Comparative Essay: Ancient Female Rulers  
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Author Note

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Wu Zetian and Pharaoh Cleopatra were among the most well-known ancient female rulers. Cleopatra ruled ancient Egypt from 69 to 30 BC, whereas Empress Wu reigned between 624-705 AD. The paper compares and contrasts the two leaders in terms of their lives and struggles and compares them to modern women leaders indicating the relevance both rulers hold in setting influential precedents for female leadership.

A major difference between the two ancient female leaders was how they rose to power. Pharaoh Cleopatra was born to a royal Ptolemaic Greek origin family. As she grew up, she was elevated to the status of a co-ruler by her father and ruled Egypt after Alexander the great. She was granted the throne in a just way according to the will of her father and then remained a ruler until she died (Tyldesley, 2008). In contrast, Wu Zetian was the daughter of a Chancellor in the Tang Dynasty in China, and her intelligence, beauty, and wit led her to be appointed as a secretary to the Emperor. She used her position to become close to the Emperor and became his concubine. From there, she cleverly worked her way up in the royal palace until she became the only empress in Chinese history (Woo, 2008). Despite ruling impressively, her rise to power was cunning, manipulative and unjust, framing her rival to reach the throne. Another difference between the two rulers was how they were remembered by history. Cleopatra is generally favored by historians as someone brave, intelligent and capable of leadership as well as love. Her story has influenced numerous painters, historians, filmmakers and writers, though a significant portion of her life story in books are based on fictional legends wherein she is portrayed as a sensual character who could manipulate men with her charms. On the other hand, Chinese historians largely revile Empress Wu as an oppressive and manipulative leader and spread many insults about her throughout their works.

A similarity between the two leaders was their stern stand and ruthlessness in which they dealt with their enemies, eliminating anyone that posed a threat. Cleopatra had several enemies from different parts of her empire; family members that were a potential threat to her throne would be swiftly murdered (Tyldesley, 2008). She was well versed in the geopolitical and strategic realities of her time. The riches in Egypt led Rome to increasingly depend on its wealth through which Cleopatra exercised her influence. Similarly, Empress Wu annihilated anyone who stood in her way. She hired secret intelligence officers who would kill or silence any average citizen or from the military hierarchy whom they saw as opposing her. Moreover, both Empress Wu and Pharaoh Cleopatra, who ruled people from two different times and cultures introduced reforms that sought to increase the revenue from the capital peasants raised from their lands, by increasing taxes. They both reigned over a political system in which the Pharaoh or the Emperor was considered the absolute, unquestioned ruler.

Both Cleopatra and Empress Wu were influential leaders. We can see glimpses and traces of their leadership styles in female leaders today. Hilary Clinton is comparable to Cleopatra today in the sense that she like Cleopatra rose to prominence on the appendage of her partner, Bill Clinton, just as Cleopatra did using Julius Caesar. Cleopatra also influenced Caesar’s decisions yet rarely credited for them. Hilary was also known as the puppeteer behind Bill Clinton’s presidency yet had an image of a sacrificing partner who forfeited her political and personal principles for her husband (Clinton, 2003). Empress Wu can be compared to Margaret Thatcher in our Era. Both of them were seen as the Iron Lady of their times. Empress Wu was the first female ruler and enjoyed absolute authority and power in her dynasty, whereas Margaret Thatcher was the first female British prime minister. Like Empress Wu, Thatcher was also hated by a large portion of the British people for not only her policies but for being a woman. Moreover, both women oversaw their nations in expansionist wars. Wu led her empire to expand West of China, whereas Thatcher led her nation in the Falklands War with Argentina (Jessop, 2015).

In conclusion, it is evident that both these rulers had characteristics that will make their names live on forever. What we can learn from their history is their determination to rise to the occasion despite having an obvious disadvantage of being a woman in a male-dominated culture. It is because of women like them that women in positions of leadership today has become accepted and seen as something normal within the world.

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