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Egypt & Egyptomania

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**Cleopatra Through the Ages**

***How the Success of Powerful Women Has Been and Continues to Be Defined Within the Confines of Their Sexuality***

Born in 69 BC, the third child of Ptolemy XII, King of Egypt, was a princess who would become perhaps the most infamous woman in history. She was an exceedingly capable ruler, both tough and thrifty by necessity, but it is not for her skill in government that she is remembered. Rather, her fame derives from her trysts with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony and her subsequent portrayal as a dangerous seductress. Caesar and Antony, both of whom engaged in many more romantic exploits than did Cleopatra, are remembered as courageous, powerful generals. But as a woman, Cleopatra is remembered solely in the context of her relationships with these men. Cleopatra’s image has been distorted over and over again to match the cultural ideals for a woman in whatever era she is being depicted. Historically, women have not been where the power lies in society; their power has been seen to derive from the presence or absence of a powerful man in their lives. Because of this, history and the media depict them as sexual objects, judging them not on their ability but on whether a man would want them, in a sexual sense. Cleopatra, and powerful women throughout history, have been depicted in ways entirely reliant on their sexuality and ignorant of their accomplishments, resulting in a devaluation of women’s roles in society and misrepresentations in historical mediums.

Cleopatra ruled during the twilight of Egypt’s time as an empire. She was Greek, not Egyptian, a descendant of the first Ptolemy, a Macedonian general who became ruler of Egypt after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC (Hughes-Hallett). At the time of her birth, Egypt was a rich but politically unstable state. Much like her father before her, Cleopatra was to base her foreign policy on Roman alliances, as evidenced by her partnerships with both Julius Caesar and Mark Antony (Hughes-Hallett). King Ptolemy Auletes, Cleopatra’s father, died in 51 BC. His will named Cleopatra and her brother Ptolemy XIII joint heirs; she was 18, and he was 10 (Hughes-Hallett). After the death of Ptolemy XIII, Caesar did not annex Egypt, but married his royal mistress to her youngest brother, Ptolemy XIV, and declared them joint rulers. From this point onward, Cleopatra reigned effectively alone (Hughes-Hallett). Thus it seems that the overdramatized love affair between Cleopatra and Julius Caesar was more of a business arrangement than a tale of star-crossed love; Caesar was able to continue milking Egypt for funding for his wars, and Cleopatra was able to attain sole rule.

The first two years of Cleopatra’s reign were troubled. The Nile didn’t flood, resulting in an inadequate harvest and food shortages in the cities. Additionally, some soldiers mutinied; because of her Roman alliances, Cleopatra was perceived as a Roman ally, which her nationalist subjects did not like (Hughes-Hallett). However, she proved herself a capable ruler, able to keep the peace as harvests failed and participating on the international stage as a cunning, powerful player (Hughes-Hallett). However, her story has been diminished into just two installments: her relationships with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony (Tyldesley). Since it was Octavian who took power after the fall of the Ptolemaic dynasty, history of the time was written from his perspective. Caesar, the adoptive father who gave Octavian the right to rule, was “remembered with respect as a brave and upright man who manipulated an immoral foreign woman for his own ends” (Tyldesley 206). Antony, who was a powerful Roman general, after all, was “remembered with a mixture of pity and contempt as a brave but fatally weak man hopelessly ensnared in the coils of an immoral foreign woman” (Tyldesley 206). Cleopatra, whose story was only allowed to survive because of the key role she played in Octavian’s struggle to power, was, and would continue to be in depictions throughout history, “stripped of any political validity” and remembered as that “immoral foreign woman” (Tyldesley 206).

This reimagining of Cleopatra is not a new trend. Even in her own lifetime she was “twice over a fiction” (Hughes-Hallett preface). In her enemies’ propaganda, she was reinvented as a depraved seductress, an attempt to discredit her rule. But in her own self-glamorization she was a goddess and a liberator (Hughes-Hallett). Cleopatra has been “recreated over and over again, each time in a form that fits the prejudices and fantasies of the age that produced it” (Hughes-Hallett preface). To Chaucer, she was the “model of a good wife” (Hughes-Hallett preface). The Arabic historian Al-Masudi referred to her as “a scholar and a sage” (Hughes-Hallett preface). George Bernard Shaw depicted her as “an emotionally retarded sex-kitten, while the painters of the Renaissance saw her as “a swooning victim”; but the poets of Romanticism saw her as “a terrifying *femme fatale*” (Hughes-Hallett preface). These myriad interpretations of her show, more than anything, that we really have no idea who she was. The reason that many of the images and interpretations of Cleopatra are so demeaning is that her enemies, in essence, wrote her history. The years after Actium, perhaps her greatest defeat, was a time of extravagant mythmaking that coincided with the birth of Latin literature (Schiff). This new generation of great poets would be hard-pressed to ignore such a remarkable woman. However, they depicted her in a shameful way, in contradistinction to everything she represented. These unfavorable representations are only a continuation of the trend of history’s distrust of and distaste for powerful women.

To obfuscate Cleopatra’s dominant position in society, her power has been made to derive from her sexuality. “It has always been preferable to attribute a woman’s success to her beauty rather than to her brains,” thus reducing her to the sum of her sex life (Schiff 299). For men in positions of power, “it is less threatening to believe her fatally attractive than fatally intelligent” (Schiff 299). For Cleopatra to have outsmarted many a Roman general, it is less embarrassing for Roman historians to say that it was her irresistible seductiveness that allowed her such success. Any true man would never be able to resist seduction by a beautiful woman, after all. Additionally, eroticism and seduction make a much better story than intelligence. The greats of Latin literature needed a character who would draw a crowd, and an intelligent female character was unlikely to do that in first century Roman society. An exotic, provocative queen, however, was another story. To Propertius, Cleopatra was “a wanton seductress, ‘the whore queen’” (Schiff 299). He also has her fornicating with her slaves. Dio describes her as “a woman of insatiable sexuality and insatiable avarice”, and to Dante she is “a carnal sinner” (Schiff 299). Boccaccio says she is “the whore of the eastern kings”, to Dryden she is “a poster child for unlawful love”, and Florence Nightingale even referred to her as “that disgusting Cleopatra” (Schiff 299). Cecil B. DeMille is even said to have asked Claudette Colbert, when he wanted her to play Cleopatra in his 1934 movie, “’How would you like to be the wickedest woman in history?’” (Schiff 299). “The personal inevitably trumps the political, and the erotic trumps all”; all of us know that Cleopatra slept with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, but I imagine very few people know what she accomplished in doing so (Schiff 299). Cleopatra was able to sustain a vast, rich, heavily populated empire in its troubled end, continuing a proud dynasty (Schiff).

Cleopatra is remembered mostly for her sexual exploits, but by the time she died she’d been celibate for more than half her adult life. Most of the time she was partnered with Caesar he was absent on campaigns, and it’s highly unlikely that either of her marriages to her younger brothers were consummated (Hughes-Hallett). She remains famous “for having seduced two of the greatest men of her time”, but this was also her crime (Schiff 299). She entered the same cunning marital partnerships that every man in power was permitted to enjoy, but doing this as a woman made her an unnatural deviant (Schiff). Cleopatra’s story is constructed “as much of male fear as of fantasy” (Schiff 300). For Antony, the great Roman general, to have been overpowered by something other than a fellow Roman, Cleopatra had to be a disarming seductress who would ruin him (Schiff). But rather than being focused on love and seduction, it appears that Cleopatra’s energies were fully employed elsewhere. She was a tactful and efficient ruler, and a tough negotiator. The Greek Ptolemies weren’t always popular with their Egyptian subjects; nationalist uprisings were common throughout their three-hundred-year rule. Cleopatra herself ascended the throne immediately following a nasty civil war, “yet all the records agree that during her reign the country was internally at peace” (Hughes-Hallett 23). It is also clear that under her management the Egyptian economy was strong, despite the massive debts incurred by her father and Caesar’s use of the country to pay for his own civil wars (Hughes-Hallett). Without Cleopatra, Alexandria “began to dematerialize”, and “with it went legal autonomy for women” (Schiff 301). Two thousand years of bad press can’t obscure the fact that Cleopatra was a remarkable woman, a capable queen and strategist (Schiff). “’What woman, what ancient succession of men, was so great?’” asks the anonymous author of a fragmentary Latin poem, depicting Cleopatra as the principal player of the age (Schiff 301). With her, the age of empresses essentially came to an end; “in two thousand years only one or two other women could be said to have wielded unrestricted authority over so vast a realm” (Schiff 302). However, Cleopatra’s accomplishments have largely been obscured by stories about her failings as a woman.

In 17th and 18th century society, “’The greatest achievement for a woman [was] to be as seldom as possible spoken of”, as Thucydides stated (Schiff 189). Women at this time were second class citizens whose roles in society were entirely dependent on men. Cleopatra, whose 17th and 18th century interpretation can be read as an expression of the culture that produced it, is also seen in this submissive, dependent light. John Dryden’s Cleopatra, heroine of his 1678 tragedy *All for Love*, bemoans her lack of a husband: “Nature meant me/A wife; a silly harmless household dove,/Found without art, and kind without deceit” (Hughes-Hallett 160). She expresses that she cannot do without a man in her life. Two discouraging trends can be drawn from the books, plays, and art representing Cleopatra. These are that “good women are, or should at least appear to be, weak, and that those whose energy and talents prevent them from conforming to this idea of feminine feebleness are, of necessity, ‘false’ – wily, self-serving, and unchaste” (Hughes-Hallett 160). Cleopatra ruled a rich, powerful empire alone, killed herself rather than be seen to surrender, but “was repeatedly depicted by baroque and neo-classical artists in situations expressive of helplessness and self-abasement” (Hughes-Hallett 162). Continuing the theme of women being helpless without a man by her side, Sedley’s Agrippa deplores Cleopatra’s “unladylike insistence on ruling her own country”, as evidenced by his opining that “’Women should sit like idle passengers,/While the tall ship some able seaman steers’” (Hughes-Hallett 166). In other words, a woman, that poor, helpless creature, needs a man to protect her. The Cleopatras of the 17th and 18th centuries are politically and practically incompetent, and are principally preoccupied with finding and keeping a man (Hughes-Hallett).

In the 17th and 18th century versions of her story, there are three possible characters for Cleopatra: “the wife, the failed or would-be wife, and the brazen whore” (Hughes-Hallett 170). The wife is weak but virtuous, the would-be wife weak and pathetic, and the whore is depicted as bad and strong (Hughes-Hallett). All have in common a lack of autonomy; “they are defined entirely by the nature of their relationships with men” (Hughes-Hallett 170). Samuel Brandon depicts Octavia, Antony’s lawfully wedded wife, as “’Earth’s glory’” and “’the heaven’s beloved bride,’” while Cleopatra, his adulteress, is notable only for her “gilded baits of sin” (Hughes-Hallett 177). Cleopatra as a dangerously seductive whore seems to be her primary depiction of the 17th and 18th centuries. The whore is hated, but is seen as stronger and more dangerous than the wife. She’s financially independent, since her sexuality is her own, to sell or enjoy as she pleases; this makes her clever, but also false. She has the ‘manlike’ belief that life has more to offer than romantic sentiment. Masculine advantages such as these allow her to make men feel at ease; she knows how to benefit from her popularity with them (Hughes-Hallett). This “harlot-Cleopatra” who considers her own interests before those of her man has some independence, but nothing can entirely free her from the weakness of her sex (Hughes-Hallett, 180). To her interpreters of the 17th and 18th centuries, “she’s only ever as powerful as men’s favor can make her,” seduction being “her only talent, and male indifference can render its potency null” (Hughes-Hallett 180). When Cleopatra became the *femme fatale* of the 19th century imagination, she temporarily escaped this weakness, but the belief that women’s perceived nature was determined by their relationship with men remained a perennial part of her story (Hughes-Hallett). Her virtue; namely, whether she is the wife or the brazen whore; is entirely dependent on whether or not a man has taken her under his protection. By the early 19th century, Cleopatra’s name had become synonymous with adultery. In a cartoon of the time by James Gillray, “Sir William Hamilton contemplates his art collection, including a pair of portraits labelled *Cleopatra* and *Antony* but actually depicting Hamilton’s wife Emma and her lover, Lord Nelson” (Hughes-Hallett 181-182). In a 17th through 19th century woman’s imagined weakness, she is only allowed to choose between two roles: wife or courtesan. The same is true for Cleopatra. To find a place for herself in society, she must win men’s favor. But the price of this favor, and thus a place to succeed in society, is her own natural strength, since men have tended throughout history to dislike toughness in a female (Hughes-Hallett). Thus the Cleopatras of the 17th through 19th centuries are weak and submissive, entirely dependent on men’s favor for her success as a queen.

20th century media has not significantly evolved from the 17th through 19th centuries in its depiction of women. Studies by Dominick and Rauch in the *New York Times* of 1970s television advertisements “suggest strongly that females in television advertising are associated with domesticity and submissiveness while males are associated with more worldly roles and with dominance” (Busby 110). This is consistent with the trend of women as secondary members of society whose roles are entirely dependent on the presence of a man in their lives. In television advertisements analyzed by Busby, 37.5% of the ads showed women as men’s domestic adjuncts, 33.9% showed women as dependent on men, 24.3% showed women as submissive, and 16.7% depicted women as sex objects (Busby 108). In this same study, the vast majority of women were depicted as married, none of whom worked at jobs outside the home. Of the single women who did, only two held positions of authority and prestige. Additionally, “women were usually portrayed as silly, over-emotional, and dependent on husbands and boyfriends” (Busby 111). When compared to males in an analysis of 20th century films by Busby, females were depicted as “less ambitious, less competitive … less independent … less brave, weaker, more submissive, more fragile, less dominant…” and “more dependent on others” (Busby 112). Women were shown to be dependent on the protection of a man, while men primarily perceived women as domestic adjuncts or sex objects (Busby). Franzwa found women to be portrayed in one of four ways: “single, looking for a husband; housewife-mother; spinster; or widowed or divorced, soon to marry. Franzwa noted that one common element that defined all the women was the presence or absence of a man in their lives” (Busby 117-118). This, of course, sounds much like the three dominant portrayals of Cleopatra: the wife, the failed or would-be wife, and the brazen whore. Women of the late 20th century were still portrayed in the media within a very narrow lens, that being the presence or absence of a man in their lives and how that affects their standing in society.

In the 21st century, women, especially women in power, are still not safe from their success being defined in terms of their sexuality. Stacy Schiff is correct in stating that “Female ambition, accomplishment, and authority trouble us as they did the Romans, for whom Cleopatra was more a monster than a marvel, but undeniably a little of both” (Schiff 301). Women in government today are still unable to escape the idea that powerful females must be cold and power-hungry. There is an inescapable double standard for accomplished women that does not exist for men: “Women who are considered feminine will be judged incompetent, and women who are competent, unfeminine” (Carlin 327). Politically successful women are examined under a very different lens than that of accomplished men (Carlin). Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in her book *Men and Women of the Corporation,* “identified four common stereotypes of professional women: seductress or sex object, mother, pet, and iron maiden” (Carlin 327). Again, there is a direct connection between these depictions and that of Cleopatra in the 17th and 18th century, forcing us to question how far we’ve really come in the fight for women’s equality.

The 21st century female politician seems to be the media’s favorite target, and in their depictions of female candidates we can find egregious examples of modern sexism. In the 2008 election campaign coverage of Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton, it is all too easy to see the continuation of the sexist tendency to view a woman solely through her relationship with a man or how men would view her. Sarah Palin’s past as a beauty pageant contestant was used to dismiss her as a serious candidate. Writing in the Berkeley Daily Planet, Becky O’Malley editorialized that “’The race for the U.S. presidency is not just one more beauty contest,’” implying that success for Palin could only be determined by her appearance (Carlin 330). Discussing the vice presidential debate, a Daily News article stated that “’Former beauty pageant contestant Palin is a head-turner who offers ample opportunities for trouble to a man who expresses appreciation for attractive women in ways that overstep the bounds of political correctness’” (Carlin 330). As 17th and 18th century interpreters did to Cleopatra, this reduced Palin to the sum of her sexuality, suggesting that her appearance, and not her rebuttals, was the major threat Palin posed to Joe Biden in the debate. Additionally, David Wright of ABC opined that “’Men want a sexy woman. Women want to idealize about a sexy woman… Women want to be her; men want to mate with her’” (Carlin 331). This statement reflects the idea that the only reason for electing Palin would be for men to pine after her and women to strive to be her, completely disregarding her success as a politician.

In contrast to Sarah Palin, nobody doubted Hillary Clinton’s want for power, which resulted in negative portrayals of her femininity. While Palin represented the feminine woman who was thus regarded as incompetent, Clinton was distrusted for her lack of stereotypical femininity. She “was the antiseductress who reminded men of the affair gone bad” (Carlin 331). Chris Matthews of MSNBC reduced her value as deriving solely from her relationship with a man when he stated that “’The reason she’s a U.S. senator, the reason she’s a candidate for president, the reason she may be a front-runner is her husband messed around” (Carlin 331). Rush Limbaugh further represented Clinton’s value as being dependent on her perceived value as a woman when he suggested that “’as you age – and… you know women are hardest hit on this… America loses interest in you’” (Carlin 332) Maureen Dowd, one of Clinton’s harshest critics, summarized the way that Bill Clinton is woven inseparably into Hillary’s campaign when she observed that “As a possible first Madame President, Hillary is a flaws science experiment because you can’t take Bill out of the equation. Her story is wrapped up in her marriage, and her marriage is wrapped up in a series of unappetizing compromises, arrangements and dependencies’” (Carlin 337). Again, we see the ingrained tendency of society to judge women in the context of their relationship with a man, which has managed to remain prevalent in our collective consciousness since tragedies were being written about Cleopatra and Mark Antony in the 17th century.

Interestingly, Cleopatra was cited as being not all that pretty, neither by the standards of her day or ours. Plutarch, the Greek biographer, “who was writing nearly two hundred years after her death but had read the memoirs and histories… of several people who had actually seen her, asserts that she was not particularly good-looking” (Hughes-Hallett 17). Coins from her time show her with a strong, bony face, a hooked nose, and a jutting chin. These coins were minted on her orders, and are therefore more likely to flatter her appearance, yet she was still depicted in a conventionally un-pretty way, suggesting that her appearance “seems to have been very far from that of the fabled seductress of legend” (Hughes-Hallett 17). But even by discussing the mystery of her appearance, the sexist bias to judge powerful women based on their perceived attractiveness is manifested. We should not care about what she looked like; rather, we should focus on her accomplishments as a remarkable leader. Few powerful males of history “have to suffer the same indignity of being judged on one image that has been deemed to be unflattering” (Ashton, 12). The myriad interpretations of Cleopatra are primarily mirror images of the ideal for a woman in that time, as we can see in her transformation from a weak, feebleminded woman in need of a man of the 17th and 18th century to her 19th century portrayal as a dangerously seductive *femme fatale.* As can be seen from the conventionally unflattering image of Cleopatra on one of her coins, these cultural representations have no real basis in appearance or fact. The holes in Cleopatra’s story, that of her appearance being one of them, keep us under her spell. The fact that throughout the 20th and 21st centuries women were still judged by the presence of a man in their lives shows that cultural norms regarding women’s role in society have not changed all that much. Women are still depicted in the narrow confines of seductress, mother, wife, and not much else. To me, it seems absurd that women in power today are still depicted as Cleopatra was, a woman who lived over 2,000 years ago. As a nation, we need to discuss why sexism still exists, rather than simply focusing on how women can succeed within its confines (Lawless). Only this will allow us to eradicate sexism and give powerful, influential women like Cleopatra the respect they deserve.

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