

The myth of Cleopatra: Shrewd sovereign or wanton woman

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Abstract

This project is a chronological study of the adaptation and evolution of myths and their effects on historical accuracy. For a myth to survive it must adapt to each subsequent time period, taking on elements of the current society to appeal to its audience. Yet, the factual truth behind these tales is often lost over time. The liberties taken when restructuring the facts often lead to common themes of exaggeration or misconception. Perhaps one of the most misunderstood figures in history is Cleopatra VII. A woman cloaked in mystery, Cleopatra VII has long been a topic of tremendous interest throughout history. Ruling during a tumultuous period, her supposed risqué life-style and alleged epically tragic death have surrounded the queen's life with countless myths and legends. Importantly, literary interpretations have and continue to shape public and mainstream understandings of Cleopatra. To understand this process of the evolution of myths, sources spanning from Cleopatra's lifetime to the twentieth century were analyzed to highlight each subsequent time period that contributed to an origin, shift, or addition to Cleopatra's reputation. Clearly proving her longevity, Cleopatra has endured the test of time by adapting to each new generation. However, due to this adaptability, Cleopatra's real and deserved reputation as a shrewd sovereign has been distorted and undermined by the tale of the exotic enchantress. Each of the various revivals of the Queen's story were not isolated, but built on previous ones in new imaginative ways creating the myth that is Cleopatra. One finds that modern interpretations of Cleopatra's reputation are largely skewed or false, however, her true identity can be found buried underneath years of differing historical interpretations and artistic liberties.

Keywords: Cleopatra, myths, social symbols, gender, stereotype

Introduction

Myths are the tales of fantastic feats of bravery, arduous journeys, and hopelessly romantic love stories. Yet, the factual truth behind these tales is lost over time. For a myth to survive it must adapt to each subsequent time period taking on elements of the current society to appeal to its audience. The liberties taken when restructuring the facts often lead to common themes of exaggeration or misconception. For example, Lady Godiva, an 11th century noblewoman, a generous patroness of the church and wealthy landowner, is famous for accepting her husband's challenge to ride through the streets nude.¹ Adaptations of this story have developed over time to paint Lady Godiva as a victim or a figurehead of feminism. Today, she is best known as a label for a chocolate company and is associated with sex and guilty pleasure. Yet, the earliest renditions show that Godiva's famous ride was done as an attempt to reduce the harsh taxation enforced by her husband. By studying the origins and history of this myth one has a greater understanding of Lady Godiva's deserved reputation. One of the most misunderstood and powerful

woman to suffer from this unfortunate trend is Cleopatra VII.

A woman cloaked in mystery, Cleopatra has long been a topic of tremendous interest. Ruling during a tumultuous period, her supposed risqué life-style and alleged tragic death have surrounded the Queen with countless myths and legends. "A woman who worshiped crude gods, dominated men, slept with her brothers and gave birth to bastards," is how twenty-first century author Joyce A. Tyldesley describes Cleopatra VII Thea Philopator.² However, when examining the oldest known sources, one finds that Cleopatra was seen as a powerful and witty ruler. Literary interpretations have shaped public and mainstream understandings of Cleopatra and continue to do so to this day. Much like an archaeological dig, one finds that the different pieces which make up the Queen's modern reputation are buried underneath many levels of historical strata. To unearth the truth, one must analyze the primary sources from specific time periods that contribute to an origin, shift, or addition to Cleopatra's reputation. Using *longue durée* history, a chronological study of something

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¹J. Roud Simpson, *Lady Godiva*. A Dictionary of English Folklore (2003): Oxford Reference (Oxford University Press) (accessed February 22, 2017).

²Joyce A. Tyldesley, *Cleopatra: Last Queen of Egypt*. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008), 206.

from its origins to the most recent references, one can correct these misunderstandings and see how Cleopatra was, in fact, a shrewd sovereign and not the wanton woman seen in legend.

Cleopatra VII Thea Philopator was thrown into a position of power at a young age. Inheriting the throne at the age of 18, she shared power with her younger brother, Ptolemy XIII, in accordance with Egyptian custom.³ Coming into conflict with her brother and with the insertion of Rome's power, Cleopatra played an intricate game to keep her power and position. "A capable, clear eyed sovereign, she knew how to build a fleet, suppress an insurrection, control a currency, alleviate a famine."⁴ She mastered international politics early in her twenty-two year reign as Egyptian queen: holding turbulent and ambitious Rome at bay by aligning herself with two of its most prominent players: Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. Julius Caesar set Cleopatra upon the throne and sometime later they had a child together, giving Cleopatra a possible avenue for power in Rome. After the violent murder of Caesar, Cleopatra quickly shifted gears and allied herself with Mark Antony, a Roman general. Together they also had children and would fight in the Battle of Actium against Rome and Octavian, Julius Caesar's nephew and heir. After losing the battle Antony was found dead, Cleopatra disappeared from the records, and Octavian had Caesar's bastard executed.

The first and oldest source on the great queen's identity was Cleopatra herself. With a reputation as Egypt's most infamous queen, it often comes as a shock to learn that Cleopatra was actually Greek. The Queen's royal lineage goes all the way back to Alexander the Great's Macedonian General, Ptolemy I Soter I, who gained control of Egypt shortly after Alexander's death.⁵ Cleopatra was a woman who knew how to manipulate the cultural traditions of both Egyptian and Greek heritage when the situation best suited her. "Her coin portraits vary (and not according to her age), from sweet princess through Hellenistic Greek queen to dominant ruler, the last recalling the butch images of her predecessors...."⁶ Knowing well the importance of a strong home front, Cleopatra, like the pharaohs of Egypt's past, originally portrayed herself as a reincarnation of a god. However, when Cleopatra entered international politics, particularly with Rome, she took on a more Greek figure. By manipulating her own image, Cleopatra began the trend of her evolving reputation and eventual myths.

Although he speaks neither of her reputation nor of their relationship, Julius Caesar gives one a firsthand look

at the politics and issues Cleopatra dealt with while she maintained her position as rightful ruler of Egypt. Caesar's role in Cleopatra's life was not brought about by seduction, but rather by the business of Rome. Pompey, a Roman general, had led a rebellion against Caesar in the struggle for control of Rome but had failed. Fleeing to Egypt, he was executed by Ptolemy XIII. Early on, Cleopatra's control of the throne was not secure and Caesar played an intricate role in settling the matter. Caesar states, "The will of Ptolemy Auletes had declared the elder of his two sons and the elder of his two daughters joint heirs to the throne...."⁷ With this passage, one can see that Caesar seemed to have no opinion of the Queen or her reputation other than as a woman who had claim to the throne. It was Caesar's decision to act as arbitrator that gave Cleopatra her reason for an alliance. At this time there is no hint of the promiscuous, seductive woman who steals Caesar's affections. Instead, one merely finds a political alliance that helped rid Cleopatra of an obstacle to her birthright.

In the first century, roughly two decades after the death of Cleopatra, Josephus Flavius, a Jewish historian living in the Roman Empire, and Plutarch, a Greek biographer, bring about the first layer of mythology marking a tremendous shift in Cleopatra's reputation. Giving an unflattering interpretation of the Queen, Josephus speaks of Cleopatra and Mark Antony's relationship by alluding to several morally flawed actions and traits, such as murder and seduction.⁸ Writing under Roman influence largely biased Josephus's position, causing him to portray her as an enemy of the state. Combining her original reputation with the slanders of Josephus, Plutarch adds several new myths to her story. He also makes the interesting distinction that it was not her beauty, but her brain, that attracted men.⁹ Although there is clearly a romantic element to Plutarch's writing, Cleopatra is still a respected ruler. Additionally, Plutarch gives one of the first renditions of Cleopatra and Antony's relationship and their death. Despite the fact that Plutarch sees Cleopatra as the origin of her lover's faults, she is still more respected than Antony because she dies in a quick, clean manner. Plutarch was of the opinion that she killed herself with an asp, or some other type of poison, after Antony's death.¹⁰

It is not until the Middle Ages that one sees a resurgence of interest in Cleopatra's story through the writings of the Italian poet Dante. Writing about the occupants of the second circle of hell, "...wanton Cleopatra" shows that Dante has clearly decided on the nature of her reputation.¹¹ This was a circle reserved for

³Stacy Schiff. *Cleopatra: A Life*. (New York: Little, Brown and, 2010), 20.

⁴Schiff, 2.

⁵Susan Walker, "Cleopatra: From History to Myth." *History Today* 51, no. 4 (April 2001): 223.

⁶Walker, 2.

⁷Julius Caesar and John Warrington. *War Commentaries: De Bello Gallico and De Bello Civili*. (London: Dent, 1953), 301.

⁸Josephus Flavius, William Whiston, *Josephus: The Complete Works*. (Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 484.

⁹Plutarch, Arthur Hugh Clough, and John Dryden. *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*. (New York: The Modern library, 1932), 883.

¹⁰Plutarch, 1152.

¹¹Alighieri, Dante, Robert Pinsky, and Nicole Pinsky. *The Inferno of Dante: A New Verse Translation*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), 49.

those who lust and, as Cleopatra was a great source of lechery, she fits in well. In contrast, during the Renaissance, Shakespeare sets the stage for modern interpretations by mixing several aspects of past renditions and turning her story into something immortally romantic. Despite the fact that the play *Antony and Cleopatra* focuses largely on the physical aspects of Cleopatra and Antony's relationship, one comes to recognize a much deeper bond beyond carnal pleasures as each commits suicide, unable to live without the other.¹²

The 1963 film *Cleopatra* is a culmination of the various shifts and additions of Cleopatra's story. Unfortunately, Cleopatra's personal perspective and those of her

contemporaries were almost entirely overlooked. Taking the works of authors, such as Shakespeare, and exaggerating them, Hollywood sexualized the character of Cleopatra; appealing to the modern masses. Cleopatra's true identity, cleverly manipulated from the start, can be found buried underneath years of differing historical interpretations and artistic liberties. The competent sovereign has been distorted and undermined by the tale of the exotic enchantress. Still the subject of movies, plays, books, and artwork, one wonders how much further the Queen's story shall transform? Over the next hundred years, what will be added to her ever evolving myth, and what pieces of our society will she reflect?

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¹²William Shakespeare. *Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994), 1210-1252.