

Cleopatra VII: Shrewd Sovereign or “Wanton” Woman?

By Rebecca Rooker



Portrait of Cleopatra from 1st century B.C.E.

2. Ancient Sources

Cleopatra

- The first and oldest sources were derived from self-promotion as Cleopatra ordered her portrait be depicted on coins. A master of manipulating reputation, Cleopatra changed her own portrait to best suit her current situation. She was first depicted as the Egyptian goddess Isis to gain the admiration and loyalty of the Egyptian populace. Later, as good international politics with Rome became vital, Cleopatra changed her image to represent that of her Greek ancestors.

Julius Caesar

- An influential Roman who was at some time romantically involved with Cleopatra. He views himself as the tool by which Cleopatra reclaimed her birthright after her brother/husband attempted to have her removed from the throne. Caesar does not write of a romantic relationship, but rather, a capable sovereign whom he feels should be placed back on the throne.

Josephus

- A Jewish author, who writes from a Roman perspective roughly 80-100 years after Cleopatra's death, gives one the first blemish on the queen's reputation. Speaking at length about how Antony was "enslaved to her by his affections", would impact authors for years to come as they built upon the idea of the morally corrupt female.

3. Middle Ages

Dante

- Pulling from the works of Josephus and other ancient authors, Dante speaks to Cleopatra's unsavory reputation. Dante writes of a "wanton Cleopatra" in his book *Inferno*. He continues by comparing Cleopatra to Helen of Troy, who is also found in this second circle of hell reserved for those who lust. This would tremendously influence other authors of the period.

Chaucer

- In his poem *Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer shapes Cleopatra in a manner most representative of the Middle Ages. Running deep with insinuations of chivalry and tragedy, Cleopatra is no longer the source of her lovers folly but, instead, the heroine that cannot stand the loss of her love. This rendition, despite the applied artistic liberties, would launch a theatrical career.

Shakespeare

- Shakespeare's play *Antony and Cleopatra* gives one a tragic love story in a Renaissance style. Addressing several myths and legends, Cleopatra and Mark Antony's love becomes immortal through a timeless tale of good versus evil. Although the play focuses largely on the physical aspects of Cleopatra and Antony's relationship, one comes to recognize a much deeper bond beyond cardinal pleasures as each commits suicide unable to live without the other.

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1. Introduction, Research Questions, and Thesis

Introduction

- 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 epicly tragic death have surrounded the queen with countless myths and legends. Yet compared to her modern reputation, ancient sources originally viewed Cleopatra as a shrewd monarch.

Research Questions

- How has the reputation of Cleopatra gone from intelligent queen to the more modern symbol of the morally corrupt lover and mistress who suffers a tragic fate?
- What is the reputation Cleopatra truly deserves?

Thesis

- Much like an archaeological dig, one finds that the different pieces which make up the queen's modern reputation are buried in multiple 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 in Cleopatra's reputation.



Photograph of Elizabeth Taylor from 1963 film Cleopatra

Who was Cleopatra?

Queen of Egypt from roughly 51-30 BCE. She was viewed as a goddess by the Egyptian populace and worshiped as such for years after her death.

A descendant of Alexander the Great's Macedonian general Ptolemy I Soter I, who gained control of Egypt shortly after Alexander's death. This makes Cleopatra about as Egyptian as Elizabeth Taylor.

She spoke seven languages and was the only member of her family to learn Egyptian. This mastery of both native and foreign languages allowed her to skillfully navigate domestic and foreign politics.

She was the mother of three children. The first by Julius Caesar and twins by Mark Antony.



18th century painting by Lawrence Alma-Tadema

5. Conclusion

Findings

- After reviewing the primary sources for each relevant time period, one can see just how Cleopatra VII Thea Philopator's story has evolved. With each author's rendition, there is a new origin, a shift, or an addition to the queen's tale.
- Beginning with self-interpretation and ancient sources, one sees both a mythical Egyptian and strong Greek ruler. In the Middle Ages one finds a critical interpretation in Dante's "wanton Cleopatra".
- 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.
- In the modern period, Cleopatra's reputation has become a diverse mix of past sources that leads to a confusing mix of fact and fabrication. Still the subject of movies, books, artwork, etc., one wonders how much further the queen's story shall transform?

Significance

- Clearly proving her longevity, a continual resurgence of interest Cleopatra's reputation has allowed it to endure the test of time.
- Unfortunately, over time Cleopatra's real and deserved reputation as a shrewd sovereign has been distorted and undermined by the tale of the exotic enchantress.
- With a better understanding of the historical contexts that shaped the varied interpretations of her reputation, one's understanding/knowledge of Cleopatra depends largely on which historian and era the facts are derived from.

4. The Modern Period

19th Century

- A major resurgence of interest in Cleopatra comes through nineteenth century Victorian art. This was an age where fascination with ancient Rome dominated both art and literature. Due to Cleopatra's close association with multiple ancient Romans, she also became a topic of interest. Art historian Norman Vance writes, "Being different was part of the appeal of ancient Rome to the late Victorians...". Cleopatra's exotic reputation was what enabled her legend to survive.

20th Century

- A film entitled *Cleopatra* from 1963 is the popular source of information for the 20th and 21st centuries. Brought back to life in the form of Elizabeth Taylor, the past reputation of the intelligent queen is gone as this movie focuses largely on the seductive woman.

21st Century

- Today one can dress as the infamous queen for Halloween, or find her in all manner of media. Stacy Schiff best summarizes Cleopatra's new image by stating, "In one of the busiest afterlives in history she has gone on to become an asteroid, a video game, a cliche, a cigarette, a slot machine, a strip club, a synonym for Elizabeth Taylor". Cleopatra's true identity is found buried underneath years of differing historical interpretations and artistic liberties applied to the facts.

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