



Reading Between The Lions

The Art Institute's Book Club

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Discussion Guide

“Caesar and Cleopatra” by George Bernard Shaw

1. Depicted in the tapestries, then later by Shaw, the story of Cleopatra remains a popular tale today. Why do this ancient figure and her story still appeal to us?

2. Shaw's portrayal of Cleopatra differs dramatically from other well-known versions, such as Shakespeare's. Who was the real Cleopatra? Why do such extreme variations exist? How do we think about her today?

How is Cleopatra depicted in the 14 exhibition tapestries? What does that tell us about the society in which the tapestries were produced?

See: *The Story of Caesar and Cleopatra* tapestries.

3. Why does Shaw include such extensive and specific stage direction in the play? How much of that direction do you think you would see in a staging of the play?

Many of the tapestries resemble stage sets, especially those with frames but no bottom border, such as *The Story of Caesar and Cleopatra* and *The Story of Telemachus* tapestries. Why do you think they were designed this way?

4. Shaw offers two radically different prologues. Which do you prefer? Which is a more effective introduction to the play?

5. What lessons of nation-building and statecraft are found in the play? Are they still applicable in today's society? How does today's age of globalization compare to the age of the British Empire during which Shaw wrote *Caesar and Cleopatra*?

Are similar themes of statecraft found in the tapestries?

See: *The Petitions; Alexander Encounters Thalestris, Queen of the Amazons; Cyrus Defeats Spargapises; The Diversion of the Euphrates.*

6. How does the play present the exotic and the foreign? Are these misinterpretations unintentional or deliberate? If the latter, why would Shaw include them? Do they illuminate other themes in the play?

Similar stereotypes can be found in tapestries from a century earlier. Are these intentional? Do they imply something else?

See: *The Emperor Sailing, The Elephant, The Tent.*

7. What kind of relationship exists between Caesar and Cleopatra? Is it ever romantic or sexual?

Is their relationship portrayed differently in the tapestries? If so, how does it differ?

See: *Cleopatra Asked To Pay Tribute to Rome, Caesar and Cleopatra Enjoying Themselves, Caesar's Death Makes Cleopatra Mourn.*

8. Are there gender inequalities in the play? If so, are they a reflection or refutation of the mores held by Shaw's Victorian audience? How does the character of Ftatateeta fit in?

How is gender treated in the tapestries? Is it presented differently in the tapestries depicting scenes of war as opposed to those that depict other subjects?

See: *The Lovers; The Feast; The Offering of the Boar's Head; Pygmalion; Alexander Encounters Thalestris, Queen of the Amazons.*

Additional Recommended Reading

- More from Shaw: *Pygmalion* or *Mrs. Warren's Profession*
- More about Cleopatra: *Cleopatra: Histories, Dreams, and Distortions* by Lucy Hughes-Hallett
- More about the exhibition: The exhibition catalogue, *European Tapestries in the Art Institute of Chicago*, will be available in the Museum Shop beginning November 1.

Additional Discussion Opportunities

Sign up to receive additional discussion questions and invitations to Reading between the Lions events by visiting www.artic.edu/bookclub.