

SEARCHING FOR CLEOPATRA: A RE-EXAMINATION OF THE MODERN ICON THROUGH HER ANCIENT PORTRAYAL

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ABSTRACT

Modern and ancient sources alike take a fascination with Cleopatra. Her portrayals in literature, art, and film have established her as a hallmark of sexual allure, foreign mystique, and guile. Yet in many of these depictions, Cleopatra's character is exploited to serve a cinematic or dramatic end. Often, her role as a ruler and leader is minimised. Modern research is striving to seriously consider Cleopatra's political role, her personal identity, and how these impacted historical events. This promising comprehensive approach to the ancient queen searches for more sympathetic portrayals which may elevate her character beyond the epitomised femme fatale. Adopting this view, this article will trace Cleopatra's portrayal back to the source. By analysing ancient texts, it will uncover her ancient reception and historical character according to those accounts. These accounts recognise how Cleopatra represented the interests of her country on an international scale and often at the risk of conflict. They acknowledge how she successfully secured political allies as well as how she honourably conducted herself in war. Even in the words of her enemies, Cleopatra emerges as a powerful woman and leader capable of challenging the Roman Republic and threatening its succession into an empire. The aim of this research is to establish a sympathetic interpretation of Cleopatra which accounts for the attributes ancient sources inherently ascribe her, but which can go overlooked. These findings challenge the accepted view of Cleopatra and more generally encourage the re-examination of historical female figures.

INTRODUCTION

Cleopatra is a popular historical figure. She is one of few ancient figures who remains pervasive in modern culture (Gruen, 2003: 257) and perhaps the most notable ancient female figure to retain a generous degree of relevance in popular culture (Gruen, 2003:257; Pucci, 2011:195). This is illustrated in Figure 1, below which shows a recent collaboration, Kim Kardashian West modelled for makeup artist Pat McGrath to deliver a modern take of the Egyptian queen for Violet Grey Magazine's Violet Files series: *Woman Made* (Stringfield). As can be seen below, the image both affirms West's role as a beauty icon and encourages the popular, romanticised vision of Cleopatra.

Figure 1. Kim Kardashian West Modelling Pat McGrath's Cleopatra



Photo by Ben Hasset for Violet Grey Magazine (2016).

Today, Cleopatra is immediately recognizable. It is difficult for viewers to dismiss the sight of an ornate headdress, winged eye liner, and sleek, black hair. The figure whom history repeatedly painted as a sinister seductress is now thought of as an alluring femme fatale (Pollo, 2013: 183). Cleopatra's image epitomises sexual mystique, often lending this quality to her animators (e.g. Elizabeth Taylor in the 1963 film, *Cleopatra*). However, there are various historical sources which would suggest that Cleopatra demonstrates these and many more qualities for which our popular perception does not allow. As Pucci (2011:195) aptly points out, a gap in our reception or understanding of Cleopatra persists. And, as Gruen (2003:2567) affirms, the size of this gap makes it a daunting task to confront (2003:257).

This article seeks to explain who Cleopatra was in contrast with our popular perception, which is dominated by an influx of media images that fail to provide a dimensional representation of the queen. The aim of this article is not to give a detailed character portrait of Cleopatra. Rather, it aims to balance our popular perception with a realistic and sympathetic historic portrayal. In order to accomplish this, this article will review ancient literary sources which prop this modern view (Chauveau, 2000:1) and attribute other qualities to the queen, which have since been neglected. In treating these sources with a due amount of scrutiny, it is possible to view the disparity between popular and academic perception. Furthermore, it is possible to attain a more comprehensive image of Cleopatra – one that extends, perhaps, further than her eyeliner.

METHODOLOGY

In recent years, scholars such as Sally-Anne Ashton and Susan Walker (2006) (*Cleopatra (Ancients in Action)*) and Duane W. Roller (2010, 2014) (*Cleopatra: A Biography* and *Cleopatra*) have offered an alternative approach to the queen. Rather than

searching for Cleopatra's placement within the fall of the Roman Republic, these scholars seek a sympathetic understanding of the queen by reviewing ancient textual accounts and archaeological artefacts surviving Cleopatra's reign. The balance of textual and archaeological sources, foreign and Egyptian sources, as well as politically sympathetic or unsympathetic accounts have comprised our best understanding of Cleopatra to date. Such an approach remains new, relative to the extensive research which has been conducted on the Fall of the Republic, Julius Caesar, and Marc Antony (Cleopatra's contemporaries). The attention which Cleopatra receives in this research is important, not only for the sake of understanding this ancient queen but, equally, for adapting the way scholars approach women in historical sources.

The following research adopts a similar, if more confined, methodology. This article will focus on three primary accounts which feature Cleopatra. These include excerpts from the biographer, Plutarch, and the Roman poets, Virgil and Horace. This article will acknowledge features or characteristics of Cleopatra that are apparent in modern media, but, more importantly, it will explore those which are not. All of these are made available by these ancient accounts. While each account poses its own issues in narrating Cleopatra objectively, they remain some of the most broadly discussed sources in modern research (Pollo, 2013:183). Since the discussion of women is often marginalized or lacking in ancient literature, it is necessary to examine all these excerpts in order to form a more comprehensive portrayal of the queen. A close analysis of these accounts will discuss where the source's portrayal of Cleopatra is biased or propagandistic, and where it acknowledges historical details of her reign or of her personal character. For each source, this article will explore the context in which these authors were writing and what influences, or prejudices, may have affected their portrayals of Cleopatra. In so doing, this article offers a sympathetic treatment of Cleopatra.

Plutarch, as this article will argue, is one of Cleopatra's sympathetic writers. We will first explore the merits and limitations of his account, its context, and what details he reveals about the queen. Next, we will analyse the accounts of Virgil and Horace. While these authors are both largely considered unsympathetic in their portrayal of the queen (Chauveau, 2000:1-2), they also include crucial recognition of her political and military involvement. Since these attributes are often neglected in our modern perception of Cleopatra, it is important to include these accounts. By adopting this literary approach, this article aims to provide a brief portrait of Cleopatra that relies on these ancient sources to expand our understanding of the modern icon.

CLEOPATRA IN ANCIENT SOURCES

Plutarch in Context

Plutarch was a priest, author, and biographer who wrote well over a century after Cleopatra's death (Russell, 2012). While this spares Plutarch's account from some of the political bias relevant in other accounts, it potentially undermines the validity of his narrative due to his distance from the historical events. As regards his account on Cleopatra, Plutarch mentions that he knows these anecdotes from his grandfather, who obtained the stories through one of the physicians at the queen's court (Plutarch, 1920:99). This, and the broad, if critical, discussion of the work in modern biographies (e.g. as in *Cleopatra* by Sally-Anne Ashton and Susan Walker) generally admit it to the circle of classics scholarship.

An outstanding feature of Plutarch's account is that he fully addresses Cleopatra. She does not always assume a role as an extension of Antony or as the opposition of Octavian. In many

passages, she receives direct attention, although the reasons for this are widely debated. For example, some argue that Plutarch is drawing a representation of the Egyptian gods, Isis and Osiris, through the characters Cleopatra and Antony (Brenk, 1992). Others agree that Plutarch aims to demonstrate Antony's moral deterioration as a result of his companionship with Cleopatra, the 'villain' (McJannet, 1993:3). One can only assume that the direct treatment Cleopatra receives in Plutarch's account, whether to portray a queen, god, or villain, demonstrates her centrality to the narrative. In fact, Cleopatra receives far greater discussion than does any other female character in the account (e.g. Fulvia, Octavia) (Lamberton, 2001:135). Cleopatra's role in this narrative communicates her importance to the work, or even a degree of respect or sympathy. Moreover, it becomes clear that Cleopatra had, already, an established reputation which ancient authors felt necessary to further and expand.

Cleopatra in Plutarch

It is from Plutarch's account, *Life of Antony*, that modern readers obtain one of the most detailed ancient portrayals of the queen. His account, however, poses a number of constraints which should be addressed and discussed before painting a portrait of Cleopatra. Firstly, Plutarch's account is a comparative biography and seeks to portray the Roman general, Marc Antony, in comparison with the Greek general, Demetrius. As a result, Cleopatra's depiction is narrowed by the greater centrality of Antony's narrative. Moreover, Plutarch's writing style is overtly moralizing (Pelling, 1988:9-10). Within *The Parallel Lives*, '...his object was to exemplify private virtue (and sometimes vice) in the careers of great men...' (Hammond & Scullard, 1970:849). In some *lives*, Plutarch provides a comparison between the two figures, weighing the moral success or failure of each. This also enforces Plutarch's morally pedagogic aim (Houlahan & Norrie, 2018:539). As Pelling aptly summarizes, Antony possessed many virtues and vices which were brought to excess and harm when he encountered Cleopatra:

Good qualities and bad are both painted in the firmest lines: both are indeed exaggerated to sharpen the contrast... his [Antony's] excess win the army's affection, but are fatal when he comes to share them with Cl. [Cleopatra] (4n.). His generosity is endearing, but not when he bestows Rome's dominions on a foreign queen... His philhellenism is attractive, especially to P. [Plutarch], but his lower eastern tastes will expose him to the disastrous charge of hating Rome... (Pelling, 1988:13).

Given the objective of Plutarch's account, Cleopatra's portrayal faces obvious hardships. Often, her character represents vice, and is an agent in Antony's downfall. It does not stand as a singular, independent depiction, but as that of a secondary character who motivates the demise of Antony.

Having acknowledged the limitations and difficulties of this text, it still offers insights into Cleopatra's character. Although Plutarch's account aims to minimize or exaggerate Cleopatra to the advantage of his moralizing biography, it is nonetheless more generous to her character than other sources. For example, Plutarch describes the queen's personality in great detail. When introducing the queen to his reader, he writes

For her actual beauty, it is said, was not in itself so remarkable that none could be compared with her, or that no one could ever see her without being struck by it, but the contact of her presence, if you lived with her,

was irresistible; the attraction of her person, joining with the charm of her conversation, and the character that attended all she said or did, was something bewitching. It was a pleasure merely to hear the sound of her voice, with which, like an instrument of many strings, she could pass from one language to another; so that there were few of the barbarian nations that she answered by an interpreter; to most of them she spoke herself... (Plutarch, 1920:197).

The first feature that often consumes our modern perception of Cleopatra is her reputed beauty or attractiveness. From this excerpt, Plutarch suggests that Cleopatra was not, perhaps, striking or beautiful, rather, she possessed a 'bewitching' personality. Furthermore, she was multi-lingual, and this greatly aided her ability and diplomacy at court. Plutarch further lists, as least, eight languages which the queen knew. He claims that she could speak to

... Ethiopians, Troglodytes, Hebrew, Arabians, Syrians, Medes, Parthians, and many others, whose language she had learnt' which was all the more surprising because most of the kings, her predecessors, scarcely gave themselves the trouble to acquire the Egyptian tongue, and several of them quite abandoned the Macedonian (Plutarch, 1920:197).

It is important to note that Cleopatra's first language was, in fact, Greek, and not Egyptian (Roller, 2010:46) due to her inheritance of a dynastic tradition that originated with Ptolemy Saviour, a Macedonian companion to Alexander the Great (Arrian, 1971:41; Chauveau, 2000:8). Despite the instalment of a Macedonian ruler, Greek communities, or 'Macedonian occupation' within Egypt, Egyptian language and culture persisted (Chauveau, 2000:2). By this excerpt, Plutarch acknowledges Cleopatra's efforts to communicate with and accommodate her subjects. He further acknowledges that Cleopatra was unique in doing this, as her predecessors did not. Thereby, Plutarch's account provides an insight to Cleopatra's abilities and how this could have buttressed her political competency and diplomatic outlook. More importantly, Plutarch remarks that it is not Cleopatra's looks which grant her attraction and charm, rather, it is her impressive aptitude in language, manner, and conduct.

In addition to her stately demeanour, Plutarch draws considerable attention to Cleopatra's, perhaps, unqueenly activities. While Plutarch intends this to demonstrate Cleopatra's negative influence on Marc Antony, it dually acknowledges her participation in traditionally masculine activities, and it becomes apparent that Cleopatra defies the seductive, feminine archetype modern culture assigns her:

She played at dice with him [Antony], drank with him, hunted with him; and when he exercised in arms, she was there to see. At night she would go rambling with him to disturb and torment people at their doors and windows, dressed like a servant-woman, for Antony also went in servant's disguise (Plutarch, 1920:203).

By this excerpt we understand that Cleopatra may have exhibited a rambunctious and soldierly disposition around her companion, the general, Marc Antony. If we can accept the story as true, the queen was no stranger to fun and mischief. Roller's timeline of Cleopatra's career places her at about age

28 when she convened and pursued an alliance with Marc Antony (Roller, 2010:159-160). From this account, it is reasonable to suggest that Cleopatra was not solely dedicated to her offices, but that she also indulged in these leisurely and prankish acts. Indeed, while Plutarch may include these details to discredit Cleopatra's character, they greatly alter our modern understanding of this ancient woman. Cleopatra was not barred from drinking, games, and sport, nor did she appear to perceive the disparity between her femininity and these traditionally masculine activities. From this ancient source, it is clear that Cleopatra was not simply the figure of mystique we recognise her as today. Instead, she fully embraced makeup and mischief, participated in sport, and behaved as a riotous companion to her ally and or lover. Moreover, her attractiveness was not merely physical, but largely owed to the degree of intelligence and charisma which she exercised as a person and world leader.

Virgil in Context

Virgil's assembly of the *Aeneid* occurred within the 20's B.C. (Fowler and Fowler, 2012). While it is a much nearer source to Cleopatra's queenship than Plutarch's, it contains blatant political biases customary to the Augustan literary period (Conte, 1994). Given that Cleopatra right-armed Antony in his opposition against Octavian (Augustus), she merits the harsh, propagandistic account of Virgil. As Bono acknowledges:

'Cleopatra's role as the quintessential Other... already forged by propaganda especially during the final phase of the conflict between Octavian and Mark Antony, was definitely established in the aftermath of the battle of Actium.' (Bono, 2006:118).

Cleopatra assumes a distinctly foreign identity and fulfils the role of 'Other,' as Bono states. Virgil exploits her character to represent a set of Egyptian standards, beliefs, and norms that opposed the virtues of Roman religious or cultural orthodoxy (Bono, 2006:119). Cleopatra's first mention is as the 'Egyptian wife,' an impossibility under Roman law (Virgil, 2008:246). Her later descriptors include her 'native sistrum' in contrast to the Roman trumpet, and her 'Monstrous gods' alongside 'Anubis', in contrast to Roman deities, who are all listed by name (Virgil, 2008:246). Cleopatra purposes as opposition, an adversary both in the physical battle of Actium and in Rome's beliefs. Virgil's depiction of Cleopatra is strongly grounded in his effort to create a narrative which elevates Augustus (Conte, 1994) and props the new socio-political imagery of Augustus's regime (Bono, 2000).

Given this, it is easy to understand Cleopatra's unsympathetic portrayal in ancient Roman sources. Indeed, much of Cleopatra's identity, as we understand it in popular culture, finds some basis in these accounts (Chauveau, 2000). The emphasis on sexuality and foreign identity in these accounts support our modern perception of a queen who is sexually alluring, and exotic. While the qualities have since acquired different connotations, their basis remains the same and, despite the lapse in time, these qualities still govern our perception of the queen.

Cleopatra in Virgil

In Virgil's account, Cleopatra is routinely portrayed as a seductress. For example, Virgil describes Cleopatra as so desperate to escape the battle of Actium, that she '...praying a fair wind...' seduced the sails and sea, like so many men, so that she might return to safety (Virgil, 2008:247). However, critical readers can dismiss Virgil's well-placed and politicised

depreciation to observe the setting and events of the narrative, and where Cleopatra fits within these.

In this excerpt, Virgil describes the historic battle of Actium and, crucially, places Cleopatra at the scene. While the context of the excerpt is, itself, very negative, it does reveal an unexpected detail about the queen.

‘The fleets are converging at full speed; the sea is all churned and foaming... In the midst, Cleopatra rallies her fleet with Egyptian timbrel...’ (Virgil, 2008:256).

Cleopatra is responsible for leading the Egyptian fleet into battle against Octavian. In fact, Roller’s account states that Cleopatra lead 60 ships with herself placed to the rear of the naval formation (Roller, 2010:139). Although brief, this excerpt reminds us that Cleopatra was indeed a queen, a woman of power and resources –even an involved naval commander and strategist.

Although Cleopatra would lose the battle, her participation is an important inclusion for our portrayal of the queen. Most modern sources remind viewers of Cleopatra’s femininity or Egyptian identity. While these elements do form a significant part of the historic Cleopatra, they do not represent a comprehensive image. Moreover, ancient authors, such as Virgil, exploit these attributes in order to render Cleopatra as the sinister ‘other,’ the enemy to Roman state and culture. As we revisit Virgil, it is still possible to view Cleopatra’s political and martial participation in history, despite its bias. She was a queen who fully participated in the affairs that concerned her country (Chauveau, 2000) and, evidently, fought for them. While the outcome was a failure, Cleopatra should be recognised for her political role in a fuller sense. She was not simply an extension of her male contemporaries, but instead actively pursued her and her state’s interests by forming important alliances and conducting battle in the interest of defending her state. Indeed, if Octavian had failed, and Cleopatra and Marc Antony had assumed power, there is a great question as to whether or not the Roman Empire would have existed. In many ways, Cleopatra’s defeat was a lynchpin that, once loosed, enabled Octavian to assume power of the Roman state and Mediterranean.

Horace in Context

Horace, an ancient poet and satirist, published the *Odes* seven years after the death of Cleopatra and even included a poem celebrating her death (Conte, 1994). His account carries many of the same difficulties as Virgil’s. He, likewise, wrote during the Augustan literary period (Conte, 1994:251-252) and his work shares in its political bias. The aim of the following ode, Luce suggests, is to emphasize the Roman victory at Actium and to portray Octavian hunting down some bestial adversary, like many great, Greek or Roman heroes (Luce, 1963). As Luce aptly states:

To the Augustan poets, the victory at Actium has a moral as well as mythical significance. Octavian’s victory represented the triumphs of reason over passion, of freedom over despotism, of Roman *virtus* over Oriental *luxuria* (Luce, 1963:255).

However, some of Horace’s deliberateness in word choice, as in the following poem, leave room for the careful Latin reader to question the sympathies of the account. And, Luce further suggests that Horace’s purpose for this particular ode may not

merely be to praise Augustus, but to acknowledge the bewildering circumstance and quality of Cleopatra’s queenship (1963).

Despite the potentially ambiguous nature of this account, its proximity to historic events and its acknowledgment of the queen’s conduct in war are interesting features which challenge our popular perception and merit its discussion.

Cleopatra in Horace

Horace likewise recognises Cleopatra’s participation in Roman conflict. His ode pays particular emphasis to Cleopatra’s suicide and its positive connotations in Roman honour-culture. This does not depart from other ancient examples, such as Lucretia and Cato, but is striking for its portrayal of the ‘foreign’ queen with a like degree of Roman honour (Miles, 2011:17).

Remis adurgens, accipiter velut

Mollis columbas aut leporem citus

Venator in campis nivalis

Haemoniae, daret ut catenis

Fatale monstrum. Quae generosius

Perire quarens nec muliebriter

Expavit ense nec latentis

Classe cita reparavit oras.

(Horace, 1991:68).

Octavian gave chase with his oars, like a hawk after gentle doves or the quick hunter after a rabbit on the snowy hills of Thessaly, so that he might shackle destiny’s dark portent. Cleopatra, searching to die as befits one of more noble birth did not dread the double-edged sword, unlike a womanly manner. Unstirred, she did not retreat to hidden shores by her ship (author’s own translation).

Horace’s tone is most obvious in his choice of *generosius*, and ‘...*nec muliebriter / Expavit esnem...*’, *generosius* meaning ‘noble’ by deed but also by birth. In one word, Horace acknowledges the status of the Egyptian queen and her royal ancestry. In the later part, ‘...*nec muliebriter / Expavit esnem...*’, Horace inverts Cleopatra’s gender, ‘no womanly fear of the sword’ or ‘unlike a womanly manner’ to reconcile her impressive display of bravery with her womanhood. Cleopatra’s emasculation is only slight, but it aims to offer a Roman acknowledgement of the queen’s valour. Horace’s portrayal of the queen is one which recognises her royal status, and acknowledges her womanhood, as does Plutarch’s account. In contrast, however, Horace degenderizes Cleopatra and uses her queenship primarily to level her with Octavian. He creates an equal adversary for the soon-to-be emperor (Luce, 1963:254).

Horace reaffirms what readers can understand from Virgil’s account, which is that Cleopatra made a definitive stand against Octavian and against Rome. More importantly, however, Horace demonstrates the emotional qualities of Cleopatra’s character. Whether Horace does this to paint her as a worthy adversary or to pay a small sympathy to the queen is still widely debated. As many scholars agree, ‘...the noble suicide of the queen merely serves to exalt the Roman victor... the

importance of an equal opponent or worthy adversary to the Romans can never be overstressed' (Miles, 2011:16). Nonetheless, it is apparent that the Romans recognised Cleopatra's death as a noble action. Following her defeat in battle, her suicide seems the next honourable step forward. When Horace draws attention to this, he draws attention to Cleopatra's honourable conduct in war, even in defeat.

CONCLUSION

In reviewing these three primary accounts, it is evident that Cleopatra's role and reputation as a historic figure far exceeds our popular understanding of her. From Plutarch, it is evident that the queen was charming and 'bewitching' on account of her personality, charm, and skill. Furthermore, both Virgil and Horace's accounts confirm Cleopatra's participation in a crucial conflict of history. Although both these authors were restricted in their capacity to sympathise with the foreign queen, their

literature does preserve important details of her character and pays acknowledgements to Cleopatra.

Today, the Egyptian queen remains a hallmark, although our understanding of her is limited. These literary sources remind us that Cleopatra was a capable world leader who fought for her state's interests, who was not afraid of fun, and who even took pains to better herself for the sake of her state in ways her predecessors neglected. Cleopatra was an intelligent woman, a mother, a wife, a linguist, an athlete, a naval commander, and a diplomat. We can celebrate Cleopatra's femininity whilst also acknowledging the various roles and talents she represents. What we can learn about Cleopatra from these excerpts is promising and it challenges modern scholarship to search for stories of other women across ancient literature. When we search for Cleopatra, we search for a figure who challenges our understanding of ancient women, and we find a reality with surprising similarities to our own.

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