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Isabeau Newbury, Carroll College, undergraduate student, “Cleopatra VII: How Modernity Altered One of Egypt’s Most Infamous Pharaohs”

Abstract: In the course of history, many people are fascinated by the “other” but this fascination stems from works that are not factual depictions of an event or person. If the personification of historical figures is continuously perpetuated in fictional works, how we interpret the evidence can then be affected by these works. This is especially true of the ancient women in power in Ancient Egypt, but specifically in the case of Cleopatra VII, who was the last Pharaoh of Egypt. This study is designed to look at how desire vs fact changes the narrative, and how we need to be cautious about exotifying the “other.” Cleopatra VII’s image in modernity has been shaped by her portrayal in Shakespeare and Dante, as well as in Renaissance and contemporary artwork (including film). By keeping this in mind, it is not wrong to be fascinated by the “other” but it raises the question of how much of a historical person’s character can we really know if the facts we perceive to be true are affected by fictional manipulations of them.

Cleopatra VII: How Modernity Altered One of Egypt's Most Infamous Pharaohs

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Women throughout ancient history have been portrayed by those who write it as the damsel in distress, the snake, the jealous and enraged, and as the seductress. It has not been until recently that we have come to understand the contributions that many women brought to society, and how important those roles have been. However, it is the women of non-European descent whom History treats the most unkindly. And yet, there is one woman who has managed to weave herself through the times regardless of her death in 30 BCE. Cleopatra VII, the last true Pharaoh of Ancient Egypt, was known for her intellect, wit, and her involvement- both romantically and politically- with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony of Rome.

Cleopatra has had many iterations over the centuries since her death, but her character is most commonly perpetuated by William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. This personification of Cleopatra VII has managed to pass into modernity and inspire a fascination that transcends factual evidence. This paper examines how modernity has shaped our view of Cleopatra VII, and how this can affect what we do know going forward with future research. What was it about this woman that made so many hate her in antiquity-- that made that hatred seep into modern interpretations? Today, when we think of Cleopatra VII, we think of a woman who seduced her way into power. But why is the theory of conniving slut more interesting than the fact that Cleopatra VII was highly intelligent and was hellbent on claiming the Mediterranean for her own? Though this paper cannot speak for Cleopatra VII, as she has no surviving text of her own, this paper posits that her reputation needs a reevaluation. It is not inherently wrong to be fascinated by the "other" but it can be dangerous when it turns to exotification and orientalism and to continue viewing one as such and researching them through that lens.

Literature Review

Cleopatra VII is actually more popular in types of media than she is in any historical research. Joyce Tyldesley, a British archaeologist and Egyptologist, states that, “The Graeco-Roman scholars have, in turn, shied away from Cleopatra VII; maybe because histories emphasising individual rather than national achievement are currently considered somewhat old-fashioned, or perhaps they feel a reluctance to tackle a subject as obviously popular as Cleopatra.”¹ She also says that while most of the world looks to Cleopatra as the defining Queen of Egypt, most traditional Egyptologists from the 20th century onward ignore her.² This paper takes a look at how Cleopatra VII’s character has been altered by modernity and perhaps answers why most historians- namely Egyptologists- practice a “hands off” approach to the long dead Queen.

As Tyldesley states, “With an almost complete lack of primary sources we cannot hope to hear Cleopatra’s true voice, and are forced to see her through secondary eyes; eyes already coloured by other people’s propaganda, prejudices and assumptions. Few of us would wish to be judged this way.”³ From Plutarch, Shakespeare, all the way to Dante and the painters of the late 1800s, Cleopatra has captured the eyes of many who wish to know more about her life. While few have attempted to research her in depth due to a lack of primary sources, this paper urges the reader to look at Cleopatra as a woman outside of modernity. The woman we see in our history books is most often mischaracterized as the villainous seductress that brought about the downfall of her own empire and almost took Rome with her, but there is perhaps more to Cleopatra VII than meets the eye.

Background Knowledge

In order to understand why Cleopatra's image in modernity is the way it is, we first need to look at how her image has been shaped since her death in 30 BCE. Joyce Tyldesley, a British archaeologist and Egyptologist, states in her book *Cleopatra: Last Queen of Egypt* that, "Much of his [Octavian] propaganda...has of course been lost. But enough remains to allow us an understanding of the corruption of Cleopatra's memory."⁴ In 69 BCE, Cleopatra VII Philopator was born into the reigning family of Egypt- the Ptolemy's. The Ptolemy family was given Egypt to rule over after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE, thus marking the arrival of the Hellenistic period in Egypt, which lasted until the death of Cleopatra VII in 30 BCE. This piece of information is important to retain because many- in our current day- do not realize that Cleopatra VII was Greek, and not Egyptian. The Ptolemy family did not intermarry with Egyptians, they married other Greeks, but followed the royal Egyptian tradition of marrying their sisters. So while Cleopatra may have been lighter skinned for the area, she would not have been the white-skinned seductress that is often portrayed in modernity.⁵

After the death of her father, Cleopatra VII was married to her brother, Ptolemy XIII Theos Philopator. Cleopatra VII had her siblings murdered in order to have sole reign over the Egyptian Empire. This was not unusual for rulers of ancient Egypt, or many other places during the time. The meeting and eventual partnership between Cleopatra and Caesar could be described as a "whirlwind" romance, though it is important to note that this relationship was not one of a loving couple and the term "romance" is used loosely. At the time of their first meeting, Cleopatra VII would have been 21 and the story goes that since she was having problems with her co-ruler and brother over Egypt that she wrapped herself in some sort of sack and was secretly delivered to the Roman general in order to garner some help from him.⁶ Since her

brother would have been a thirteen year old boy- and by ancient standards, he probably still would have been considered a boy- Cleopatra is also unlikely to have had any sexual experience before Caesar to begin with, though this did not stop commentators calling her, as Stacy Schiff puts it, “would write off Cleopatra as ‘Ptolemy’s impure daughter,’ a ‘matchless siren,’ the ‘painted whore’ whose ‘unchastity cost Rome dear.’”⁷ Schiff also suggests that survival may have more been on the forefront of Cleopatra’s mind than seduction.⁸

Eventually, Caesar and Cleopatra had one son named Caesarion (who was unacknowledged by Caesar, making him illegitimate in Rome’s eyes) in 47 BCE- and they remained in some sort of relationship until Caesar’s death in 44 BCE, much to the chagrin of Caesar’s wife and the Roman Senate. Egypt’s relationship with Rome became even more complicated when Cleopatra and Mark Antony entered into a relationship that *was* acknowledged publicly. In time, Antony divorced his wife Octavia,⁹ married Cleopatra, and they had three children: twins, Alexander Helios and Cleopatra Selene, and then a much younger son, Ptolemy Philadelphus. And while it’s not entirely clear if Caesarion was in fact Julius Caesar’s son, Octavian- Caesar’s nephew- did feel that the boy was a threat. For all Cleopatra did as her image as the “Mother of Egypt,” she would ultimately fail at making Egypt the biggest empire in the ancient Mediterranean world. For her attempts, she would be remembered as the sultry villain that lots of us remember her as today.

Despite the negative effects that her romantic relationships received, however, Cleopatra VII had, by all accounts, a brilliant mind. Tyldesley notes this using a quote from Cicero himself on the matter of Cleopatra VII and her intellect: “Cicero, who met and took an instant dislike to Cleopatra, confirms that she had academic leanings-- ‘Her promises were all things to do with learning, and not derogatory to my dignity...’-- while Appian tells us that she tried to interest

Mark Antony in education and discussion.”¹⁰ Plutarch also tells us that Cleopatra VII spoke and wrote Egyptian fluently- possibly other languages as well- and was the only Ptolemaic ruler to do so.¹¹ Though she was highly intelligent, her being a woman put her at a disadvantage in the ancient world.

Analysis

In order to proceed, we must define Orientalism and what it means to exotify- particularly in the case of a person. Edward Said, the father of the theory of Orientalism, defines Orientalism as, “Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient--dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”¹² When she was alive, Cleopatra’s image was not shaped by Orientalist fantasy, but rather that of a fascination with power and- potentially- jealousy.¹³ As more time passed after her death, Cleopatra VII became a figure that was used to remind the minds of men not to fall into the trap of foreign seduction lest they be overcome and tragedy ensues. It is this portrayal of Cleopatra that led to centuries of perpetuations by Shakespeare and Dante, painters in the late 19th century, and the more recent 1963 film *Cleopatra* that modernity draws on.

Tyldesley says, “...it is possible, with goodwill, patience, and determination, and without venturing too far into the enticing but ultimately sterile realm of historical romance, to draw some conclusions and, perhaps, to begin to understand something of her motivation.”¹⁴ Due to a lack of evidence, it is easy to view Cleopatra as a blank slate that is ready to be reinvented. Shakespeare and the 1963 biopic film, *Cleopatra*, draw inspiration from the “love story” of Cleopatra VII and Mark Antony- drawing their own inspiration from Plutarch and the like- and

this is a common theme that can be seen throughout the various portrayals of Cleopatra's life. In Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, a man in Antony's party tells someone after they suggest that Antony will be able to leave Cleopatra forever after his marriage to Octavia this:

ENOBARBUS Never. He will not.
 Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
 Her infinite variety. Other women cloy
 The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry
 Where most she satisfies.¹⁵

In the play, Cleopatra is beyond outraged to hear that Antony has decided to marry Octavia instead of returning to Egypt. Historically, it is known that Cleopatra often tested poisons on prisoners, but Shakespeare characterizes this as a brutality not usually seen in women, though Schiff assures us that Cleopatra did what she had to in order to run her empire.¹⁶ Due to a misunderstanding, Antony denounces Cleopatra and swears to kill her- she instead fakes her death and waits for his return. Antony, however, feels so awful about this that he attempts to kill himself, is then brought to die in Cleopatra's arms, and then Cleopatra kills herself with an asp in order to avoid being captured by Octavian.¹⁷ Shakespeare's portrayal of her often seems mixed- sometimes she appears as the villain opposing Octavian, and other times she is seen as the tragic heroine- and it is not clear if we are supposed to be rooting for her or not.

At the end of the play, Octavian experiences "conflicting emotions" as now he is free to be the ruler of Rome, but he also feels sympathy for the couple. This contradicts what we know happened after Mark Antony and Cleopatra VII's deaths. Octavian killed Caesarion a week before Cleopatra died, and then he paraded Antony and Cleopatra's ten year old twins and four year old son in golden chains throughout Rome, eventually giving them to his sister Octavia to raise.¹⁸ The only sympathy given was given by the Roman people who felt that parading children as war prizes alongside the statue of their dead mother was in poor taste. Cleopatra's life, though

it has been molded into this strange thing, has been as Tyldesley states, “[As] Cleopatra had played a key role in Octavian’s struggle to power, her story was allowed to survive as an integral part of his.”¹⁹ History is often wrought with instances of women scorned, but their contributions are diminished as being secondary in someone else's' story and not allowed to star in their own. A woman in power is a dangerous phenomenon, and as Cleopatra VII’s life suggests, it often comes at a cost.



Figure 1. *Cleopatra* by John William Waterhouse (1888)²⁰

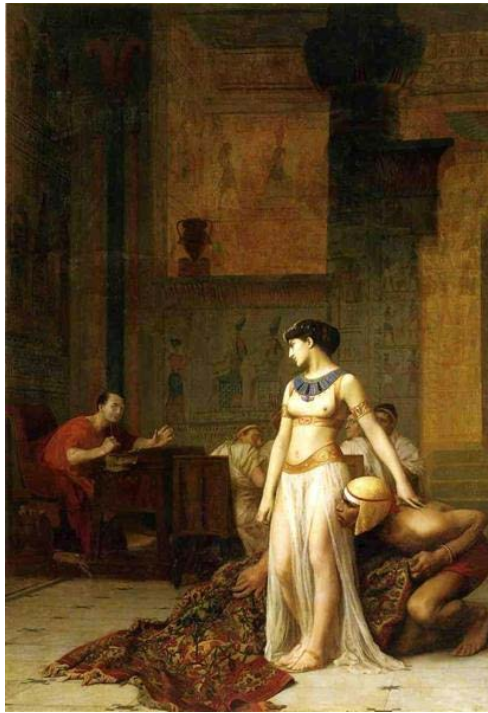


Figure 2. *Cleopatra and Caesar* by Jean-Leon Gerome (1886)²¹

As seen above, there was a trend in European paintings from the 1870-80s done of Cleopatra VII, in what might be considered a mix of pre-Raphaelite art and “academicism.”²² In figure 1, John William Waterhouse portrays her on a lavish throne, judging something or someone that the spectator cannot see- perhaps a nod to the sometimes ruthless portrayal of Cleopatra’s rule in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*.²³ Jean-Leon Gerome, figure 2, shows Cleopatra VII with a sheer top, crawling out of the rug she had folded herself into in order to “seduce” Caesar.²⁴ Other paintings portray her testing poisons on prisoners, and then there are the myriad of death scenes that vary anywhere from a fantastical setup with Roman soldiers to Cleopatra VII looking vaguely like the Virgin Mary with her top off and a snake at her breast. The problem with these images? Cleopatra VII is depicted as white and, in most cases, *nude*. Even the paintings by Juan Luna (1881)²⁵ and Jean Andre Rixens (1874)²⁶- both titled *The Death of Cleopatra*- feature a white-skinned Cleopatra.

Cleopatra's image is brought into the 20th century when the biopic film- named after her- is released in 1963. Elizabeth Taylor stars in the titular role, and brings to screen the image of Cleopatra that most of us are familiar with. This film, along with Shakespeare's portrayal of her, are what have continued to circulate throughout recent decades. Schiff says of Cleopatra's image, "A very different kind of woman, the Virgin Mary, would subsume Isis as entirely as Elizabeth Taylor has subsumed Cleopatra."²⁷ Taylor's portrayal of Cleopatra may have been in part due to her own "exotic" features, as the actress reportedly had purple colored eyes- but this idea of a white woman with exotic features playing a long dead Queen who was neither white nor exotic for her time is deeply unsettling. Like Shakespeare, the film draws heavily from the *Histories* (Plutarch, Appian and the like) and weaves a love triangle between Caesar, Cleopatra VII and Mark Antony. And while the film shows Cleopatra as using Caesar for her own gains and show her as being incredibly intelligent, they used her intelligence as an "exotifying" fact about her.²⁸

After Cleopatra's death, there was heavy anti-Egyptianism sentiment throughout the Roman empire. She had been declared a public enemy, a direct threat to Octavian and his claim to Rome, and in an act of her own self-agency she had taken her life; this left Octavian with nothing to do but take her treasure, her children, and drag her name through the mud.²⁹ The story of Cleopatra VII, however, would be a warning to all Roman women going forward- after all, what woman would want to be seen using their intellect in order to make advances towards men or in order to advance one's station in life? Whatever the case may be, the anti-Egyptian sentiment that lasted through Octavian's rule and onward did not stop people's fascination with the dead Queen. Cleopatra VII had deified herself as Isis, as the "Mother of Egypt," and though

Octavian did his best to get rid of all statues of Cleopatra- to erase her name as much as was needed from history- myth is more likely to prevail.

Conclusion

Plutarch, born seventy-six years after Cleopatra's death, was utterly fascinated with her himself. Jennifer Moss tells us that, "Plutarch's portrayal of Cleopatra is colorful; like so many who followed him, Plutarch was seduced by the mythologized character of the queen."³⁰ His writings are what most of what we know of Cleopatra VII are based on, and it is thanks to him that she has been perpetuated throughout time. Tyldesley, in response to Cleopatra's treatment after her death says this:

"Cleopatra, stripped of any political validity, was to be remembered as that immoral foreign woman. Almost overnight she became the most frightening of Roman stereotypes: an unnatural female. A woman who worshipped crude gods, dominated men, slept with her brothers and gave birth to bastards. A woman foolish enough to think that she might one day rule Rome, and devious enough to lure a decent man away from his hearth and home. This version of Cleopatra is, of course, the precise opposite of the chaste and loyal Roman wife, typified by the wronged Octavia and the virtuous Livia, just as Cleopatra's exotic eastern land is the louche feminine counterpoint to upright, uptight, essentially masculine Rome. As enemy number one, Cleopatra was extremely useful to Octavian, who not unnaturally preferred to be remembered fighting misguided foreigners rather than decent fellow Romans."³¹

With the newly announced remake of the 1963 Cleopatra biopic film, and current "whitewashing" claims³², it seems that many people's notions of the long dead Queen are clouded by both an Orientalist and a Feminist-Presentist mix of history. Not only is this mythologization of Cleopatra dangerous, it also continues to make the claws of modernity clutch her that much tighter. The mythos of the Queen may have started as a way to defame her, but that clearly did not go according to plan as many after her death have continued to be enchanted by her tale. This paper cannot speak for Cleopatra VII and how she might have felt about her name being defamed, but it hopes that others will begin to reexamine her character going

forward with research. And though there is still much to learn about Cleopatra VII, and many more misconceptions to right, the long dead Queen will continue to fascinate the modern world. Afterall, as the Roman poet Juvenal said, “What woman will not follow when an Empress leads the way?”³³

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- ¹ Joyce A. Tyldesley, *Cleopatra: The Last Queen of Egypt* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008), 3.
- ² Tyldesley, *Cleopatra*, 3.
- ³ Tyldesley, *Cleopatra*, 7.
- ⁴ Tyldesley, *Cleopatra*, 206.
- ⁵ Ancient Egypt was actually rather diverse in terms of skin color and culture. There are accounts of people- particularly slaves- from other kingdoms or empires that Egypt obtained. One may even question if this collection of people was a form of ancient “exoticism” itself. Tyldesley says that “Egyptianness”, much like “Greekness”, is a matter of culture and not skin color, at least in the ancient world (p. 31).
- ⁶ Stacy Schiff, *Cleopatra: A Life*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2010, 17-18.
- ⁷ Schiff, *Cleopatra: A Life*, 18.
- ⁸ Schiff, *Cleopatra: A Life*, 18.
- ⁹ Octavian’s sister- this did Antony no favors.
- ¹⁰ Cicero, *Letters to Atticus*, 15: 15. Translated by E.O. Winstedt (1918), Heinemann, London and New York; Appian, *Roman History*, 5: 1. Both are quoted in Joyce Tyldesley, *Cleopatra* (2008), 32.
- ¹¹ Tyldesley, *Cleopatra*, 3-6; Plutarch, *Life of Antony*, 26. Translated by B. Perrin. As quoted in Joyce Tyldesley, *Cleopatra* (2008), 33.
- ¹² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*. 1st Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books, 179, 3.
- ¹³ Orientalism is a modern idea.
- ¹⁴ Tyldesley, *Cleopatra*, 7.
- ¹⁵ William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, <https://tinyurl.com/y6pzbeq>. Act 2, Scene 2, Lines 275-79, 73.
- ¹⁶ Schiff, *Cleopatra: A Life*, 66.
- ¹⁷ Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*. Many, like Schiff, do not think Cleopatra would have opted to kill herself with an asp, as it would have been extremely slow and painful.
- ¹⁸ Tyldesley, *Cleopatra*, 199.
- ¹⁹ Tyldesley, *Cleopatra*, 206.
- ²⁰ John William Waterhouse, *Cleopatra*, illustration, 1887, accessed September 27, 2020, <https://www.wikiart.org/en/john-william-waterhouse/cleopatra-1887-1>.
- ²¹ Jean-Leon Gerome, *Cleopatra and Caesar*, illustration, 1886, accessed September 27, 2020, <https://www.wikiart.org/en/jean-leon-gerome/cleopatra-and-caesar>.
- ²² “Academicism” was especially popular during the late 1800s, but had existed since Art Academies were created. It refers to a style of painting, sculpture, or architecture. This particular movement was meant to mimic European academies of art.
- ²³ Waterhouse, *Cleopatra*.
- ²⁴ Gerome, *Cleopatra and Caesar*.
- ²⁵ Luna, Juan. *The Death of Cleopatra*. Illustration. 1881. Accessed November 2, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y32x47h7>.
- ²⁶ Rixens, Jean Andre. *The Death of Cleopatra*. Illustration. 1874. Accessed November 2, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y3n3acun>.
- ²⁷ Schiff, *Cleopatra: A Life*, 301.
- ²⁸ *Cleopatra*, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, Twentieth Century-Fox Film Distribution, 1963.
- ²⁹ Schiff, *Cleopatra: A Life*, 288-89.
- ³⁰ Jennifer Moss, *Plutarch’s Invention of Cleopatra*. SSRN Electronic Journal. 2010. 10.2139/ssrn.1608202, Abstract.
- ³¹ Tyldesley, *Cleopatra*, 206.
- ³² There have been long arguments in recent decades about whether Cleopatra was “white” or “black.” The truth of the matter is that we will never know for sure, but for the sake of this paper, Cleopatra VII was a Greek living in an Egyptian world that she made herself a part of- and that’s what matters.
- ³³ Juvenal. *The Satires of Juvenal*. Translated by Rolfe Humphries. N.p.: Indiana University Press, 1958, 88.