning for all would-be temptresses. Her death and infamy are presented as fitting and appropriate compensation for an unholy, indulgent life. Boccaccio’s indictment of Cleopatra are echoed in other late medieval accounts, such as Dante’s *Inferno* where Cleopatra spends eternity in the second circle of Hell populated by those given over to the vice of Lust. For the purposes of this discussion, the illustrations that accompanied Boccaccio’s writings in several editions are particularly interesting for providing a visual expression of the author’s condemnation.

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9 Alberto Bacchi della Lega, *Serie delle edizioni delle opera di Giovanni Boccaccio* (Bologna: Romagnoli, 1875). According to Bacchi della Lega, nearly a dozen editions of *De Mulieribus Claris* were present in France before 1600, seven in Italy, six in Germany and two in Spain.


11 Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. by Henry Francis Cary and Gustave Doré (New York: Cassell, Petter, Galpin & Co., 1814), 22. In Canto V, Dante places Cleopatra alongside Helen of Troy, Dido, Achilles and Paris—all mythological characters whose lust destroyed nations and lives. Dante’s indictment of Cleopatra, a real historical figure, at the same level of these other legendary characters points to the extreme vilification of Cleopatra during this time.
The earliest of these printed images, a pair of woodcuts that illustrate the editio princeps of Boccaccio’s *De Muleribus Claris* (Ulm, 1473) dramatically link Cleopatra’s pride and excess brought with the deaths of Antony and, indeed, herself (Fig. 5; London, British Library, MS 1449, fol. 96). The first woodcut depicts the Banquet of Cleopatra—a narrative scene in Pliny’s account of Cleopatra’s life in which Cleopatra demonstrated her wealth and power by dissolving a rare and expensive pearl into a cup of vinegar.\(^{12}\) Important to the scene is the general shock conveyed on both male attendees’ faces, the standing man on the right being Antony himself. In this moment, Cleopatra has stunned her male counterparts by ostentatiously displaying her wealth. Perhaps Cleopatra was too bold, for the next moment represented is her death. In this scene Cleopatra is depicted kneeling at Antony’s side with two snakes wrapped around, and biting, her arms. Face downcast, she stares at Antony. Cleopatra’s excessive pride and sexuality indicated in the first woodcut are necessarily and righteously punished in the second.\(^{13}\) The implication is that Cleopatra’s refusal to behave as a chaste and humble woman of virtue resulted in a miserable death for herself and for Antony.

In a later French language manuscript version of Boccaccio’s *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* produced in Bruges ca. 1479-1480 Cleopatra is again castigated for her sins of excessiveness and sexuality. Cleopatra is depicted erect, baring both of her breasts for the fangs of two large snakes (Fig. 6; Royal MS 14 E.V., London, British Library).\(^{14}\) It is important to note that in the Bruges Boccaccio illustration, the artist depicts Cleopatra bare breasted. Although Boccaccio followed Plutarch’s account that Cleopatra had the snake bite her arm in *De Claris Muleribus*, in *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* he writes that Cleopatra bared her breasts for the serpent. The miniaturist of the Bruges Boccaccio creates a visual parallel to the author’s macabre written description. Cleopatra is dressed in medieval attire with her elaborate garment pushed to her waist so that her breasts may be prominently displayed. Obviously distressed, Cleopatra watches as Antony raises his arms to thrust his sword into his body. More disconcerting than

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\(^{12}\) Pliny, *Natural History* IX (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1940), 58-60.


\(^{14}\) On this manuscript see Catherine Reynolds, “Illustrated Boccaccio Manuscripts in the British Library (London),” *Studi sul Boccaccio* 17 (1988): 153-159.
Antony’s impalement, however, are the two disproportionately large snakes that have seized onto Cleopatra’s breasts. Over half the size of both human figures, the snakes are not the slender asps of Plutarch’s narrative. Indeed, they seem to overpower Cleopatra; her hands grip their upper bodies tightly as if she is futilely trying to maintain control. These snakes are hardly the honorable choice for a royal suicide. They are instead instruments of torture meant to punish the fallen queen. Furthermore, the presence of the large snakes coupled with the prominently displayed breasts of a nude woman call to mind medieval and early Renaissance personifications of the vice of Luxuria.

Both illustrations of Boccaccio’s text insist on Cleopatra’s excessive sexuality, arrogance and greed. The continuity between the representations suggests that, by the late fifteenth century, there was a correlation between the figure of Cleopatra and popular personifications of the vice of Luxuria (Fig. 7; Luxuria, 1125-1150, fresco, Church of Saint Nicholas, Tavant, France; Fig. 8; Avarice and Luxury, ca. 1125-1131, relief, Abbey Church of St. Pierre, Mozac, France; and Fig. 9; Inferno, detail, Lust, 1396, fresco, San Gimignano, Collegiata.) The image in the Bruges Boccaccio particularly resonates with medieval representations of the vice of Luxuria in which a nude or semi-nude woman suffers from the attacks of snakes and other reptiles to her breasts and genitals. By aligning Cleopatra with excess and sexuality, both in the text and in the illustrations, Boccaccio and subsequent illustrators of his texts made clear a direct link between the ancient queen and the vice of Luxuria.15

Michelangelo and Luxury: The Case of Minos

Michelangelo must have been aware of the tradition of personifying Luxuria as a figure with reptiles attacking genitalia for he used the association in the Last Judgment fresco at the

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15 For a discussion of the visual representations of Luxury during the Middle Ages see, Ellen Kosmer, “The ‘noyous humoure of lecherie,’” Art Bulletin 57 no. 1 (1975): 1-8. As Kosmer points out, the personification of Luxury from ca. 1279 to ca. 1310 generally holds to a similar pattern; the seductive, fashionable and richly dressed woman (sometimes partially clothed) is depicted either alone or with a lustful man approaching her. This indicates that there is a presence of a demon underlying the beautiful exterior of the woman. Furthermore, Luxury was often personified as a totally nude woman whose breasts were sucked by toads or bitten by dragons or snakes. The idea is that the sinner was punished through the organs through which they sinned (ibid., 5).
Sistine Chapel in the figure of Minos. A figure from Greek mythology, Minos functioned in life as the tyrannical, lustful and murderous King of Crete. After his death, he became the Prince of the Underworld. In Michelangelo’s fresco, Minos is depicted encircled nearly three times by an enormous snake whose mouth clenches tightly around his phallus (Fig. 10; 1536-1541, Rome, Sistine Chapel). The figure of Minos suggests that Michelangelo knew and capitalized on the medieval tradition of depicting a lustful human punished by a reptile attacking an organ of vice. Of course, we must acknowledge that Michelangelo’s Cleopatra too has a snake wrapped around her body latched onto her exposed breast. However, I suggest that Michelangelo treats the coexistence of a snake and an exposed body part very differently in the figure of Minos and the figure of Cleopatra.

Michelangelo was particularly skilled at capturing both the emotion and the character of his subjects through his treatment of their faces and bodies. Even without the demons that surround Minos, the viewer instantaneously understands the depraved and disturbing nature of the person depicted. Michelangelo presents the face of Minos in a slightly exaggerated profile view; he grants the viewer full sight of the figure’s distorted features and snarling mouth, but prevents him from coming face-to-face with the frightening creature. In contrast, the viewer does see the entire body of Minos, which is encircled by a snake, in full frontal view. The snake itself is dramatically long; its tail extends above Minos’s head and curls around the head of a hook-nosed demon in the background of the vignette. The snake’s multi-colored, bloated body winds twice around Minos’s fleshy midsection under his sagging pectorals. Minos reaches down with his right hand and grasps the snake’s body, perhaps attempting to loosen its tight hold. On the snake’s third and final loop around the figure, it pulls back its head to strike at his phallus. The snake in Michelangelo’s representation of Minos invokes feelings of horror and pain that appropriately mirror the fearsome countenance of its prey. This snake is ultimately intended to convey the idea of punishment and pain, the only suitable sentence for a man whose life revolved around pursuits of the flesh and whose death revolves around the damning of souls.

In striking contrast to both Michelangelo’s own depiction of Minos at the Sistine Chapel and the popular representations of Cleopatra as the vice of Luxuria, the drawing of Cleopatra conveys peaceful acceptance and tempered sorrow. Cleopatra’s face is nearly completely smooth.

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and still. Even at the moment of her death, Cleopatra maintains composure. The snake that wraps itself around Cleopatra does so with her consent. It is slender and curves gracefully around her body, careful not to bind itself too tightly. When the snake’s mouth does meet her breast, Cleopatra does not even look down to watch the event. Indeed, this snake does not attack Cleopatra’s breast as a demon reptile does a depraved sinner’s phallus. Rather, this snake delivers a welcome bite, one that Cleopatra invites as an instrument of death that will reunite her with her lover Antony.

Renaissance Rehabilitations of Cleopatra: Cleopatra as Wife, Lover, and Mother

Responding to the exaggerated, and biased, moralizing of Dio Cassius and subsequent medieval authors, many Renaissance artists and authors took up the cause of defending Cleopatra’s actions as evidence of her great love for Marc Antony. Their treatment of Cleopatra shifted away from medieval considerations of the vices and took on a more philosophical approach. Although there is no unified representation of Cleopatra during the Renaissance, it is fair to state that many representations evidence a sustained effort to rehabilitate the legacy of Cleopatra. Through stressing Cleopatra’s love for Antony, as well as her role in the geology of Rome, Renaissance authors drew attention away from the more lascivious aspects of her story and instead focused it the qualities that made the ancient queen relatable and human.

In response to the venomous condemnations of late medieval authors, many sixteenth-century authors posed a defense for the ancient queen. In 1504, the Italian humanist Bernardino Cacciante wrote *Libretto apologetico delle donne*, a book devoted to defending the actions of

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17 It should be noted that the medieval author Geoffrey Chaucer, writing only twenty years after Boccaccio, was more sympathetic to Cleopatra than his predecessor had been. In Chaucer’s *The Legend of the Good Women*, Cleopatra commits suicide out of her great love for Antony; she throws herself into a pit of adders cheerfully so as to join her dead lover. For Chaucer’s text see, Geoffrey Chaucer, ‘The Legend of Cleopatra,’ in *The Complete Works: The Legend of the Good Women*, ed. F.N. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 496-497. For more on Chaucer’s engagement with Boccaccio’s text and his defense of Cleopatra see Anderson, *Tiepolo’s Cleopatra*, 54-55. It should further be noted that it has been proposed that Chaucer was being satirical when he launched his defense of women who were perceived as “bad” throughout history. For this argument see, Gurval, “Dying Like a Queen,” 73-74; Florence Percival, *Chaucer’s Legendary Good Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), see especially pp. 221-239; and Carolynn Van Dyke, *Chaucer’s Agents: Cause and Representation in Chaucerian Narrative* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005), 63-64. If these scholars are correct, then Chaucer’s text should not be considered a prototype of the Renaissance sympathetic treatment of Cleopatra. It would fit better in the theme of representing Cleopatra as a symbol of vice.
famous women. Cacciante’s description of Cleopatra’s life and death represents two dramatic departures from Boccaccio’s text, both of which spring from his careful re-reading of the ancient accounts. In the first instance, Cacciante resurrects Horace and Plutarch’s praise of Cleopatra’s decision to commit suicide rather than be taken captive, calling her a, “nobile et grande regina” (a noble and great queen). In the second, Cacciante emphasizes Cleopatra’s great love for Antony. It would seem that Cacciante was in fact primarily interested in Cleopatra’s love story in his account. For Cacciante, Cleopatra’s suicide was an homage to her great love of Antony. Out of this love, according to Cacciante, Cleopatra placed the snakes close to her heart on her left breast where they bit her nipple. Cacciante subverts the intentionally erotic implications of Cleopatra’s breasts in medieval accounts of her suicide, glorifying her breast as an emblem of love. In renegotiating the breast imagery that had become so enmeshed in the narrative of Cleopatra’s suicide, Cacciante worked against the erotic tide that had come to dominate discussions of Cleopatra’s death.

Cleopatra’s role as the lover of both Julius Caesar and Marc Antony is often referenced as evidence of her wanton sexual behavior. This formulation, however, ignores the by-products of these unions, Cleopatra’s four children, who proved to be significantly influential even after their famous parent’s deaths. With Caesar Cleopatra produced one son, Caesarion (little Caesar,) who was born on 23 June 47 B.C. Cleopatra clearly relished her position as progenitor. She groomed her son to be her successor and even ruled jointly with him from 37 B.C. until her death in 30 B.C. An image on the east wall of the Temple of Denderah commemorates their co-rulership (Fig. 11, Temple of Denderah). Caesarion constituted Caesar’s sole male heir, and although he was not recognized as a legitimate heir in Rome, his direct lineage from the great Caesar made him enough of a threat that Octavian had him killed almost immediately after

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18 Cacciante’s manuscript, Codex 1390, in the Biblioteca Oliveriano, Pesaro was published in an edited edition, see Mario Martini, Bernardino Cacciante Aletrinate: Contributo alla Storia dell’Umanesimo (Sora: Centro di Studi Sorani "Vincenzo Patriarca," 1982). Cacciante writes about Cleopatra’s suicide, “non possendo el iugo de la insueta servitù per pacto alcuno patire, essendo stat si nobile et grande regina, volse più presto morire che vivere serva” (ibid., 106). For further discussion of Cacciante’s description of Cleopatra as a political figure see, Stephen Kolsky, The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio’s De Mulieribus Claris (New York: P. Lang, 2003), 178-179.

19 Martini, Bernardino Cacciante Aletrinate, 106.

20 Kleiner, Cleopatra and Rome, 32.
Cleopatra’s suicide, on 23 August 30 B.C. Octavian’s assassination of Caesarion suggests that he recognized the young Egyptian Pharaoh’s legitimate claim to Caesar’s power.

Cleopatra had three other children with her husband Antony. Although their marriage was never considered legitimate in Rome, Cleopatra considered herself to be Antony’s wife. Furthermore, Antony recognized all three of their children as his own. In 41 B.C. Cleopatra gave birth to twins, Alexander Helios and Cleopatra Selene, and in 36 B.C. Cleopatra produced a second son for Antony, Ptolemy Philadelphus. All three of these children were captured following their parent’s suicides in Alexandria. They were taken to Rome where they formed part of Octavian’s triumphal procession through the city. Following this degrading parade, the children were placed under the care of Octavia, Antony’s first wife and sister of Octavian. The fate of both of Cleopatra and Antony’s male offspring is relatively unknown; it seems that they died of illness shortly after arriving in Rome, Ptolemy Philadelphus perhaps did not even survive the journey. Cleopatra Selene, however, became an important ally of Rome when, sometime after 26 B.C., Augustus married her off to the King of Numidia, Juba II.

In 1517 the Italian humanist Andrea Fulvio published one of the earliest attempts at identifying and recording famous historical figures’ faces based on evidence from ancient coins. Fulvio’s *Illustrium immagines* records the history of Rome through representations of famous visages accompanied by short, explanatory texts. His representation of Cleopatra deserves careful analysis, for it seems to depict the ancient queen not as a seductress, but rather as a respectable and chaste mother (Fig. 12, *Illustrium immagines*). By covering her hair and endowing her face with gentle characteristics, Fulvio visually equates Cleopatra with the other respectable wives and mothers in his account. For just one example of many, note the similarities between Fulvio’s depiction of Cleopatra and his representation of Attia, Octavian’s mother and the niece of Julius Caesar (Fig. 13, *Illustrium immagines*). Both women are depicted wearing a head covering (one that not unimportantly recalls a wimple), and both gaze steadfastly ahead with a small smile playing at their lips. Moreover, Fulvio explicitly recalls Cleopatra’s role as

21 For a more thorough discussion of Cleopatra’s children, see Kleiner, *Cleopatra and Rome*, 24-27.
22 Ibid., 158-159.
23 Ibid., 160.
mother in his accompanying text. He writes that her first child was permitted to be called Caesar. I think it possible that Fulvio, like Cacciante, participates in a pervasive effort during the Renaissance to rehabilitate Cleopatra’s reputation. Like any good public relations campaign, Fulvio draws on Cleopatra’s most endearing and humanizing quality, her role as a mother. By ushering Cleopatra into the category of respectable women in Rome’s long history Fulvio underscores her role as a progenitor.

Both Cacciante’s and Fulvio’s texts work to rehabilitate the image of Cleopatra, rescuing it from the moralizing hands of previous authors. Where Cacciante elevates Cleopatra for her enduring love for Antony, Fulvio emphasizes her role as a mother. I suggest that Cacciante’s and Fulvio’s sensitive treatments of the pivotal moments in Cleopatra’s story in which she becomes a heroine of love are ultimately references to influential ancient accounts. As will become clear in the next section, the ancient texts of both Horace and Plutarch stress the ambiguity inherent in Cleopatra’s story. It is only through engagement with Horace and Plutarch’s texts that artists and authors alike could understand the complicated and highly nuanced nature of Cleopatra’s life and suicide.

**The Authentic Cleopatra: Ambiguity in the Ancient Accounts**

As we have seen, the prevalent image of Cleopatra as a *femme fatale* is ultimately a construct initially invented for propagandistic purposes and subsequently continued for moralistic instruction. In reality Cleopatra’s life and death cannot be so easily defined. Indeed, even the earliest chroniclers struggled to define Cleopatra’s character. On the one hand, the defeated queen did commit several morally questionable offenses, but on the other, she maintained her honor even unto death by committing suicide rather than to be taken captive by her conqueror. In the following section I present a critical reading of the oldest and most authoritative accounts of Cleopatra’s suicide, Horace’s *Ode 1.37* and Plutarch’s *Life of Marc Antony*. Both authors present an undeniably ambiguous picture of the ancient queen, particularly at the moment of her suicide. I ultimately argue that Michelangelo drew inspiration from these ancient authors’ accounts of Cleopatra’s death.

The earliest known account of Cleopatra’s life, today as in the Renaissance, was written by the Roman poet, Quintus Horatius Flaccus, known as Horace (65 to 8 B.C.). Importantly, Horace wrote *Ode 1.37* as political propaganda to support his patron Augustus. As was the case

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with Virgil, Horace was charged with representing Augustus as the moral and political victor over the Egyptian queen. However, unlike Virgil, Horace suggests that he did not see Cleopatra as a completely conquered foe.

Horace’s poetic account of Cleopatra’s suicide in the first of his four *Odes* reflects his conflicting allegiances. In early 31 B.C., Octavian attacked the joint forces of Cleopatra and Antony at Actium. Generally seen as the decisive victory for Octavian and Rome, the Battle of Actium left Antony and Cleopatra’s forces severely weakened. The lovers escaped to Egypt with only a quarter of their fleet. In late August of the following year, Antony and Cleopatra lost the final battle of the war, the Battle of Alexandria, to the army of Octavian. Horace wrote his poem shortly after the Battle of Alexandria. True to its propagandistic purpose, *Ode 1.37* clearly celebrates and praises the ultimate victor of the war. However, Horace also seems to suggest, even if covertly, that Augustus could not fully subjugate the ancient queen.

Although Horace makes clear Cleopatra’s moral depravity, calling her “*fatale monstrum*” (fatal or deadly monster) at a critical juncture in the poem’s organization, in the final three stanzas of the poem where he describes her suicide, he shifts away from wholeheartedly condemning the dead queen and instead presents a woman who has gained nobility in death. Horace writes, “She had the strength of mind to gaze on her ruined palace with a calm countenance, and the courage to handle the sharp-toothed serpents . . . She would not be stripped of her royalty and conveyed to face a jeering triumph: no humble woman she.” Even Horace’s Roman audience would have had to concede when reading his account that Cleopatra’s decision to die rather than be captured by Octavian was a noble decision. The ancient Greeks and Romans

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27 The phrase *fatale monstrum* has a long and complicated history in translation. As it comes at the very moment of Horace’s transition from censure to praise of Cleopatra, it deserves serious consideration. For a compelling argument for a dualistic meaning of the phrase, see J.V. Luce “Cleopatra as Fatale Monstrum (Horace, Carm. 1. 37. 21),” *The Classical Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (1963): 251-257. Luce argues that Horace’s term *fatale monstrum* carries the weight of representing Cleopatra as both a formidable opponent whom Octavian mythically conquered at the Battle of Actium and a morally deviant person. This is an important point to consider in light of Octavian’s intensive propaganda campaign against Cleopatra that relied on turning her into a damnable creature who needed to be dethroned.

saw suicide as the only honorable alternative to dishonor and defeat. In taking her own life, then, Cleopatra died honorably and courageously.

The second major account of Cleopatra’s life and death appears over one hundred years after Horace’s Odes in Plutarch’s Life of Marc Antony of ca. 75 A.D. Despite his temporal remove from the actual events Plutarch holds historical credibility for he credits his information to his grandfather, Lamprias, who was friendly with Cleopatra’s personal physician Olympus. Writing many years into the Roman Imperial era and as a Greek by birth, Plutarch had little interest in participating in a propaganda campaign for a long-dead ruler. Indeed, in all of his writings, Plutarch remains detached from issues of politics. His primary interest in writing the Parallel Lives was to present a commentary on the moral virtues and vices of famous men throughout Greek and Roman history.

Plutarch discusses Cleopatra in his Life of Antony. Throughout the text he oscillates between demonizing the Egyptian Queen and yet, in describing her suicide, emphasizing her courage in taking her own life. For the most part, Plutarch’s account focuses on enumerating Cleopatra’s vices of lust, greed and gluttony, and how those vices led to the dishonorable downfall of Antony. However, like Horace before him, Plutarch has to grant Cleopatra dignity in her choice of death rather than capture. In both of the ancient accounts then, the authors present a picture of a woman who was both morally corrupt and yet heroic in her refusal to submit to the forces of Augustus.

Horace and Plutarch’s presentations of Cleopatra are undeniably ambiguous. Neither author it would seem could definitively label the ancient queen as good or bad. Their accounts grapple with the fact that Cleopatra was indeed comprised of both great moral failures as well as an unquestionable, tide-changing moment of courage and love. Importantly, for the ancient authors, this climactic moment comes only at Cleopatra’s death. Cleopatra’s humanity was saved

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29 Robert A. Gurval, “Dying like a Queen: The Story of Cleopatra and the Asp in Antiquity,” in Cleopatra: A Sphinx Revisited, ed. Margaret M. Miles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 64. Gurval adds that the asp was a specific type of snake reserved for Pharaohs. Like the hemlock plant for Greeks, the asp stood for an honorable choice as a means of suicide.


32 Plutarch, Lives IX, 318-323.
at the razor-thin moment of time when she took her own life. I propose that Michelangelo captured this moment in his own depiction of Cleopatra.

Michelangelo’s *Cleopatra* exists in the liminal space between life and death, victory and defeat, condemnation and praise. Michelangelo even seems to suggest a liminal time of day in his careful shading across the right side of Cleopatra’s face indicating an indirect and unidentified light source off the left side of the sheet. Most importantly, though, Cleopatra is literally between life and death; the asp has bitten her breast, but the poison has not yet taken its toll. She is still alive, but her death is imminent. Moreover, Michelangelo’s *Cleopatra* easily calls to mind Horace’s words about the queen’s “calm countenance” and “courage” that garnered his praise. The very characteristics that saved Cleopatra’s reputation (in part) are highlighted in Michelangelo’s drawing. Cleopatra’s steady gaze over her right shoulder and her untroubled visage suggest a graceful acceptance of her destiny. She is presented to the viewer at the very moment that her sins of arrogance and greed are countered by her final act of courage. This intentional ambiguity in the drawing, which reflects the ancient accounts, suggests that Michelangelo wanted to convey to Cavalieri a very specific image of the ancient queen.

In his *Cleopatra*, Michelangelo makes reference to the courage and nobility of Cleopatra as one of the final political figures of the Roman Republic. His depiction underscores Cleopatra’s venerable qualities, her courage and resolve in taking her own life, as well as her admirable pride in refusing to submit to Octavian. Moreover, the image makes reference to the final moments of the ancient Roman Republic. Although the years preceding the fall of the Republic were marked by multiple civil wars and conflicts, the final war of the Roman Republic sealed its fate. Cleopatra and Antony’s loss at the Battle of Alexandria and their subsequent suicides signaled the decisive end to the Republic. Michelangelo’s drawing not only recalls the ambiguity of the ancient accounts that suggest Cleopatra’s courage in death, but also the weighty political moment that her death represents.

**Cleopatra as the Captive Queen of Rome**

Cleopatra’s political significance became an important theme during the Renaissance following the discovery of a late Hellenistic statue of what was believed to be a dying Cleopatra (Fig. 14; Rome, Vatican Museums). Although it is now known as a Sleeping Ariadne, Renaissance viewers assumed the statue to be a depiction of Cleopatra primarily because of a
snake bracelet wrapped around her upper arm.\textsuperscript{33} In the following pages I discuss how the owner of the statue, Pope Julius II (1503-1513), utilized the ancient work to secure his own political rule. Following Augustus’s seminal propagandistic use of Cleopatra, Julius fabricated the idea of Cleopatra as the “captive queen” of Rome. This designation was disseminated throughout Italy through prints, paintings, and epigrammatic poems as propaganda in support of Julius and the papacy.

Returning to the earliest known record of Cleopatra’s death, Horace writes with a note of admiration that Cleopatra refused to be led to face a “jeering triumph.”\textsuperscript{34} Cleopatra knew well the tradition of the triumph from her time spent in Rome with Julius Caesar in 44 and 46 B.C. She knew that upon the victor’s return to the city, his captives and booty would be marched through the city to the top of the Capitoline Hill. In taking her own life, Cleopatra denied Octavian the glory of displaying her as the victim of his conquest. According to Plutarch, Octavian was so enraged upon hearing news of Cleopatra’s suicide he called for one of the psylli—Libyan men who were purportedly able to suck venom from a snake wound and heal the bitten—to rouse her.\textsuperscript{35} When their efforts failed, he ordered a statue of the dead queen be made in order to display her effigy in his triumph. There are no records of what this statue looked like, but we do know the queen was arranged as if she were lying on a couch. This follows the idea present in Plutarch that Cleopatra had positioned herself upon a luxurious bed before allowing the snakes to bite her arms.\textsuperscript{36} I suggest that, for Julius, the recently discovered statue believed to be of Cleopatra recumbent on a couch resonated with the ancient accounts regarding Octavian’s effigy of the defeated Cleopatra.

The Vatican Cleopatra enters the documentary record in a February 1512 inventory of the Vatican collections as a Cleopatra recently acquired by Pope Julius II.\textsuperscript{37} By August of 1512,

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\item \textsuperscript{34} Horace, Odes and Epodes, 48 and 261.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Plutarch, Lives IX, 329.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 335 and Gurval, “Dying Like a Queen,” 64. Plutarch is the first to reference Cleopatra’s decision to adorn herself in royal regalia and diadem and lay down on a couch before she took her own life.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Haskell and Penny, Taste and the Antique, 184. Julius purchased the statue from the Roman
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Julius had the statue installed as part of a fountain in the Belvedere statue court. According to Hans Brummer, the entire Julian program of the court, which included the Cleopatra, the Laocoon and the Apollo Belvedere, worked to promote Julius as the new Augustus and moreover, the pope as the continuation of the Roman Emperors. A reference to the effigy of Cleopatra paraded at the defeat of the Republic is thus an appropriate image for Julius’s collection. Like the first Augustus before him, Julius was to consolidate power in the city of Rome and rule as the rightful heir to the ancient emperors.

That the Vatican Cleopatra was widely known is evidenced by several drawings and prints. The earliest known drawing that was circulated is by Francisco de Hollanda and it records the statue with its Renaissance base in a grotto-like space (Fig. 15; Escorial, Biblioteca del Real Monasterio de San Lorenzo, ca.1538-39). Where Hollanda’s drawing depicts the statue as it would have appeared before the restoration carried out ca. 1540, Marcantonio Raimondi’s engraving after Raphael’s drawing of the statue isolates it from its fountain context (Fig. 16; London, Victoria and Albert Museum; ca. 1530). Raimondi gives his viewer a close-up view of the full-length sculpture. Through these drawings and prints, and others like them, Italian patrons acquired the visual aids necessary to commission their own copies of the famous ancient statue. Numerous copies of the Vatican statue were made in marble, bronze, wax and paint for patrons

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Angelo Maffei for a great sum of money. Although the exact amount is unknown, it is said that the statue was still being paid off during the pontificate of Paul III (1534-1549). For the discovery of the statue, see W. Amelung, Die Skulpturen des vaticanischen Museums 1 (Berlin, 1903), 636 n. 414.

38 Brummer, Statue Court, 156.


40 For a list of all drawings after the Vatican Cleopatra see Phyllis Pray Bober and Ruth Rubinstein, with contributions by Susan Woodford, Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture: A Handbook of Sources (London: Oxford University Press, 1986), 113-114.

41 Brummer, Statue Court, 220-222.
across Western Europe; four large-scale statuary fountains were even made on its model. Indeed, Italian humanists were enthralled by the ancient statue and its alluring references to the historical figure of Cleopatra. The problem for Julius and his successors, however, was that removed from the rest of the works in the Belvedere statue court, the isolated image of a dying Cleopatra did not convey the meaning it held as an essential component of Julius’s program of imperial propaganda. Although the Vatican Cleopatra worked primarily within the statue ensemble at the Belvedere as previously mentioned, there is evidence that Julius, as well as his successor Pope Leo X, utilized epigrammatic poetry to facilitate an imperial reading even without the presence of the other statues.

During their respective pontificates, Julius and then Leo commissioned at least three poems dedicated to the statue that referenced the defeat of the Queen and the Egyptian Empire. Each poem made clear the failures of Cleopatra and the ultimate victory of the Roman Empire, and especially Augustus. In the earliest of the epigrammatic poems, the Roman humanist Evangelista Maddalena de’Capodiferro, also known as Faustus, writes:

I who held the Nile have now become the tenant of a little spring, and teach men that great power is not to be trusted. I, who, conquered, refused by death to follow the triumphal procession of Augustus, now, stone, serve your waters, Julius. (emphasis added)

In Faustus’s poem, Julius succeeds where Augustus had failed. Where Augustus could not parade his conquest in triumph, Julius fully conquers the queen and forces her to submit to his almighty rule. In the end, Julius avenges his forbearer to whom Cleopatra had denied a rightful and deserved triumph.

The most famous of the honorific poems dedicated to the statue, penned by Baldassare Castiglione in 1515, furthers Faustus’s claim for Julius’s vengeance. Castiglione’s poem became

42 For copies made in various materials see Haskell and Penny, Taste and the Antique, 186. Haskell and Penny record, amongst others, Isabella d’Este’s small marble copy, Primaticcio’s bronze cast for Francois I and Poussin’s wax copy. All of the examples they enumerate point to the widespread popularity of the statue. For the statuary fountains see Elisabeth B. MacDougall, “The Sleeping Nymph: Origins of a Humanist Fountain Type,” Art Bulletin 57, no. 3 (1975): 357. Angelo Colocci and Hans Goritz commissioned copies in the early 1520s and there is evidence that the type spread to Venice and Sicily in the late 1520s.

43 Evangelista Maddalena de’Capodiferro, De Fonte Cleopatrae, Cod. Vat. lat. 3351, fols. 122r-v. Translated by Brummer, Statue Court, 221-222.
widely known after it was printed in 1530, most likely due to Pope Leo’s particular affinity for it. The poem became so popular that when the *Cleopatra* was moved into the Vatican’s Stanza della Cleopatra in 1550, Castiglione’s poem was inscribed on one of the pilasters of the supporting base. In Castiglione’s poem, the allusion to Octavian’s stone effigy of the defeated queen is solidified and the connection between Julius and Octavian is made all the more overt. Castiglione writes as the dead Cleopatra:

> For a long time my conquerors forbade me to break off my life, doubtless so I, a captive queen, might be borne in a thronging triumphal procession, and, turned slave, wait upon Roman daughters in law

( emphasis added)

In Castiglione’s poem as in the one by Faustus, Cleopatra speaks of herself in Roman terms, as the captured booty of the Roman victory at Alexandria, despite the fact that there are no ancient accounts that suggest that Cleopatra was ever captured or imprisoned by Octavian.

According to Plutarch, Cleopatra killed herself inside the mausoleum she had built for herself and Antony. After losing the Battle of Alexandria, Cleopatra rushed to her tomb before any of Octavian’s men could capture her. Although no description of the mausoleum is given, Plutarch does write that Cleopatra hoisted Antony in through her window, making clear that the queen was inside a windowed room. He also writes that before Cleopatra took her own life, she had a bath drawn and afterwards partook of a sumptuous feast. In Plutarch’s account, not only was Cleopatra never alone in her final days, but also she was treated as befits a queen, adorned with royal robes and provided with luxurious sleeping accommodations. Nowhere does Plutarch mention chains or a prison cell. Indeed, the emergence of visual depictions of Cleopatra in chains

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44 Brian A. Curran, “Love, Triumph, Tragedy: Cleopatra and Egypt in High Renaissance Rome,” in *Cleopatra: A Sphinx Revisited*, 256. A firm date for the relocation of the statue is difficult to ascertain. However, there are records of a final payment to Daniele da Volterra in 1555 indicating that the project was completed by that date. Additionally, an engraving from 1560 confirms that the statue was in this location by 1560.

45 Ibid., 119. Curran notes that Michelangelo utilized the “speaking statue” device most famously when he gave voice to his figure of *La notte* on the tomb of Giuliano de’ Medici.


or behind bars must be a response to Castiglione’s widely known poem in which she is said to have been a captive.

The first instance of Cleopatra behind bars appears in ca. 1530, soon after the publication of Castiglione’s poem. Giampietrino’s painting of Cleopatra (Fig. 17; Oberlin, Ohio, Allen Memorial Art Museum) depicts a standing Cleopatra inside a darkened room with bars across the small window in the far right corner. She averts her eyes and gazes over her right shoulder as the snake grasps her nipple between its fangs. Cleopatra is shown nude save a green head covering, a small pendant hanging around her neck, and a pair of earrings peaking out from under her curled hair. Outside the barred window we see an illuminated interior replete with symbols of Imperial Rome – fluted columns, multiple arches atop which runs a decorative frieze. This interior is certainly not meant to evoke images of Cleopatra’s own palace in Alexandria. What Giampietrino suggests in his painting is that Cleopatra died alone, in a dark and dank prison cell.  

Around the same time as Giampietrino’s painting, Hans Sebald Beham produced his own engraving of Cleopatra Seated (Fig. 18; ca. 1530, London, Warburg Institute). If Giampietrino suggested that Cleopatra was imprisoned, Beham makes it expressly clear by depicting a writhing, miserable woman trapped inside a cramped cell. There is neither nobility nor courage expressed in this image of Cleopatra’s death, only desperation and pain. Beham presents an anachronistic prison cell complete with a metal foot chain attached to a hard, wooden cell bench. The small arched window behind the seated Cleopatra is barred and emits only enough light to illuminate her dying body. Beham’s print strips Cleopatra of any dignity in death and visually represents Faustus’s and Castiglione’s vision of a defeated, captive queen.

Cleopatra and Resistance to Papal Authority

The image of Cleopatra imprisoned by Octavian was a Renaissance fabrication furthered in epigrammatic poems and artistic productions. In at least one case, the Vatican Cleopatra, the image of a captive queen worked to establish papal authority as a continuation of

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48 Giampietrino painted another version of this painting several years prior to the Oberlin Cleopatra (Bucknell University Art Gallery, Lewisburg, PA; 1524-26). As in the Oberlin composition, Cleopatra is inside a darkened room nearly nude with a snake latched onto her nipple. Additionally, the female figures in both versions share a similar facial expression of ambivalent acceptance of the snake’s bite. However, in the Bucknell version, Cleopatra is seated and there are no overt references to her as a prisoner.
imperial power stemming from the first Roman emperor Augustus. I turn now to another example of a politicized representation of Cleopatra, only here I want to emphasize that the figure of Cleopatra was also used during the Renaissance to evoke resistance to Rome and to papal authority.

In ca. 1492-93, the Venetian sculptor Tullio Lombardo restored a late Hellenistic statue recognized today as the Muse of Philiskos as a standing Cleopatra (Fig. 19; Venice, Museo Archeologico Nazionale). Debra Pincus has demonstrated that the statue is an ancient sculptural fragment restored by Tullio Lombardo using contemporary elements. Tullio’s additions consist of: head and neck, left hand, supporting pillar, raised right arm from below the elbow, sections of drapery on the mantle and chiton, and the vessel held in the right hand. He also re-carved and repaired the original drapery. Essentially Tullio restored an ancient marble fragment to create a full-length female figure. That the statue is a Cleopatra is made clear by the small snake wrapped around her upper arm, not unlike the snake armband found in the Vatican Cleopatra. The snake armband was part of the original Hellenistic fragment. Presumably Tullio took the armband to signify that the statue originally depicted Cleopatra, and thus he fashioned his own additions to support that reading. In order to transform the statue as a depiction of Cleopatra, Tullio focused on the head of the queen, emphasizing a royal diadem and fashioning the face to display intense emotion befitting the moment of her death.

In the first instance, the diadem recalls Plutarch’s ancient account that before dying Cleopatra bathed herself, ate a sumptuous meal and dressed herself in all of her regalia, including her diadem. In the examples discussed previously, Cleopatra is never represented as an ennobled queen at the moment of her death. In Tullio’s statue, however, Cleopatra appears as in

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49 Debra Pincus, “Tullio Lombardo as Restorer of Antiquities: An Aspect of Fifteenth Century Venetian Antiquarianism,” Arte Veneta 33 (1981): 29-42. Tullio’s restoration was carefully done to harmonize with the antique fragment. Therefore, determining which elements of the statue constitute the Renaissance additions proves difficult to discern by the naked eye. Pincus looked carefully at the stylistic elements of the figure that corresponded with Tullio’s other works to certify her claims.

50 Ibid., 32. In a 1736 inventory of the Statuario Pubblico, the statue is listed as a Cleopatra at the moment when she receives the bite of the asp. However, as was the case with the Vatican Ariadne, in the late eighteenth century the identification of Tullio’s Cleopatra was rejected. In 1866 the historian Giuseppe Valentinelli recognized in the snake armband the serpent armilla popular in antique statues of Muses. The statue has since been renamed the Muse of Philiskos.

51 Plutarch, Lives IX, 320.
the ancient accounts complete with carefully coiffed hair and prominent diadem. Secondly, Tullio cements the statue’s identity as Cleopatra by endowing her face with an intense, almost theatrical expression. Tullio’s *Cleopatra* seems to speak to the viewer; with her lips slightly parted and arm outstretched, she beckons the viewer closer to hear her final dying words. Tullio was clearly interested in the dramatic possibilities of the moment of Cleopatra’s death. He was also interested, according to Pincus, in depicting ancient heroes and heroines in the act of noble suffering, an antique virtue in its own right. By giving his *Cleopatra* an expression of controlled anguish, Tullio drew an association with the category of exemplary ancient heroines such as Lucretia. As we have seen, this type of depiction is a dramatic break from the sexualized and vilified representations of Cleopatra that emerged from medieval condemnations. This begs the question, why would Tullio remake an ancient fragment into a venerable representation of the ancient queen? I argue, as others have before me, that this novel interpretation of Cleopatra’s death was done for political reasons that pertain immediately to the patron of the restoration project.

Scholars continue to debate who the patron of the statue may have been, but all agree that the commission revolved around “strong political references of a directly anti-Rome nature.” Tullio’s *Cleopatra* was eventually acquired by the patrician Grimani family, who produced three doges and was active in Venetian politics throughout the Renaissance. The family also formed part of a political faction that resisted papal authority exercised from Rome. Tensions between Venice and Rome ran deep in part due to the onerous taxes the papacy levied on the thriving trading city. Furthermore, Venice sought to appropriate the ancient past of Rome, in part by employing ancient sculpture in developing its own creation myth. Prominent

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52 Pincus, “Tullio Lombardo as Restorer of Antiquities,” 34-45. Pincus cites Antico’s bronze bust of *Cleopatra* (Boston, Museum of Fine Arts; ca. 1525), Mosca’s relief of *The Death of Cleopatra* (Rennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts; ca. 1580) as well as Mosca’s *Antony and Cleopatra* (Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria, ca. 1580) as additional examples of Northern Italian artists presenting Cleopatra as a stoic classical figure.

53 Ibid., 40. Pincus argues that Tullio’s patron was the Venetian humanist and politician Ermolao Barbaro. Refuting Pincus’s claim, Alison Luchs argues that the patron was the Venetian politician and author Girolamo Donato whose writings included a defense of Venice. See Alison Luchs, *Tullio Lombardo and Ideal Portrait Sculpture in Renaissance Venice, 1490-1530* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 26-29.

Venetian families utilized their antiquities collections to present their city as a new Rome, rather than as a shaky structure supported by wooden pilings rising atop the waters of the Adriatic Sea.\(^5^5\)

Although it was not on public display until the late sixteenth century, Tullio’s *Cleopatra* was complete by 1493. A little over a year later, in September of 1494, Michelangelo arrived in the city of Venice having fled Florence following the first overthrow of the Medici family.\(^5^6\) Not much is known about Michelangelo’s first trip to Venice and it is unlikely that he would have seen Tullio’s sculpture at this point in time as he was only documented in Venice for 14 days.\(^5^7\) However, Michelangelo made another trip to Venice in 1529, again due to Medici conflict in Florence. This time, though, instead of fleeing with the Medici, he was fleeing from them. Although there is no way to know for sure, it is feasible that Michelangelo would have come into contact with Tullio’s restored ancient statue believed to be an image of the dying Cleopatra. It is further imaginable that Michelangelo’s viewing of the ancient statue would have resonated with his own personal experience at that very moment defending the Republic of Florence against the tyrannical forces of the Medici.

\(^{55}\) Wendy Heller, “Dancing Statues and the Myth of Venice: Ancient Sculpture on the Opera Stage,” in *Theatricality in Early Modern Art and Architecture*, ed. C. van Eck and S. Bussels (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 305-319. When Cardinal Giovanni Grimani died in 1593, his collection, which included Tullio’s *Cleopatra*, was donated to the Statuario Pubblico of the city. According to Heller, the Public Statuary then became a kind of theatre in Venice that aided the city in perpetuating its creation myth. Statues of ancient Romans figured prominently in the collection. We know from an account by the sixteenth-century English traveler Thomas Coryate that the Public Statuary collection contained at least two statues of Julius Caesar and two of Cleopatra. Although all of these statues were fragmentary, they were still utilized on the stage of the Grimani family’s opera houses. On the opera stage, Venetian actors would mock statues of Roman Imperial figures such as the Julian-Claudian emperors while venerating the role models of the Roman Republic. Cleopatra appeared in these productions as a celebrated victim of the Empire whose dignity in death confirmed her superiority to Imperial Rome. In sum, the opera stage became a platform for the Venetians to demonstrate their superiority to Imperial Rome and its extension, the papacy.


\(^{57}\) It has been proposed that Michelangelo’s Florentine *David* is indebted to his encounter with Tullio’s Vendramin tomb, specifically the *Adam*, during this first trip to Venice in 1494. For a more detailed discussion see Luchs, *Tullio Lombardo*, 48.
Importantly, there is a direct link between Tullio’s representation of Cleopatra with a diadem and Michelangelo’s own depiction of the queen. Careful inspection of Michelangelo’s *Cleopatra* reveals two faint parallel lines running across the figure’s forehead. Upon first glance one may assume that they indicate worry or frown lines. However, closer investigation of the original drawing (with the aid of a magnifying glass) reveals that the two lines in fact represent a band. Not only is the half of an inch or so space between the two lines noticeably lighter than the rest of the figure’s face, but also, on the far right of the band there is a barely discernible square attachment. Nearly impossible to detect in reproductive photographs due to the severely damaged nature of the drawing, the attachment, which looks like a square brooch, is highly decorated with a swirling, almost floral, motif. I think it possible that Michelangelo’s inclusion of a forehead band complete with a decorative fixture may well be a nod to Plutarch’s specification of Cleopatra’s diadem worn during her suicide.\(^5^8\) Michelangelo’s inclusion of a diadem works to cement my claim that the artist consciously and purposefully referenced the ancient source of Plutarch in his drawing. Moreover, the diadem underscores Cleopatra’s nobility and dignity in the final moments of her life.

**Michelangelo’s *Cleopatra*: Heroine or Villain?**

In this chapter I have suggested that Michelangelo depicts Cleopatra as she was described in the ancient accounts. Specifically I have proposed that the *Cleopatra* drawing captures the ambiguous nature of these accounts. In the final section of this chapter, I argue that Michelangelo’s *Cleopatra* was not just loosely based on an antique idea. It was not a purely imaginative work of art without visual precedent. In the following pages I propose that Michelangelo’s drawing was inspired, in part, by what was believed to be the most complete and most authentic ancient representation of Cleopatra at the Vatican.

Michelangelo was not alone in his desire to access the character of the ancient queen. Antiquarians throughout the city of Rome were collecting antique statues of Cleopatra. In 1556 the famous Bolognese naturalist and author Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522-1605) published a book on

\(^5^8\) Importantly, there are other examples of Cleopatra depicted with a diadem, most notably Antico’s bronze bust of *Cleopatra*. I would argue that Antico’s bust takes on the same tone and narrative moment as Tullio’s statue as well as Michelangelo’s drawing in that each represents the queen as a noble sufferer. For a discussion of the psychological interiority conveyed in Antico’s *Cleopatra* see Leonard N. Amico, “Antico’s ‘Bust of the Young Marcus Aurelius,’” *J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* 16, (1988): 103.
the collections of antique statuary in the city of Rome. Aldrovandi records no less than eight examples of prominent Roman citizens whose collections boasted statue fragments believed to depict Cleopatra.\(^{59}\) Michelangelo knew of at least one of the ancient statues of Cleopatra located in Rome, although it is very likely that he knew many more, perhaps all. Aldrovandi writes of a *colosso della testa di Cleopatra antica* in the collection of R. di Cesis. Also in Cesis’s collection was a statue of a woman in antique clothes, without any arms, that Michelangelo praised as the most beautiful thing in the city of Rome.\(^{60}\)

Aldrovandi’s account is especially valuable because the author informs his reader of the historical context for each of the statues. His description of a statue in the collection of the *Reverendissimo* di Carpi (Cardinal Pio Ridolfo da Carpi) is illuminating of the way in which antiquarians approached ancient statues of Cleopatra. Aldrovandi writes, “There is a statue of a clothed woman, but with bare arms: there is a snake which bites her arm; they believe that it is

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\(^{59}\) Ulisse Aldrovandi, *Tutte le statue antiche, che in Roma in diversi luoghi, e case particulari si beggono, raccolte e descritte per Ulisse Aldroandi*, ed. Margaret Daly Davis. In *Fontes* 29 (University of Heidelberg, 2009), 14-155. http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/volltexte/2009/704/. The first edition of Aldrovandi’s text was published in Venice in 1556. It was reprinted twice, once in 1558 and again in 1562. Aldrovandi records Cleopatra statues (or fragments of statues) present in multiple collections, which I list here: A full size ancient statue incorporated into a fountain structure in the collection of Pope Julius II (15-17); a *colosso della testa di Cleopatra antica* (colossal ancient head of Cleopatra,) in the collection of R. di Cesis (30); a fragmentary head of Cleopatra in the collection of M. Paolo Manilio (35); A *testa di Cleopatra col petto mezzo vestito* (head of Cleopatra with her breast half clothed,) in the collection of Maestro Francesco Riggattiero Francese (58); a *statua d’una donna vestita, ma con le braccia ignude: ha un serpe che gli morde il braccio; credono, che sia Cleopatra regina dell’Egitto* (a statue of a clothed woman, but with bare arms; there is a serpent which bites her arm; believed to be Cleopatra Queen of Egypt,) in the collection of Reverendissimo di Carpi (76); a fragmentary piece of marble, *nel quale pare che sia Cleopatra col serpe al petto*, (which seems to be Cleopatra with the serpent at her breast,) in the collection of M. Domenico de Nigris (117-118); a head of Cleopatra in the collection of M. Domenico Capotio (120); and a *antica statua giacere, et e Cleopatra* (ancient reclining statue, and it is Cleopatra,) in the collection of M. Stefano dal Bufalo (137). Aldrovandi also mentions Cleopatra in reference to four bronze columns at the Lateran that were said to be made by Augustus out of the scraps of material from the defeated ships of Cleopatra and Antony. He claims that the columns were previously located at the Capitoline Hill (151-152.)

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 20. That Aldrovandi includes Michelangelo’s commentary suggests that he knew the artist personally. Aldrovandi was in fact connected to Michelangelo through his relative, Giovan Francesco Aldrovandi, who was an early Bolognese patron of Michelangelo. See Luisa Ciammetti, “Note biografiche su Giovan Francesco Aldrovandi,” in *Giovinezza di Michelangelo*, ed. Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt (Firenze: Skira, 1999), 139-141.
Cleopatra Queen of Egypt, who did not come alive in the hand of Augustus, who wanted to die bitten by a snake; although one reads that this was done by the snake bite on her breast.\footnote{Aldrovandi, Tutte le statue, 76. The text reads, “Vi è la statua d’una donna vestita, ma con le braccia ignude: ha un serpe, che gli morde il braccio; credono, che sia Cleopatra Reina dell’Egitto, che per non venir viva in mano di Augusto, volle à questa guisa morire morsicata dal serpe; benche si legga, che si facesse nel petto dal serpe mordere.” Author translation.}

According to Aldrovandi, the identification of the fragment in Cardinal Pio da Carpi’s collection as a representation of Cleopatra is complicated due to the location of the snake. He indicates that the snake’s position on the figure’s arm does not fit with the ancient sources, which he claims have the snake affixed to Cleopatra’s breast. Aldrovandi’s description indicates a degree of residual confusion about the exact location of the bite site on Cleopatra’s body. Even those with access to the ancient accounts were evidently still under the impression, begun as we have seen in the sixth century, that Cleopatra died after a snakebite to her breast. What is most important about this passage in Aldrovandi’s text is that Renaissance audiences were reading the literary sources about Cleopatra’s life and death. Thus, Michelangelo’s decision to depict Cleopatra with a snake affixed to her breast rather than to her arm may be read as a sign of his active engagement with ancient and contemporary sources rather than, as has been suggested, his desire to impart an erotic overtone to the composition.

Although there were multiple fragments of ancient statuary believed to be of Cleopatra Michelangelo would have had access to, the only full-size preserved image of Cleopatra was the Cleopatra at the Vatican. I argue that Michelangelo used this work as a figural source for his own drawing in order to complement his invocation of the ancient sources. However, in his drawing, Michelangelo ultimately subverts Julius’s (and further, Augustus’s) propagandistic use of Cleopatra by choosing to represent her alive and fully awake. Notwithstanding obvious differences, the full body of the sculpture versus the bust length depiction in the drawing, one figure asleep, the other awake, it is possible to draw a comparison between the Vatican Cleopatra and Michelangelo’s Cleopatra.\footnote{Many artists utilized the antique source of the Vatican Cleopatra in their own representations of Cleopatra. Most pertinent to this discussion is David Franklin’s contention that Rosso Fiorentino adapted the arm pose of the Vatican Cleopatra, as well as the snake armband, in his painting The Death of Cleopatra. See David Franklin, Rosso in Italy: The Italian Career of Rosso Fiorentino (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 151. Writing about Rosso’s representation of Cleopatra, Franklin argues that the artist chose to sublimate the violence and eroticism of the scene in order to present a sensitive and meditative moment. Franklin makes}
a subtlety of expression in their tilted faces that points to a similar psychological state. Second, and more importantly, I suggest that there is a formal parallel in the dramatic contortions of the neck in both figures. Both artists here sacrifice logical anatomy in order to present a perfect arabesque line. The only difference is this: Michelangelo’s Cleopatra is not asleep, she is not dead, and most importantly, she is not depicted recumbent as a potential feature of a victory parade. Rather, Michelangelo’s Cleopatra is the conscious queen in control of her own destiny, refusing to be taken captive, just as she is recorded in the ancient sources.

It is important to stress here that Michelangelo never slavishly copied from his sources. Michelangelo often borrowed from the antique to create his own interpretation of classical material. Indeed, Michelangelo’s utilization of the Vatican Cleopatra must be seen as a quotation of a recognizable antique sculpture now reinterpreted to convey a novel narrative. Like Tullio several decades before him, Michelangelo drew upon what was believed to be an ancient representation of Cleopatra to produce an authentic depiction of the ancient queen in keeping with the ancient accounts of her suicide. In so doing Michelangelo capitalized on the ambiguity inherent in the accounts of Horace and Plutarch to create an image of Cleopatra that makes reference to a very specific moment in the history of Cleopatra and of the Roman Republic.

As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, however, it is not enough to say that an image of Cleopatra fits into a particular theme. Indeed, to understand the politicized reading I propose we must turn to the historical circumstances the surrounded its presentation to Cavalieri. In the next chapter, I discuss how Michelangelo’s Cleopatra, the Cleopatra of the ancients, functioned as a reference to the noble glory of the ancient Roman Republic in the context of Michelangelo’s relationship with Tommaso de’Cavalieri.

clear Rosso’s debt to both antique sculpture and the works of Michelangelo in his Roman period works.

63 For Michelangelo’s engagement with the antique see Lisa Koch, “Michelangelo’s Bacchus and the Art of Self-Formation,” Art History 29, no. 3 (2006): 345-386.
CHAPTER THREE

MICHELANGELO, CAVALIERI, AND POLITICS

Scholars traditionally interpret Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s friendship in terms of the artist’s sexuality.¹ Focused primarily on Michelangelo, these discussions do not treat Cavalieri’s prominent role in the civic government of Rome — a role I consider to be a fundamental component of their friendship. The following chapter proposes a new understanding of Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s relationship based on both men’s civic-mindedness, demonstrated through an active involvement in the government of their respective cities. This chapter presents, for the first time in an integrated manner, a consideration of Cavalieri’s political career, particularly his involvement in overseeing the execution of Michelangelo’s projects for the Capitoline Hill. It also reveals how Michelangelo and Cavalieri met in a network of highly powerful republican sympathizers and continued to associate with this group throughout their lives. In light of these facts, I argue that politics played a much larger role in their friendship than has previously been acknowledged and that their shared veneration of republican ideals manifests itself in the Cleopatra.

As discussed in Chapter One the meaning of images of Cleopatra during antiquity and the Renaissance, both literary and visual, depends upon specific historical conditions. Weaving together Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s civic-minded activities between the years 1527 and 1548, I situate the Cleopatra within its proper historical context. A reference to Cleopatra, one of the major political figures during the final period of the Roman Republic, takes on a new meaning in light of Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s own political beliefs. The Cleopatra is ultimately a highly political image exchanged between two highly political friends. This chapter not only illuminates the meaning of Michelangelo’s Cleopatra, but also provides a more nuanced understanding of how politics played a significant role in the two men’s friendship.

The Florentine Exiles in Rome

The years leading up to Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s meeting in 1532 saw great political conflict in both Rome and Florence. In the chaos resulting from the Sack of Rome that began on 6 May 1527, the republican factions of Florence expelled the Medici family and installed the Second Florentine Republic. Despite the protests of Pope Clement VII de’Medici, Michelangelo chose to side with his native city. The artist clearly demonstrated his loyalty to the Republic by serving as its military engineer and as a diplomat to gain allies in other regions. Thus on 12 August 1530 when the Republic capitulated to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in league with Clement, Michelangelo was understandably terrified that he would be punished for his actions. Although he eventually received a papal pardon from Clement in November of 1530, Michelangelo never forgot the importance of maintaining an appearance of political neutrality. Against the backdrop of these tumultuous times Michelangelo met Tommaso de’Cavalieri, an ambitious young politician himself, who frequented the circle of Florentine exiles in Rome. As will become clear in this chapter, their friendship was founded on a devotion, if necessarily covert, to the ideals of republican government.

In 1532, the same year that Michelangelo met Cavalieri, Duke Alessandro de’Medici took control of the city of Florence under an imperial edict of Charles V. The fate of republican supporters was tenuous; 150 persons were executed, imprisoned, or banished in the weeks following Alessandro’s ascent to power. With Florence under the thumb of Alessandro and Clement, Michelangelo had to be careful about his connection to Florentine exiles in Rome.

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2 For a discussion of Michelangelo’s role as military engineer in Florence during the Second Republic see Wallace, “Michelangelo’s Drawings for the Fortifications of Florence,” 119-134 and idem, “Studies,” 27-43. In both texts Wallace counters de Tolnay’s observation that the fortification designs Michelangelo executed as military engineer appear to be fanciful experiments in design meant only to satisfy Michelangelo’s aesthetic desires (see Charles de Tolnay, “Michelangelo Studies II: Michelangelo’s Projects for the Fortifications of Florence in 1529,” *Art Bulletin* 22 (1940): 130-137). Wallace argues that the fortification drawings are evidentiary of Michelangelo’s experiments in formal design techniques, his dedication to finding practical and strategic defense strategies, and his desire to prove his credentials to the civic officials who employed him. For Michelangelo as a diplomat to Ferrara during the same period, see William Wallace, “Michelangelo’s Leda: The Diplomatic Context,” *Renaissance Studies* 15, no. 4 (2001): 473-499.

Indeed, during the years immediately following the fall of the Republic, Michelangelo was compelled to cater to the needs of the pope just to ensure the safety of his family living in Florence. Although still forcibly in the service of Clement, Michelangelo managed to gain permission to travel to Rome in order to complete the commission for Pope Julius II’s tomb, which had engaged him since 1505. Ignoring Clement’s allowance of no more than two months absence from Florence, Michelangelo remained in Rome for at least eight months, from sometime before 19 September 1532 until April 1533. Furthermore, despite his justifiable fear, Michelangelo continued associating with known opponents of Medici rule.

The events unfolding in Florence affected the situation in Rome in many ways, not the least of which that many Florentine exiles fled to the Eternal City. These exiles found respite in the circle of Cardinal Niccolò Ridolfi—archbishop of Florence, grandson of Lorenzo de’Medici the Magnificent and outspoken critic of his cousin Alessandro de’Medici, who was named hereditary duke of Florence following the fall of the Republic (r. 1532-1537). Importantly, Ridolfo was also a distant relative of Cavalieri. Ridolfi served as the de facto leader of the Florentine exiles of Rome including Donato Giannotti, Bindo Altoviti, Ippolito de’Medici, and Roberto Strozzi. His home near the church of Sant’Apollinare was a safe haven for the exiles, and his valuable library and impressive antiquities collection drew many humanist visitors. Although Michelangelo was careful to cloak his association with Ridolfi and the other exiles,

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4 Wallace, “Studies,” 159. The artist’s pardon from Clement depended on his ability to complete the Medici Chapel at San Lorenzo within three years, beginning 29 April 1532.
5 Ibid., 23. Michelangelo remained so long in Rome due to Clement’s absence in the city. Clement was in Bologna meeting with Charles V from 12 November 1532 to April 1533. During this time, exiled republicans organized their own emissary to send to Bologna hoping to gain Charles’s support. They did not succeed in their efforts.
6 Ibid., 171 n. 103. During the Republic Ridolfi supported the republican cause. His support for republican rule continued after the Republic’s capitulation. Along with Cardinal Giovanni Salviati, Cardinal Ippolito de’Medici, Cardinal Gaddi and Fillipo Strozzi, Ridolfi formed part of powerful anti-Medicean faction in Rome.
7 Frommel, Michelangelo und Tommaso dei Cavalieri, 72.
8 Wallace, Michelangelo, 170.
9 Frommel, Michelangelo und Tommaso dei Cavalieri, 14. Ridolfi’s house was known as domus sapientiae (house of wisdom).
their names appear throughout his correspondence for the rest of his life. In this complex nexus of personal associations Pierantonio Cecchini, a sculptor and member of Ridolfi’s household, likely orchestrated the meeting between Michelangelo and Cavalieri.

Few details about Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s meeting are known. It is probable, however, that they were introduced either at Ridolfi’s home or at Cavalieri’s home in modern day Largo Argentina. The essential point for this discussion is that Michelangelo and Cavalieri met in a circle of men united by their opposition to Alessandro de’Medici’s rule, as well as their continued efforts to restore Florence to republican government. In light of this fact, it is easy to image that contemporary politics formed part of their friendship. The questions remain: Who was this young man Tommaso de’Cavalieri whom Michelangelo immediately befriended and admired? What evidence is there for his support of the republican cause? The answers lie in both the history of the Cavalieri family and Tommaso’s own career in the civic government of Rome.

Vasari records that Michelangelo maintained friendships with “Cardinale Ridolfi, e Cardinale Maffeo e Monsignor Bembo. . . el Magnifico Messer Ottaviano de’ Medici e Messer Bindo Altoviti.” See Vasari (Barocchi), 1:118.

Frommel, Michelangelo und Tommaso dei Cavalieri, 15. The fact that Cecchini was responsible for arranging Michelangelo’s accommodations as well as currying letters between the two men suggests his intimate involvement in the early days of their friendship. Cecchini is even referenced as “amico nostro” (our friend) in an early letter from Michelangelo to Cavalieri: Carteggio 4:3, CM.

Hirst, Michelangelo the Achievement of Fame, 260-261. It seems probable that the introduction happened at the Cavalieri home for it was but a short distance from the house where Michelangelo lived at the time at Macel de’Corvi.

Frommel, Michelangelo und Tommaso dei Cavalieri, 171 n. 103. Ridolfi traveled to Florence in 1537 after the assassination of Alessandro to try and negotiate a reinstatement of republican government. His efforts failed. By August of 1537, Cosimo I de’Medici had defeated the troops of Strozzi at the Battle of Montemurlo and taken control of Florence.

William Wallace has even suggested that one of the earliest drawings Michelangelo gave to Cavalieri, the Punishment of Tityus, represents their shared political ideals. However, he argues that the Tityus was not explicitly made for Cavalieri, but was instead re-gifted so to speak in light of the two men’s shared interest in current politics. Wallace’s argument for the Tityus as a veiled political message is convincing. However, I see no reason why the Tityus could not have been created for Cavalieri. Michelangelo’s enthusiastic pursuit of friendship with Cavalieri could easily have compelled him to allude to a hypothetical discussion of politics occurring early in their friendship. If Wallace is correct in assuming that the Tityus represents a political message in light of its historical circumstances, then it stands as a precedent for the type of message I propose for the Cleopatra. See, Wallace, “Studies,” 141-176.
The Cavalieri Family

The Cavalieri family held the honorable title of nobilis since the tenth century when, according to family legend, their patriarch was named a head knight of Holy Roman Emperor Otto II (r. 973-983). Very little is known of the family’s history from this time until the birth of Tommaso in 1509. However, what is known strongly suggests that the family held a sustained interest in instituting a republican government in the city of Rome. In at least two known cases a member of the family was killed while involved in a conspiracy to overthrow papal control of Rome and return the city to its republican glory. I propose evaluating Cavalieri’s own role in the civic government of Rome against this background of radical politics.

The first Cavalieri killed in the service of the Roman Republic was executed for his involvement in the 1347 revolution of Cola di Rienzo. Letters exchanged between Cola di Rienzo, a lowborn Roman, and the great Italian poet Petrarch document the story of the revolt. Throughout the exchange, Petrarch commends Rienzo for his bravery and his patriotism, adding that he has only words to support the cause. In May of 1347, while Stefano Colonna’s troops were away from the city and Pope Clement VI was in Avignon, Cola gathered support from the Roman people to free the city from the rule of the pope and the barons. Cola proclaimed Rome a Republic and declared himself tribune of the people. Although his reign was short-lived, ending in just seven moths, it points to a widespread desire amongst the Roman people to end papal tyranny. In the wake of the revolt, Rienzo was exiled from Rome and many of his co-conspirators were either exiled or, as in the case with Cavalieri’s ancestor, killed.

The desire to see Rome return to the days of Republican rule continued into the fifteenth century, and the Cavalieri remained prominently involved. A second Cavalieri family member died during the 1453 Porcari conspiracy against Pope Nicholas V (r. 1447-1455). Roman-born politician Stefano Porcari began his career as the capitano del popolo of Florence in 1427.

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15 Frommel, Michelangelo und Tommaso dei Cavalieri, 69.
16 Ibid.
18 Cola di Rienzo eventually returned to Rome in 1354, this time as a senator. Again, his rule was brief; he was assassinated on the steps of the Capitol just two months after his return. For a comprehensive discussion of the revolution see, Ronald Musto, Apocalypse in Rome: Cola di Rienzo and the Politics of the New Age (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
During his time in Florence, Porcari befriended the civic humanists Leonardo Bruni and Matteo Palmieri. At the urging of his friends Porcari read the ancient texts of Livy and Sullust concerning the Roman Republic. When Porcari returned to Rome in 1447, he began to proselytize the benefits of republican rule. Porcari was successful in exciting the emotions of his fellow Romans. Over the next five years he amassed a large group of dedicated followers. He and his accomplices planned to reclaim control over the civic government on 6 January 1453, the feast of the Epiphany. Their plan was to set fire to the Vatican stables, seize the pope and the cardinals in Saint Peter’s, and then take over the senate. They would then gain control of Castel Sant’Angelo and proclaim Rome a Republic, declaring Porcari tribune of the people, a title that Cola di Rienzo had applied to himself in the prior century. Unfortunately for the conspirators, they were betrayed by one of their own members. Porcari was arrested, tried, and eventually executed on 9 January 1453. It is likely the Cavalieri conspirator, whose name has not come down to us, died this same day.

Tommaso de’Cavalieri was born in 1509, less than two generations after the fateful Porcari conspiracy. His mother, whose name is not known, was the daughter of the Florentine banker Tommaso Baccelli. His father, Mario Cavalieri degli Orsini was the son of Gabriele Orsini, who took the Cavalieri name in 1490 when he wed Giovanna Cavalieri. Through his father, Cavalieri was related to both the Cavalieri family and the Orsini, the great baronial family which counted among its ancestors Pope Nicholas III (r. 1277-1280). Through this line, he was also related to the future cardinals and avid supporters of the Florentine Republic, Ippolito de’Medici and Niccolò Ridolfi. When seen in the light of family history, Cavalieri’s decision to spend his career in the service of the civic government of Rome is both unsurprising and appropriate.

Michelangelo and Cavalieri in Rome

In September 1534, following the death of Pope Clement VII, Michelangelo left Florence for Rome, never to return to his native city. The ensuing years saw both men busy. Michelangelo accepted commissions from Pope Paul III (the Last Judgment and the decoration of the Pauline

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20 Perrig, “Tommaso de’Cavalieri.”
21 Frommel, Michelangelo und Tommaso dei Cavalieri, 72.
Chapel), continued work on the Julius Tomb, and began to design the grandest civic project of the century—the renovation of the Capitoline Hill. Meanwhile, Cavalieri enjoyed a rapid climb through a series of government appointments. He also established a reputation in Rome as a knowledgeable antiquities expert. The two men’s careers overlapped in a significant way at the Capitoline Hill where, in 1548, Cavalieri became one of two official overseers of Michelangelo’s designs. The following discussion highlights pivotal moments in Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s careers that suggest their shared veneration of republican government.

The Aftermath of the Republic: Tyrannicide and Michelangelo’s Brutus

Almost a year after the Second Florentine Republic fell on 5 July 1531 Alessandro de’Medici marched into the city of Florence bearing an imperial edict from Charles V that declared him the new head of state and confirmed the Medici as hereditary dukes. The new government under Alessandro was ostensibly meant to adhere to republican doctrine, however, Alessandro’s father Pope Clement VII had other plans. On 27 April 1532, in a move strikingly similar to Augustus’s subtle dissolution of civic committees, Alessandro de’Medici abolished the city’s constitution, the civic governing body of Florence (the Signoria), and the office of governor (Gonfaloniere). Alessandro assumed the role of a tyrant and continued to rule Florence harshly until his murder in 1537.

In January 1537 Lorenzino de’Medici assassinated his ruthless cousin Alessandro, thus bringing an end to five years of absolutist rule in Florence. Lorenzino’s act of tyrannicide quickly became aligned with the most famous of all assassinations, Marcus Junius Brutus’s murder of Julius Caesar on 15 March 44 B.C. The current political situation in Florence surely resonated with the classical history of the Roman Republic in the minds of republican supporters throughout Italy. To these men Lorenzino was the “Bruto toscano.” Every Florentine who attempted to kill a Medici was deemed a “nuovo Bruto” and was celebrated for his devotion to liberty. This was a moment of potent historical parallels; Alessandro played the role of Caesar,

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23 Ibid., 154.
25 Bernardo Segni, a well-known republican and author of the Storie fiorentine, called Lorenzino the Tuscan Brutus in his account of Florence’s history. Filippo Strozzi, commander of the republican army at the Battle of Montemurlo, also aligned Lorenzino with the ancient republican hero in a letter to the Cardinals Ridolfi and Salviati. See Gordon, “Giannotti, Michelangelo, and
while Lorenzino took on the guise of Brutus. No republican sympathizer could miss the opportunity to capitalize on such a perfect classical allusion. Indeed, Michelangelo himself commemorated the event in a highly controversial, never completed bust of the ancient republican hero.

Against the background of Lorenzino’s murder of Alessandro, Michelangelo’s Brutus of ca. 1539-1541 indicates the artist’s own celebration of tyrannicide (Fig. 20; Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello).\(^{26}\) Scholars debate the dating of the bust, but agree upon a *terminus post quem* of 1539 based on Vasari’s assertion that Michelangelo executed the bust for Cardinal Ridolfi at the request of Donato Giannotti, who entered the cardinal’s service in that year.\(^{27}\) That the bust represents Brutus is made clear by a buckle-shaped fibula on the figure’s right shoulder, which depicts a man with the same physiognomic features as those of Brutus on known ancient Roman coins.\(^{28}\)

Michelangelo’s Brutus provides a precedent for transmitting political ideas through an artistic representation of an historical figure. The next time, and indeed the only other time, that Michelangelo recalled the antique portrait bust tradition in his work was in the Cleopatra. And the formal similarities between the Brutus and the Cleopatra are not confined to their shared *all’antica* bust format. In both cases the figures’ heads turn dramatically to one side while their bodies remain static. Furthermore, I suggest that Michelangelo intended his Cleopatra to look sculptural; that is to say, he carefully modeled her face and neck to produce a vivid three-dimensional effect that recalls ancient sculpture in-the-round. In comparison to the Fall of Phaeton, which we know was inspired by an ancient sarcophagus relief, the Cleopatra appears

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27 Ibid., 281, argues that the bust was commissioned in 1539 when Donato Giannotti entered the service of Cardinal Ridolfi as his secretary. De Tolnay argues for a later date of 1540 based on similarities between the faces of Brutus and faces in the Last Judgment: see de Tolnay, “Michelangelo’s Political Opinions,” 25, and idem, “Michelangelo’s Bust of Brutus,” 22-25.

28 De Tolnay, “Michelangelo’s Brutus,” 23.
far more volumetric. Where the Phaeton obviously emulates ancient reliefs, I believe that the Cleopatra, like the Brutus, was inspired by Michelangelo’s engagement with ancient sculpture in-the-round.

Quite aside from the formal qualities they share, the Brutus and the Cleopatra are also the only two instances of figures drawn from classical history in Michelangelo’s extensive œuvre. Amid the many examples of religious and mythical themes in Michelangelo’s works, the two bust-length figures are the only ones with sources in classical history. In both compositions Michelangelo complemented the ancient subject matter with an equally all’antica stylistic treatment. The essential point for the present discussion is that in the Brutus Michelangelo executed a bust-length representation of a republican hero in the wake of a highly controversial political assassination for a highly political friend. The remainder of this chapter presents the historical context of Michelangelo’s gift of the Cleopatra to Cavalieri to show that it too was a politically charged work of art between highly political friends.

**Michelangelo and Cavalieri at the Campidoglio: Among the Relics of Republican Rome**

On 13 June 1548 the Communal Council of Rome appointed Cavalieri one of the Special Deputies to the Design of the Capitol (Deputati speciali alla fabbrica del Campidoglio). With this new title Cavalieri oversaw the execution of Michelangelo’s designs for the restoration of the Capitoline Hill, thus adding a professional element to their personal friendship. In the same year Cardinal Alessandro Farnese presented to the Roman people recently uncovered fragments of the Fasti Consulares and Fasti Triumphales for display at the Capitoline Hill. These ancient inscriptions record the important civic events and magistrates of Rome’s history, beginning with Romulus and ending with Augustus. The Communal Council appointed Cavalieri to a five-man committee in charge of translating and arranging the inscriptions. The Fasti committee, very likely under the direction of Cavalieri, also commissioned Michelangelo to design an appropriate installation for the fragments. In both of these projects Michelangelo and Cavalieri worked together to resurrect the physical and textual remains of the ancient Roman Republic. I suggest that this direct contact added a new level to Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s friendship. Among the

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29 De Tolnay, Corpus, 3:113 and 199-200. Michelangelo’s compositional arrangement of figures in the Fall of Phaeton was inspired by an ancient sarcophagus then in S. Maria in Aracoeli, now in the Uffizi.

30 Perrig, “Tommaso de’Cavalieri.”
relics of the Republic, the historical parallel between the two men’s own time and that of antiquity became increasingly apparent.

The dating of Michelangelo’s involvement in the restoration of the Capitoline Hill is a much-contested issue (Fig. 21; Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina). Plans for restoring the site had been in the works at least since 1535 in anticipation of Emperor Charles V’s triumphal arrival into the city in 1536. However, lack of funds and political problems continuously halted the project’s progress. A letter from the ambassador to Rome from Urbino dating from mid-December 1537 suggests that Michelangelo was involved in some capacity with the project by this date. That Michelangelo was given Roman citizenship on 10 December of the same year seems to support this speculation.32

Throughout the literature on Michelangelo’s designs for the Capitoline Hill scholars note the presence of republican symbolism. Ackerman related the central oval support for the Marcus Aurelius statue to the legendary cosmological shield of Achilles that accompanied the epithet Kosmokrator—ruler of the Universe. The Roman Emperors subsequently appropriated this title as well as the shield. However, Ackerman suggests that, by the time of the Renaissance, the Communal Council of Rome had claimed use of the military shield as a symbol of civic virtue.33

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31 Argan and Contardi, Michelangelo Architect, 252. Charles was to be given a triumphal entry following his 1535 victory in Tunisia. The project had not even begun by the time of his entry, and the imperial procession ended up circling the hill instead of ascending to the top.

32 Ackerman, The Architecture of Michelangelo, 1:50-51. In the letter, the ambassador refers to Michelangelo’s opposition to Pope Paul III’s proposal to transfer the statue of Marcus Aurelius from the Lateran Basilica to the Campidoglio. Later in the same letter the writer mentions a design for a new base for the statue, however it is unclear whether or not the writer is referencing Michelangelo or the pope’s agent. If it is indeed Michelangelo, then this indicates that he had some role in the design of the Capitoline Hill by late 1537. Charles Burroughs has argued that Michelangelo began conceptualizing the project in the late 1530s: Charles Burroughs, “Michelangelo at the Campidoglio: Artistic Identity, Patronage and Manufacture,” Artibus et Historiae 14, no. 28 (1993): 85-111.

33 For the republican symbolism of the Capitoline Hill project see, Argan and Contardi, Michelangelo Architect, 252-263; Burroughs, The Italian Renaissance Palace Façade, 176-177; and Ackerman, The Architecture of Michelangelo, 1:160-170, see especially the symbolism of the ancient statue of Marcus Aurelius (ibid., 161). Ackerman provides a legendary reading of the rider as il gran villano—a folk hero of the Republic—that provides evidence that the statue was seen as a symbol of anti-monarchical, Republican heroism.
government. Burroughs furthers Ackerman’s argument by suggesting that the Capitoline Hill is a monumental, and ambiguous, representation of Michelangelo’s artistic and political identity. He reads in the antithetical architectural features on the façade of the Conservators’ palace a statement of republican sympathy. For both scholars, the Capitoline Hill evidences Michelangelo’s engagement with contemporary politics in the midst of the ancient seat of republican government.

Cavalieri was responsible for faithfully interpreting Michelangelo’s charged designs. On 14 January 1563 Cavalieri was appointed Deputato special per il Senatorio (deputy to the design of the Senator’s Palace). Michelangelo died just over a year after this appointment, on 18 February 1564. Following Michelangelo’s death, it seems that Cavalieri’s role as overseer of the construction of the Senator’s Palace became more crucial than ever. A record of payment given to a Master Ludovico, a stonemason, suggests that Cavalieri was the sole trustee of Michelangelo’s designs. The record, dated 24 April 1564 just two months after Michelangelo’s death, indicates that a “master Thomao del Cavalieri” had been given the new designs for the Senator’s Palace. It is possible that Michelangelo entrusted the designs to Cavalieri because they both understood the intended republican symbolism embedded within the original plans for the Capitoline Hill complex.

Michelangelo’s proven republican sympathies in his service to the Second Florentine Republic, as well as his commemoration of the assassination of Alessandro de’Medici in the Brutus, provide a prelude to his republican references in the designs for the Capitoline Hill. Cavalieri’s appointment to oversee the execution of the designs may similarly be understood as a natural extension of his own republican sympathies. His family’s history as well as his known association with republican factions in Rome suggest that he shared Michelangelo’s desire for republican rule. In light of both men’s biographies we can conclude that the Capitoline Hill project served as a physical manifestation of their shared veneration of republican government.

34 Ackerman, The Architecture of Michelangelo, 1:169. The Communal Council used the military shield type for their coat of arms. It appears on the ceilings of the Conservators’ palace in ca. 1516-1518 and again in 1544.

35 Burroughs, “Michelangelo at the Campidoglio,” 85-111, see especially 100-111.

36 Perrig, “Tommaso de’Cavalieri.”

37 Argan and Contardi, Michelangelo Architect, 256-262.
Further evidence for Cavalieri’s political opinions lies in his expertise as a Latin scholar and an expert in deciphering Roman antiquities. Cavalieri was well known as an antiquities collector and expert, a knowledgeable judge of artistic matters and a well-educated humanist. Considering his family’s impressive antiquities collection, it is little wonder that Cavalieri had an interest in ancient artifacts. According to Aldrovandi the family collection was comprised of over twenty ancient sculptures including, “statues of a faun, a sleeping putto who holds in his hand a bundle of poppies, a head of a woman who is called a Caryatid with a basket on her head, a Silenus, a Venus and a sleeping Cupid, a beautiful large head of Augustus, a relief of a battle of Hercules and the Centaurs, and also some ancient fragments and numerous ancient inscriptions.”

Cavalieri added to this collection some 280 drawings, many by Michelangelo’s hand, as well as works said to be by artists such as Giotto, Donatello, Perugino, Mantegna and Giovanni da Udine. Cavalieri’s personal collection was recorded in a 1580 inventory created at the time of a sale of a large part of his collection to Giovan Giorgio Cesarini. Cavalieri also

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In 1580 Cavalieri sold four of Michelangelo’s presentation drawings (although it is not known which ones) to Cesarini at his son Emilio’s urging. This sale came shortly after the death of Mario, Cavalieri’s other son, in January of the same year. After Mario’s death Cavalieri rewrote his will in favor of Mario’s many sons. Sickel speculates that the drawings were sold to avoid a dispute between Emilio and his nephews (see Sickel, “Die Sammlung des Tommaso de’Cavalieri,” 181). The presentation drawings eventually entered the collection of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, as Cesarini was Alessandro’s son-in-law through his marriage to Celia Farnese (ibid.,182). The sale was brokered through Emilio who had begun his career as a musician and composer in Cesarini’s household.

A second major sale of items in the Cavalieri collection occurred shortly after Cavalieri’s death in 1587. As the new head of the family, Emilio had to cover the financial expenses of his many nieces and nephews who consistently accumulated debts they could not repay. From November of 1593 to January of 1594, Emilio was forced to pay over 14,000 scudi to his nephew’s
added at least three featherwork shields from New Spain to the family’s collection, which indicates his investment in remaining current in the fast-paced world of collecting. Cavalieri’s active collecting of both antique and contemporary art works along with his extensive humanist education recommended him as an expert in all matters of art in the city of Rome.

Most notably, Cavalieri served twice as Cardinal Alessandro Farnese’s antiquities advisor—once in 1562 and again in 1567—evaluating the authenticity of a recently purchased antique saltcellar as well as other unidentified antiquities. Following the first meeting in 1562, Alessandro commissioned a saltcellar from Michelangelo, perhaps inspired by the ancient one in his collection. Cavalieri provided a modello for this commission. Some years later, in 1583, Cavalieri was a member of a three-man commission to evaluate the antiquities collection of creditors. It is thought that this deficit resulted in the sale of around 200 drawings to Odoardo Farnese later that year (ibid., 179).


41 Perrig, “Tommaso de’Cavalieri.”


Cavalieri wrote to Alessandro on 23 August 1567 that he had heard from Count Ludovico (Ludovico Todesco di Piacenza) that the Cardinal was looking to have made a beautiful saltcellar. He writes that he has seen many designs for the saltcellar, but although they were beautiful, they did not have good composition. In contrast, Michelangelo’s model was the only one that possessed good composition as well as beautiful inventione. The letter reads, “Havendomi il Conte Lodovico detto che V.S. desidera che si faccia una saliera bella, siamo andati a far fare et vedere molti disegni; et ci siamo risoluti in questi doi, quali ci pareno assai belli. Et per dire, il mio parere, il disegno in carta riuscira assai vistoso, et massime a quelle persone che non intendono più che tanto, perchè invero non ha troppo bella compositione: ma il modello è bellissima inventione, et fu fatto per ordine di Michelangelo . . .” See, Steinmann and Pogatscher, “Dokumente und Forschungen,” 505-506 and Vasari (Barocchi), Vita di Michelangelo, 4:1874.

Cavalieri served as an intermediary for Michelangelo on multiple occasions, both during the artist’s life and after his death. A letter published by Wallace in 1985 suggests that collectors often used Cavalieri as a conduit through which to procure works by Michelangelo’s hand. A letter dated 23 June 1571 from Count Ludovico Todesco di Piacenza to Duke Ottavio Farnese records that Cavalieri supplied the Duke’s artist (Wallace argues this artist was Marcello Venusti) with a Michelangelo drawing. See Wallace, “A New Letter,” 21-26.
Octavian Capranica in advance of his sale of the collection in 1584 to Cardinal Ferdinando de’Medici. The Capranica collection was large, numbering over 200 antique statues and fragments of antique architecture. The sale constituted a major event in the circle of humanists in Rome. That Cavalieri was chosen to adjudicate the sale suggests his widespread reputation as an expert in antiquarian studies.

Aside from his professional role as overseer of the construction on the Capitoline Hill, Cavalieri also assumed appointments involving other projects in the city. As a member of the prestigious Arciconfraternita del Santissimo Crocifisso di San Marcello he was involved in the construction of the confraternity’s expanded meeting place. In June of 1557 Cavalieri replaced Scipione Orsini as deputy to the construction of the new Oratory. In this role Cavalieri evaluated and recorded the plans, as well as worked closely with the architect, the young Giacomo della Porta, to oversee the construction. Cavalieri continued working with della Porta throughout both of their careers: first, likely recommending him as successor to Michelangelo at the Campidoglio and second, surely recommending him to Pope Gregory XIII (1572-1585) as the new architect of Saint Peter’s following the death of Giacomo Vignola in 1573. Additionally, in 1540, Gregory appointed Cavalieri the director of the construction and decoration of the Gregorian Chapel in Saint Peter’s where he oversaw Giacomo della Porta’s continuation of designs begun by Michelangelo. That a patron as elevated as the pope called on Cavalieri to oversee monumental projects indicates the nobleman’s status as an artistic arbiter.

43 Perrig, “Tommaso de’Cavalieri.”
45 Josephine von Henneberg, “An Early Work by Giacomo della Porta: The Oratorio del Santissimo Crocifisso di San Marcello in Rome,” Art Bulletin 52, 2 (1970): 59. Cavalieri was a member of the Arciconfraternita del Santissimo Crocifisso di San Marcello at least as early as 12 April 1555. By 22 August 1557 Cavalieri was second in power only to the then Governor Scipione Orsini. When the construction of the new Oratorio was complete in 1568, Cavalieri placed an inscription on the façade commemorating the patronage of Alessandro Farnese. Ten years later, in February in 1578, Cavalieri selected Flaminio Boulanger’s project for the wooden ceiling of the Oratorio. He was also elected as one of two deputies in charge of decorating the walls.
46 Ibid., 168.
47 Perrig, “Tommaso de’Cavalieri.”
Cavalieri’s involvement in social groups in Rome also reveals his dedication to humanism and the arts. In the first instance, his admittance into the Arciconfraternita del Santissimo Crocifisso di San Marcello indicates his high social standing. The confraternity of the Holy Cross of San Marcello was founded on 25 May 1519. When Cavalieri joined in 1555, the confraternity boasted prominent members of Roman society such as Sciopione Orsini, Cencio Frangipani, and Alessandro and Ottavio Farnese. Secondly, Cavalieri was a member of the exclusive Sodalitas Parionis at San Lorenzo in Damaso. The Sodality developed as the academic counterpart to the Confraternity of the SS. Concezione at San Lorenzo in Damaso, which was supervised by Cavalieri and Michelangelo’s mutual friend Cardinal Raffaele Riario. The members of the Sodalitas were expected to be upstanding citizens as well as good Latinists; only the most erudite Romans such as Paolo Galli, Blosio Palladio, Pietro Mellini, and Angelo Colocci were offered membership.\(^48\) Both of these roles indicate Cavalieri’s respected status as a learned humanist. It was because of his reputation for knowledge of antiquity and Latin that Cavalieri received the charge to interpret and arrange for the display of the recently uncovered Fasti in the Conservator’s Palace on the Capitoline Hill.

As already mentioned, in 1546, workers excavating the Roman Forum to obtain building stones for Saint Peter’s unearthed fragments of ancient tablets known as the Fasti Triumphales and the Fasti Consulares (Fig. 22; Rome, Musei Capitolini).\(^49\) The Fasti Triumphales record all of the names of the Roman triumphators alongside their captured territory and the priests overseeing their triumph. They begin with Romulus’s three triumphs at the foundation of the city.

\(^48\) Kathleen Wren Christian, *Empire Without End: Antiquities Collections in Renaissance Rome, c. 1350-1527* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 193. The Sodalitas Parionis was founded by Pietro Mattuzzi, nobleman, Capitoline officer, and husband of Alexander VI’s daughter Isabella Borgia, during the pontificate of Leo X. Members met regularly but were required to attend an annual celebration called the Parionalia on 19 April in honor of Pietro’s death. During the feast, most likely held in the antique sculpture garden of the Palazzo Mattuzzi in Piazza di Pasquino, members would participate in poetic contests and other “literary activities.”

and end abruptly in 19 B.C.\textsuperscript{50} The \textit{Fasti Consulares} record all of the magistrates of Rome beginning in ca. 752 B.C. with the Foundation of the City by Romulus. The \textit{Fasti Consulares} end in 13 A.D., the year before Augustus’s death.

Remains of tablets bearing inscriptions of the \textit{Fasti} were unearthed throughout the Renaissance, however, the four tablets of the \textit{Fasti Triumphales} and the four of the \textit{Fasti Consulares} found at the Forum in 1546 constitute the most complete and the most famous iteration of the \textit{Fasti}. From the beginning, the origin of the \textit{Fasti Capitolini} as they have come to be called has been debated. Gabrielle Faerno (ca. 1510-61), a Cremonese Latin scholar and poet, believed that the fragments came from an aedicule that was located beside the temple of the deified Augustus. In contrast, another scholar, Metello, proposed that they had been in front of the Temple of Castor and Pollux. The Neapolitan painter, architect and antiquarian Pirro Ligorio (ca. 1510-83) suggested that the panels had been originally affixed to the lost Arch of Augustus.\textsuperscript{51} The inscription made to accompany the \textit{Fasti Capitolini} when they were put on display indicates only that the fragments were found in the Forum and that they record the history of the Senate and the People of Rome until the time of Augustus.\textsuperscript{52} Although the original source of the \textit{Fasti Capitolini} continues to be debated, what is important for this discussion is that they were unequivocally understood to be remains of the ancient Roman Republic.\textsuperscript{53}

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\textsuperscript{50} Ida Östenberg, “From Conquest to \textit{Pax Romana}: The \textit{Signa Recepta} and the End of the Triumphal \textit{Fasti} in 19 B.C.,” in \textit{Ritual Dynamics and Religious Change in the Roman Empire: Proceedings of the Eighth Workshop of the International Network Impact of Empire} (Heidelberg, July 5-7, 2007), ed. Olivier Hekster, Sebastian Schmidt-Hofner, and Christian Witschel (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 53-77. Östenberg argues that the decision to end the \textit{Fasti Triumphales} in 19 B.C. was made to underscore Augustus’s decisive end of the Roman Republic. She argues that the \textit{Fasti Triumphales} indicate Augustus’s gradual assumption of imperial power.


\textsuperscript{53} For the most recent scholarship regarding the debate over the source of the \textit{Fasti Capitolini} see Elisabeth Nedergaard, “Facts and Fiction about the \textit{Fasti Capitolini},” \textit{Analecta Romana Instituti Danici} 27 (2001): 107-127; and Mary Beard, \textit{The Roman Triumph} (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 61-66, 72-80.
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Moreover, the *Fasti Consulares* provided the names of every past magistrate in the history of Rome’s government—a fact that the current magistrates of Rome, Cavalieri included, could hardly have overlooked.

After the *Fasti* were discovered in the Forum, Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, the nephew of the reigning pope Paul III and a devout humanist, had them moved to his own palace. Two years later, in 1548, Farnese donated the tablets of the *Fasti* to the people of Rome. The fragments were moved from Farnese’s palace to the Capitoline Hill where they were installed in the courtyard of the Conservators’ Palace. That same year, the Communal Council of Rome appointed a select committee of learned men to translate the fragments and to determine the most suitable manner of display. Gentile Delfini, a notable collector of antiquities, oversaw the committee. Five other men, including Cavalieri, were appointed under Delfini. A member of the committee and a notable Renaissance author, Bartolomeo Marliani documented the discovery and the interpretation of the *Fasti Capitolini* in a book published in 1549. Marliani indicates the reason for the appointments of two of the members of the committee, Delfini and Cavalieri. Both men are described as “curatoribus in Capitolio,” Capitoline conservators, responsible for the objects housed at the Capitoline Hill. Furthermore, where Delfini is described as “Romanorum antiquitatum investigatore diligentissimo” (most careful investigator of the antiquities of the Romans), Cavalieri is called “Urbis ornamentorum studiosissimo” (most studious of the decorations of the city [Rome]). Marliani also published a woodcut of Michelangelo’s original design for the aedicule in which the *Fasti* were displayed (Fig. 23, Marliani).

When installed at the Capitoline Hill, the *Fasti* tablets must have assumed a revered status. The contemporary magistrates of Rome likely viewed the names of past republican officials as forbearers of their own civic offices. By 1586, during the reign of Pope Sixtus V (1585-1590) the *Fasti Capitolini* had become explicit symbols of the civic government of contemporary Rome. They were removed from the courtyard of the Conservator’s palace and placed in an aedicule in the Sala della Lupa inside the palace. Directly across from the aedicule

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55 Marliani, *Consulum, Dictatorum Censorumque romanorum Series*, 6. “Gentile Dephinio Romanoru(m) antiquitatu(m) in investigatore diligentissimo, necnon Thoma Cavalerio urbis ornamentoru(m) studiosissimo curatoribus in Capitolio.”

56 Ibid., 8-9.
was the famed ancient Lupa statue representing the foundation of the city of Rome with Romulus and Remus suckling the she-wolf. Each of these ancient works bears an inscription linking it to the contemporary magistrates of the city of Rome. The conflation of ancient and modern within the Conservator’s palace suggests the autonomy of the Popolo Romano. Jacks even suggests that the gesture marks the civic government’s indignation against Sixtus V’s attempts to reduce the civic government’s power in the city.\(^{57}\) If Jacks is correct, then the Renaissance magistrates saw the remains of the ancient Roman Republic as charged political symbols capable of making statements concerning contemporary politics. In this formulation the Fasti were not merely fragments of a distant past, but rather highly potent relics of republican rule that had relevance for the present.

Twice the tangible remains of republican Rome brought Michelangelo and Cavalieri together in a professional capacity: first in Michelangelo’s designs for the Capitoline Hill where both men worked to complete a program replete with republican symbols, and second in the interpretation and display of the highly politicized fragments of the Fasti Capitolini in the courtyard of the Conservators’ palace. Michelangelo’s designs for the Capitoline Hill in particular point to a joint sustained interest in the capabilities of expressing political opinions through art. Well before the project was completed, Cavalieri’s instrumental role in its execution was commemorated in an inscription on one of two dedicatory tablets installed in 1568 that flank the main entrance to the Conservators’ palace (Fig. 24, Rome, Musei Capitolini).\(^{58}\) On the left hand inscription Cavalieri’s name appears alongside Prospero Boccapadulli as conservators, and celebrates the restoration of the Capitol. The right hand inscription re-dedicates the Capitol, which was once dedicated to Jove, to God and Jesus Christ.\(^{59}\)

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\(^{57}\) Jacks, *The Antiquarian*, 244. Sixtus had attempted to reduce the salaries of the caporione; the local officials who governed individual sections of the city. He had also worked to have the Vatican Borgo incorporated as the fourteenth rione, the district overseen by the caporioni, in the city. The friction between the pope and the Communal Council of Rome seems to have subsided by 1595 during the pontificate of Clement VIII.

\(^{58}\) Frommel, *Michelangelo und Tommaso dei Cavalieri*, 84 and 124 n. 186. Frommel suggests that Cavalieri may have even designed the tablets himself, citing a draft for the inscriptions in the archives of the Boccapaduli family in Rome that is possibly by Cavalieri’s hand. The draft Frommel cites may be found in Rome, Archivio Storico Capitolino, Boccapaduli, arm. II, mazzo IV, n. 47.

\(^{59}\) The left inscription reads: S. P. Q. R. / Maiorum . suorum . praestantiam / ut . animo . sic .re / quantum . lincuit . imitates / deformatum . iniuria . temporum / Capitolium . restituit / Propsero .

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In 1548 Michelangelo and Cavalieri undertook two significant projects for each of their professional careers, in the midst of what Burroughs describes as a “climate of fervid republicanism in Rome” during the late 1530s and early 1540s. We can conclude that Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s professional appointments at the Capitoline Hill overlapped with their personal sentiments about the current political situations in Florence and in Rome. In light of the evidence presented here concerning Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s shared political opinions, the Cleopatra takes on a new meaning. Cleopatra stands as a principal figure in the history of the Republic and especially in its expiration. In the context of Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s sympathy for republican government, a reference to Cleopatra is ultimately a reference to the Republic. In the final section of this chapter, I investigate more closely why Michelangelo would choose Cleopatra, instead of other possible subjects, to refer to the Republic.

“I am always alone”: Cleopatra and Purposeful Ambiguity

The Cleopatra is an ambiguous image. I suggested in the second chapter of this thesis that the ambiguity in the drawing was due to Michelangelo’s knowledge of the ancient literary sources. The accounts of Plutarch and Horace make clear the ambiguity of Cleopatra’s character in light of her decision to commit suicide rather than be taken captive by Octavian. In portraying Cleopatra in the liminal moment between life and death, censure and praise, Michelangelo captured the nuanced readings of the ancient chroniclers. In so doing he rejected the popular representation of Cleopatra as a depraved sinner and instead portrayed her as a noble and brave queen, a far more positive treatment to be sure. I now suggest that Michelangelo had another reason to utilize ambiguity in his drawing. The artist’s documented concern for his family’s safety in Florence under the rule of Duke Cosimo I de’Medici forced him to publically renounce his support of republican government in Florence, even if he privately continued to associate with republican sympathizers and create works of art that carried messages of support for the ideal of republican government. The Cleopatra, replete with diverse meanings, perfectly...
encapsulates the ambiguity required by the tense political situation in Florence and in Rome in the years that followed Duke Cosimo I’s assumption of office in 1537.

On 22 October 1547, Michelangelo wrote to his nephew Lionardo Buonarroti, “. . . I am always alone. I go about very little and talk to no one, least of all to Florentines; but if I’m greeted in the street I cannot but respond with a kindly word and pass on—though, if I were informed as to which are the exiles, I would make no response at all.”\footnote{Carteggio 4:279-280, MXCII. Michelangelo to Lionardo Buonarroti: “sto sempre solo, vo poco actorno e non parlo a persona, emmassimo di Fiorentini, e s’io son salutato per la via, non posso fare chi’i’ non risponda con buone parole, e passo via; e se io avessi notitia quali sono e’fuoriusciti, io non risponderei in modo nessuno.” Translation from Maria Ruvoldt, “Michelangelo’s Slaves and the Gift of Liberty,” Renaissance Quarterly 65, no. 4 (2012): 1054.} This letter shows Michelangelo’s intense anxiety about his friendships in Rome following Cosimo’s decree making it a criminal act to associate with Florentine exiles.\footnote{Ruvoldt, “Michelangelo’s Slaves,” 1054.} More importantly, however, the letter demonstrates the lengths to which Michelangelo went to hide any and all affiliation with republican politics, for the letter is, in short, a lie.

As we have seen in this chapter, Michelangelo maintained friendships with republican supporters, including Cavalieri, throughout his life in Rome. However, for the sake of his family, he had to conceal these associations. The figure of Cleopatra is thus an ideal image to convey a hidden message. Were it to be intercepted, its meaning could have easily been explained as an image of virtue versus vice, or the power of love. Indeed, the burden of interpretation of the Cleopatra fell on Cavalieri. Only in light of the two men’s shared history could the true meaning of the drawing emerge.

Returning to the bust of Brutus of ca. 1539, we recall that it is related to the Cleopatra in both style and content; both works present a historical figure drawn from classical antiquity and presented in an all’antica manner. Now I want to suggest that there is one final similarity between the two classicized portraits of ancient historical figures. Both the Brutus and the Cleopatra are highly ambiguous images.\footnote{Michelangelo expressed an interest in ambiguous moments throughout his career. His sculpted figures of Dusk and Dawn at the Medici Chapel at San Lorenzo in Florence and Christ’s body in the Last Judgment capture moments where two events occur almost simultaneously: day coexisting with night, night with day, and blessing with damning. For a discussion of the ambiguity of the Last Judgment Christ see Leo Steinberg, “Michelangelo’s ‘Last Judgment’ as Merciful Heresy,” Art in America 63 (1979): 49-63.} Michelangelo treated the historical narrative of Brutus
in much the same way that he treated the story of Cleopatra, that is to say, he captured a split-second in time, a moment pregnant with potential meaning, by painstakingly articulating his figure’s visage (Fig. 25, Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello). Indeed, Michelangelo’s Brutus, like his Cleopatra, seems to summon a specific moment in history. I suggest that Michelangelo meant to evoke Brutus’s emotional state immediately before entering the Senate to murder Julius Caesar, an equally tide-changing moment in the history of the Roman Republic.

The Brutus is perhaps best understood as an enduring depiction of moral resolve. Michelangelo used Brutus’s physiognomy to express the courage and determination necessary to complete the horrible, but ultimately necessary, task of murder. Brutus’s steadfast gaze across his right shoulder suggests his commitment to action. His clenched facial muscles hold his jaw taught while his nostrils flare slightly out, both of these physiognomic features working to convey a sense of the emotion of the scene. In the bust Michelangelo depicts an ambiguous moment in which Brutus exists between innocence and murder, loyalty and betrayal. In order to fully understand the image as a reference to the legendary murder of Caesar the viewer must engage with the historical circumstances surrounding its creation.

As we have seen, the immediate context of Michelangelo’s design of the Brutus was the assassination of the first Duke of Florence, Alessandro de’Medici. The bust’s original patron, Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s mutual friend Cardinal Ridolfi, furthers the likelihood of a highly political meaning for the work. The Brutus, when read as a commemoration of tyrannicide, provides strong evidence for a deeper political meaning for the Cleopatra. Both of these classical figures, the only ones ever depicted by Michelangelo, engage important moments of the Roman Republic—the Brutus to the routing out of a tyrant and the Cleopatra to the end of an era.

The Two Brutuses and a Potent Historical Parallel

The figure of Marcus Junius Brutus held further political resonance later in Cavalieri’s life when, in 1564, the civic government of Rome received a donation of an antique bronze head believed to be a representation of Lucius Junius Brutus, the legendary founder of the Roman Republic.64 Lucius Junius Brutus was best known for overthrowing the Etruscan Kings and

subsequently initiating the Roman Republic. According to Plutarch, a second Brutus, Marcus Junius Brutus, planned his assassination of Caesar after a stirring emotional experience with a famed bronze statue of Lucius Junius Brutus holding a dagger, which had been displayed on the Capitoline Hill since the early days of the Republic. The two Brutes were thus consistently tied together across history in both antiquity and during the Renaissance; both men represented republican fortitude and courage. When placed atop the Capitoline Hill the head of Lucius Junius Brutus probably assumed a revered status as a memento of the foundation of the Republic.

It is likely that the deeply republican symbolism embedded in the so-called *Capitoline Brutus* spurred its owner, the Cardinal Pio Ridolfo da Capri, to donate it to the *popolo Romano* in his will. Ridolfo was both an avid ancient art collector and a supporter of the republican cause. His death on 2 May 1564 followed closely Michelangelo’s own death just three months earlier in February of the same year, and also coincided with Cavalieri’s election to conservator. When Ridolfi died, the bronze head was transferred to the Capitoline Hill where Cavalieri was responsible, as conservator, for placing the bust in the Conservator’s Palace. Cavalieri commissioned a new base for the bust on which his name is inscribed along with those of his fellow conservators. The bust’s presence in the Palace of the Conservators signals a subtle but

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Aldrovandi writes, “vi è ancora in esso cornicione la testa di Junio Brutto di metallo, con gli occhi smaltati, estimata di gran prezzo” (“there is also in this cornice the head of Junius Brutus of metal, with enamel eyes, estimated of great price”). However, an undated drawing of the head produced by Heemskerck, who was in Rome between 1532 and 1536, suggests that the Cardinal was in possession of the head earlier than 1556 when Aldrovandi wrote his account, probably by at least as early as 1536. See also, most recently, C. Parisi Presicce, "Il Bruto Capitolino: ritratto ideale di un vir illustris," *Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma* 98 (1997): 43-110.


66 By the early seventeenth century, it was believed that the bronze bust was, in fact, a fragmentary remain of the famous bronze bust of Lucius Junius Brutus that had spurred Marcus Junius Brutus’s assassination of Caesar. See Haskell and Penny, *Taste and the Antique*, 164.

67 For Ridolfo’s donation and the subsequent display of the *Capitoline Brutus* see Lanciani, *Scavi di Roma*, 3:79-80.

important republican overtone for the meeting place of the highest civic officers in Rome. Cavalieri’s utilization of a work of art at the Conservator’s Palace to convey political meaning mirrors Michelangelo’s own use of a bust-length figure from ancient Roman history in the *Cleopatra*.

**Cleopatra and Lucretia: The Beginning and the End of the Republic**

The Roman Republic began and ended with a woman’s suicide. According to legend, the suicide of Lucretia prompted the overthrow of the kings of Rome. Out of honor and also of grief, the beautiful and virtuous Lucretia took her own life rather than live with the shame of being violated by Sextus Tarquinius, the son of the last Etruscan king of Rome, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus (r. 535-509 B.C.). To avenge her death, Lucretia’s kinsmen, including most notably Lucius Junius Brutus, gathered troops to overthrow the monarchy. Essentially, Lucretia’s rape and subsequent suicide marked the beginning of the Republic. Her noble death provides a worthy point of origin for the virtuous people of Rome. Indeed, Lucretia’s story contains all of the elements essential to a heroine’s tale: honor, virtue, and chivalry. In contrast, as we have seen, the story of Cleopatra contains all of the elements intrinsic to a villain’s demise: greed, arrogance, and sex. However, the two stories share one common feature; both women chose to end their own lives, and thus obtained a noble death.

Where Lucretia represents the beginning of the Republic, Cleopatra represents the end. The image of Lucretia recalls the pure and noble origins of the Republic. The image of Cleopatra marks the demise of republican government. For Michelangelo, the fall of the Second Republic of Florence was a lamentable event. He never again overtly aligned himself with attempts to restore republican rule in his native city. Michelangelo’s concern with his family’s safety notwithstanding, it is possible that Michelangelo also saw the fall of the Florentine Republic as the failure of his own political ideology.⁶⁹ Thus the hope-filled image of Lucretia could not hold the same historical currency as one of Cleopatra. Cleopatra in the liminal moment between corrupt life and noble death represented for Michelangelo, and by extension for Cavalieri, a reference to the ancient Roman Republic and its tragic end.

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⁶⁹ De Tolnay, “Michelangelo’s Political Opinions,” 25. As Tolnay has noted, Michelangelo saw the fall of the Florentine Second Republic as “the death of liberty.”
A New Date for the *Cleopatra*

It is important to note here that the historical account of Cleopatra held resonance not only for Rome but also, through the queen’s lover and comrade-in-arms Marc Antony, for the history of Michelangelo’s native Florence as well. During the years of Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s friendship, Antony had become a central figure in the developing foundation story of Florence. By at least as early as 1513 many Italian humanists and historians believed that the city had been founded by the Second Triumvirate of Rome, which consisted of Octavian, Marcus Lepidus, and Marc Antony. A series of historical paintings executed to honor the conferral of Roman citizenship upon Guiliano and Lorenzo de’ Medici in 1513 commemorated this significant historical event. The paintings were displayed in a temporary theater constructed atop the Capitoline Hill where they reinforced the connection between Rome and Florence through the parallel histories of the cities.

During the ensuing years, Florentine humanists continued to call on their Roman origins to make claims for the greatness of their own city. Through Antony’s role in founding Florence, Cleopatra could be understood as holding significance for the city. Thus, the *Cleopatra* need not only be associated with the Roman Republic, but the Florentine Republic as well.

By way of conclusion I wish to question again the traditional dating of the *Cleopatra* to ca. 1533-34, the earliest years of Michelangelo’s friendship with Cavalieri when we know the artist gave his friend the presentation drawings with subjects derived from Ovid. Because documentation for dating the *Cleopatra* is entirely lacking, this discussion must proceed on other grounds. The interpretation of the drawing I have proposed in this study is based in part on the idea that the two men developed a close friendship in which shared personal history and political affiliations provided meaning. This leads me to ask, is there an appropriate moment in the

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70 In the late 1470s, the Florentine author and poet Poliziano uncovered a late classical source known as the *Libri regionum* or the *coloniae* in the Medici library that indicated the Second Triumvirate had founded the city of Florence. See Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), 72-73.

friends’ biography for the drawing to have been made? I suggest two viable options, one a date in the late 1530s, and the other in the late 1540s.

A date in the late 1530s seems appropriate given the dating of the Brutus to ca. 1539. In light of the formal similarities between the two bust-length figures, and the related subject matter, it is reasonable to think that they were executed at approximately the same time. Further evidence for a late 1530s date lies in a comparison between the Cleopatra and other projects Michelangelo was working on at the same time, namely the figures in the Sistine Last Judgment. Michelangelo worked on the fresco from 1536 to 1541, between the time he definitively moved to Rome in 1534 and the end of the decade when he executed the Brutus. I want to call attention specifically to the figures to the right of Christ, which are stylistically related to the Cleopatra (Fig. 26; Rome, Sistine Chapel). Like the Cleopatra, these figures have prominently rounded heads, sharply defined features such as lips and noses, deeply emotive facial expressions conveyed through their eyes, and a solid, almost bulky, definition of their shoulders and torsos. Based on these two stylistic comparisons, to the Brutus and to the Last Judgment, it is a viable hypothesis that Michelangelo executed the Cleopatra in the late 1530s.

A date in the late 1540s is also possible. 1548 marked a watershed year for Michelangelo and Cavalieri. In this year Michelangelo and Cavalieri added a professional level to their friendship at the Capitoline Hill. They began two monumental projects directly related to the Roman Republic; the first was Cavalieri’s appointment as one of the overseers of Michelangelo’s designs for the Capitoline Hill, and the second was their joint involvement in the display of the Fasti Capitolini in the courtyard of the Conservators’ palace. It is possible that Michelangelo memorialized this pivotal time in his friendship with Cavalieri in his art. The Cleopatra, insofar as it represents a pivotal figure in the history of the Republic, could be read as a parallel image to the Fasti Capitolini. Where the ancient fragments record the republican magistrates up to the time of Augustus, the drawing presents the final opponent to Augustus’s rule. In the end, both the Fasti Capitolini and the Cleopatra reference the ultimate demise of the Roman Republic, for both the Republic and Cleopatra ceased to exist upon Augustus’s rise to power.

The Afterlife of the Cleopatra

Whatever the dating of the drawing may be, it is clear that Cavalieri held it very dear. Sometime before January of 1562, Duke Cosimo I de’Medici asked Cavalieri to send the Cleopatra to him in Florence. The transaction is known from three sources: a letter from
Cavalieri written to Cosimo on 20 January of 1562 to accompany the drawing; a letter written by Cosimo’s ambassador to Rome, Averardo Serristori, confirming receipt of the drawing as well as a drawing by Sofonisba Anguisola; and Vasari’s testimony that Cavalieri sent a drawing of Cleopatra to Cosimo along with Sofonisba’s drawing in his *Life of Properzia de Rossi*.

Cavalieri writes in his letter to Cosimo about the *Cleopatra*, “Your excellency, you were not mistaken in asking me [for the drawing], and because of that I am sending to you this drawing that is so dear to me that I consider [sending it to you] as if I were depriving myself of one of my children. No other person in the world could take this out of my hands other than you. Many of the most powerful people in Rome have tried and they didn’t succeed . . .” Cavalieri’s comparison between his feeling upon losing the drawing and the feeling he would have losing one of his children makes clear the deep attachment he felt to the drawing. Serristori also recognized the great sorrow Cavalieri felt upon parting with the *Cleopatra*. Writing to Cosimo, he states, “From Tommaso de Cavalieri, I have received two sketches: one of a head by Michelangelo’s hand; and the other, showing a boy crying, by a lady who is now with the Queen of Spain. Until now, he was late in giving them to me because he wanted to have a friend of his copy the head by Michelangelo, so that he could retain a copy. Moreover, it was difficult for him to be deprived of these sketches because he loved the drawing [of *Cleopatra*] so much, and the other drawing was something quite rare. It would be proper if your Excellency would answer this

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73 Vasari (Barocchi), *Vita di Michelangelo*, 4:1890-1891. “La Eccellenza Vostra no si è punto ingannata nel promettersi di me, e per seggno di ciò mando questo disegno a me tanto caro, ch’io repute privarmi di uno de’miei figliuoli, né altra persona del mondo era mai bastante a carvarmelo de le mane. E che questo sia così, molti, quali sono stati padroni di Roma, se ci sono provati e non è riuscito loro.” Many thanks to my colleague Danila Coppola for her help in translating the nuances of the original letter.
letter with just a few kind words . . .”74 Serri tori even goes so far as to remind the powerful Duke to send a note of thanks to Cavalieri in order to appropriately respond to such a generous, if forced, “gift.”

Furthering the argument that Cavalieri highly treasured and wanted to keep private the Cleopatra is his own declaration of the drawing’s singularity. Cavalieri underscores in his letter to Cosimo the uniqueness of the drawing by noting that many of the most powerful people in Rome (padroni di Romana) tried and failed to acquire the drawing. Indeed, the Cleopatra is the only one of Michelangelo’s finished drawings for Cavalieri that was not made public during their friendship; it is the only one that was never engraved or reproduced. The only copy of the drawing was created only upon Cavalieri’s imminent loss of the original. Serri tori remarks on his delayed receipt of Cavalieri’s two drawings that the time lapse was due to Cavalieri’s desire to have a copy of the “head of Michelangelo” (the Cleopatra) executed by a “maestro amico suo,” an artist friend of his. A copy of the Cleopatra now in the British Museum is thought to be Cavalieri’s original (Fig. 27; London, British Museum).75

That Cavalieri worked to keep the Cleopatra private supports my claim that the recipient held it in the highest esteem. It suggests that the drawing represented something highly personal, which may only be understood when integrated into its appropriate historical context. In light of Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s direct engagement with the relics of the Roman Republic atop the

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74 Daly Davis, in Giorgio Vasari, 254. “Da messer Tommaso del Cavalieri si son havuti duoi disegni uno di mano di Michelangelo, che è una testa, l’altro di mano d’una giovane che sta con la Regina di Spagna, la quale ho figurato un’ putto che piange. Ho tardato a’ dannel sin’ a’ hora, havendo volute far’ ricovar’ da un’ maestro amico suo quella testa di Michelangelo, desiderando che glie’ ne rimanesse copia, oltre che gli e parso difficile il privarsene, havendo posto amor’ all’uno, et l’altro ritratto anzi disegno, come à cose rare. Non sarà fuora di proposito che l’Ec. V. faccia risponder’ alla lettera sua Quattro parole amorevole.” Translation from Perlingier i, Sofonisba Anguissola, 72.

75 Joannides suggests that Giulio Clovio, who produced many copies of Michelangelo’s drawings, executed the original copy, which he identifies as a drawing in the Louvre. He further suggests that the two other copies (one in the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam and the other in the British Museum, London) derive from the Louvre drawing. However, it has also been suggested that the copy in the British Museum is the first of the copies. For a discussion of these matters, see Paul Joannides, Michel-Ange élèves et copistes (Paris: Reunion des Musées Nationaux, 2003), 258-259. It should be noted that Perrig contends that all four aforementioned drawings are copies of a lost original. See Alexander Perrig, Michelangelo’s Drawings: The Science of Attribution (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 45.
Capitoline Hill, a reference to Cleopatra takes on a very specific meaning. The political nature of Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s friendship suggests that the *Cleopatra* does not fit into only the tradition of representing Cleopatra as a symbol of virtue versus vice, or even a classical symbol of love. Rather, the historical context suggests that Michelangelo’s invocation of Cleopatra’s suicide refers to the queen’s significant political role in the history of the Roman Republic. This historical reference ultimately underscores Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s mutual republican sympathies.

From the beginning, contemporary politics played a role in Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s friendship. Following their fortuitous introduction among a group of Florentine exiles and republican sympathizers in Rome, Cavalieri and Michelangelo both maintained a sustained interest in contemporary politics. Cavalieri rose steadily through the ranks of public office to assume the highest civic position in the city of Rome while Michelangelo continued to produce veiled images referencing his republican support. Indeed, the *Brutus*, executed nearly a decade after Michelangelo met Cavalieri, stands as a formal and symbolic precedent for the *Cleopatra* as a political image. Stylistically similar, both works present classical historical figures *all’antica* at a liminal moment before fateful events. Furthermore, the contemporary political parallel conveyed through the *Brutus* proves that Michelangelo embedded potentially controversial political meaning into images in which ambiguity played a major role in defining the subject. The choice to represent Cleopatra in the liminal moment between life and death, damnation and salvation shows Michelangelo’s intention to associate her with the ancient Roman Republic, and specifically the noble end of one of its final proponents.
CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

This thesis contributes an understanding of Michelangelo’s *Cleopatra* that moves beyond the traditional interpretation of the drawing as an exercise Michelangelo used to instruct Cavalieri in the art of drawing. The qualities of the drawing that make it so alluring, the attention to detail and the emotive features captured in the figure’s face, suggest that it is not, in fact, merely didactic. Rather, like the better known and more thoroughly studied drawings with Ovidian subjects, it too is a presentation drawing meant to convey a specific message to its recipient. Because of its former designation as an “ideal head,” as well as uncertainty surrounding its dating, the *Cleopatra* has not received the same level of critical attention as other drawings that Michelangelo created for Tommaso de’Cavalieri. This thesis has redressed the gaps in the scholarship as they pertain to the *Cleopatra*. It has provided two interrelated arguments, which together not only clarify the meaning of the drawing, but also shed new light on Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s friendship.

I first argued that Michelangelo’s drawing consciously references the ancient accounts of Horace and Plutarch. Both accounts make clear the ambiguous nature of Cleopatra’s reputation. Although Cleopatra committed many morally questionable deeds, in the end, her decision to commit suicide rather than be taken captive by Octavian garnered her the praise of the ancient authors. Working against the popular, ultimately propagandistic, imagery of Cleopatra as an amoral seductress, Michelangelo perfectly captures the ambiguity of the ancient accounts. His Cleopatra is neither a representation of the vice of Luxuria nor a defeated queen displayed in triumph. Instead Michelangelo chose to represent Cleopatra between life and death, in the very moment that she regained her humanity through a final act of nobility.

For Michelangelo’s *Cleopatra*, the historical context surrounding its creation ultimately provides its meaning. I argued that the *Cleopatra* represents a pointed reference to the ancient Roman Republic, which in the context of Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s relationship carries political meaning. It is likely that politics played a significant role in Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s relationship from the earliest moment when they were first introduced. They both
socialized in the circles of anti-Medicean, republican sympathizers in Rome. Moreover, they both took on active roles in the civic government of their respective cities. Michelangelo’s official position as Governor and Procurator General of Florence’s fortifications in 1529 is an overt example of his republican self-identification. But we have also seen how he embedded messages of republican support into his art in the bust of Brutus of the late 1530s. Cavalieri’s biography and especially his career in the city government of Rome also point to support of the ideology of republican government. The men’s personal and professional lives overlapped in a significant way in the late 1540s at the Capitoline Hill where they worked together on two monumental projects for the civic government of Rome—the restoration of the Capitoline Hill and the display of the Fasti—both of which were directly related to the history of the ancient Roman Republic. This significant engagement with the relics of republican Rome likely deepened their shared desire for, and veneration of, republican principles.

Michelangelo’s Cleopatra is perfectly suited for conveying the artist’s own political opinions. By presenting the ennobled Cleopatra at the moment of her death, Michelangelo makes a poignant statement about the current state of political affairs. Cleopatra represents not the birth of the Republic full of hope and promise, but rather the fading days of republican glory. In light of Michelangelo’s thoughts on the fall of the Second Florentine Republic, it is fitting that he would reference the end days of the Roman Republic. Michelangelo’s reference to a pivotal character in the narrative of the Republic takes on new meaning when considered a part of his highly political relationship with Cavalieri. Like the Brutus, the Cleopatra was made for one of Michelangelo’s highly political friends. I suggest that in the context of Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s friendship, Cavalieri would have immediately understood the Cleopatra to be a reference to the noble actions of a figure of the Republic as described by the ancients.

As this thesis has demonstrated, in order to fully appreciate the subject matter of the Cleopatra, and its singular place in Michelangelo’s œuvre, it is necessary to take into account the highly political circumstances that accompanied its creation. The Cleopatra can no longer exist as solely an exercise in drawing, one of the “ideal heads,” or Michelangelo’s respect for the classical age, or even as a generic expression of friendship. Rather, the Cleopatra is a testament to the important role politics played in Michelangelo and Cavalieri’s friendship.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Abigail Upshaw was born in Atlanta, Georgia. She received a Bachelor of Arts in Art History from The University of Georgia in 2011, where she graduated magna cum laude and was initiated into the Phi Beta Kappa Academic Honor Society. In the fall of 2011 Abigail began her graduate studies at Florida State University. The following summer Abigail conducted research for this thesis in Rome.

During her tenure as a graduate student in the Department of Art History at Florida State Abigail served as the President of the Art History Association and as a member of the College of Visual Arts, Theatre & Dance Leadership Council from fall 2012 through the spring of 2013. This thesis is part of her completion of a Master of Arts at FSU.