

Mother, Monarch, Murderer, Monstrosity? Reflections on Cleopatra

Cleopatra VII of Egypt is one of the most famous women in history. She is also one of the least understood. We are forced to view Cleopatra through a dense screen of hostile propaganda embellished by two thousand years of mythmaking. Her Roman enemies were relentless in their portrayal of her as a corrupt, lascivious, and vicious Eastern ruler, the absolute antithesis of the virtuous, pious, and chaste Roman matron. This talk will explore the real (?) Cleopatra behind the veil of bigotry, misogyny, and abhorrence.

'Reflections'

- In part, me as an older lazy scholar who isn't doing a pile of research for this talk.
- But also Cleo seems to be someone who is only seen in the reflections of others –
 - The Romans in particular – we read Cleopatra through a dense and hostile screen of surviving propaganda. “History is written by the victors” (attributed to Churchill but more likely to have been the observation of multiple people(s) throughout the course of, well, history).
 - But what was the self that *she* wanted the world to see and reflect on?
 - And in reflecting on her self-image, we need to acknowledge that much of it was also carefully crafted, a deliberate construct.
- Why should we contemplate her today?
 - On the issue of why we should contemplate her, "it isn't up to me to tell people why they should spend time thinking about her - all I can say is why I think she is interesting and why I think thinking about her (and her world) has value for us."
 - Classic example of propaganda and dehumanizing, misinformation and disinformation.

The Time, the Place

- Egypt under the Ptolemaic dynasty (Ptolemy I, one of Alexander's Macedonian generals) – 322-30 BCE.
- The “Hellenistic” kingdoms –
 - Ruled by Greco-Macedonian dynasties.
 - Regularly at war with one another.
- After about 200 BCE, Ptolemaic dynasty beginning to lose out in the struggles –
 - Roman expansion into the east.
 - Ptolemaic policy of friendship with Rome.
- After about 146 BCE, Roman Republic undergoing long, slow process of disintegration –
 - Variety of factors, among them political ambitions and strife among the leading classes.
 - Series of warlords with what amounted to private armies: Marius, Sulla, Pompey, Julius Caesar.

- Cleopatra a key player in one of the most momentous periods of history: the birth of the Roman Empire.

The Ptolemaic Dynasty

- From a very early stage, extreme endogamy (incestuous marriage): full siblings Ptolemy II and Arsinoë II Philadelphos (283 – 246 BCE).
- Divinity of rulers –
 - Isis, Osiris, Horus trinity.
 - Assimilation of queen to female deities such as Isis, Hathor, Aphrodite, Hera...
- Heavy emphasis on the figure of the queen – both Egyptian and Greek imagery.
- Co-regency – the king and queen as a ruling pair.

Pathways to Female Power

- Special characteristics of Ptolemaic dynasty (endogamy, emphasis on the queen as a partner in rule).
- Emphasis on the symbolic importance of the queen –
 - Fertility and dynastic continuity.
 - Beneficence (the cornucopia of Arsinoë II).
 - Divine beauty and sexuality.
- Influence (especially mother/son pairings) –
 - Note that female influence – arguably the source of much female “power” – was, precisely because of its non-constitutional behaviour, particularly threatening. It couldn’t be seen, couldn’t be measured, couldn’t be constrained by authoritarian means.
- At times, independent agency –
 - A couple of earlier Cleopatras: II & III.

The Family of Cleopatra VII

The Monarch

- Death of Ptolemy XII, 51 BCE
- Co-regency of Cleopatra (18 years old) and Ptolemy XIII (about ten or eleven – note his regency council).
- Cleopatra asserting her dominance –
 - E.g., dating formulae which fail to reference her brother.
 - Only self portrayed on coins (note diadem).
- Driven into exile by 49/48 – upper Egypt, then Askalon.

- Roman Civil War I¹ –
 - Pompey and Julius Caesar, 49 – 48 BCE.
 - Pompey defeated by Caesar at Pharsalos (August 8) – flight to Egypt and assassination.
 - Caesar in Alexandria – the meeting with Cleopatra.
 - Co-regency of Cleopatra and Ptolemy XIII – Alexandrian War, 48/7 – co-regency of Cleopatra and Ptolemy XIV (probably involved marriage, but not consummation).

The Mother

- Birth of Ptolemy (XV) 'Caesarion', June 47 BCE –
 - Caesar's only known biological son.
 - But we have no certainty that Caesar ever publicly acknowledged him as such, or what it would have meant if he did (in spite of touching scene from *Rome*).
 - Nor can we be clear on what Cleopatra hoped for on this front.
- Let us pause and consider what this meant –
 - Cleopatra emphasized his paternity wherever she could.
 - No real effort made to suggest that he was the child of either of her brothers.
 - She is unique among Hellenistic queens in proclaiming her own rights and the rights of an heir who might have been seen as 'illegitimate'.
 - Must have taken courage and determination and ambition.
- 'Sojourn' in Rome, 46 BCE: Cleopatra, Caesarion, and Ptolemy XIV.
- Ides of March, 44 BCE, and flight from Rome.

The Murderer?

- Death of Ptolemy XIV, 44 BCE.
- Was Cleopatra guilty of murdering her brother? Perhaps, perhaps not –
 - Chief source, Josephus, was a renowned Cleopatra-hater.
 - On the other hand, she might have seen it as a precautionary security –
 - She had already had rivalry and trouble with one brother – this was not a family renowned for its mutual love, in spite of all the 'Phil'-epithets.
 - And now with the loss of Caesar and the uncertainties of a Roman world once again plunged into war, she might have felt safer with her three-year-old son as her co-ruler, rather than a brother who was now coming of age.
 - And, not to defend the practice of murder, but numerous Hellenistic sovereigns, including queens, fell victim to the ambitions of others, so security would have been a real concern.

¹ Note – these are not formal divisions of the civil wars tearing the Republic apart in its last twenty years – I am just dividing them into stages that make sense for the history of Cleopatra.

Roman Civil War II

- The Republicans (Caesar's assassins) against the Second Triumvirate: Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus (43 – 42 BCE) –
 - Let's not bother with Lepidus...
 - Antony – one of Caesar's allies and supporters, now about forty years old.
 - Octavian – great-nephew and adopted son and heir of Caesar, about twenty – the future emperor Augustus.
 - And I confess, as someone who feels some sympathy for Cleopatra, that it's hard for me to like Octavian (remember, my comments should be seen as 'reflections', not allegedly impartial historical recounting).
- Battle of Philippi, October 42 BCE.
- Antony in the east – Tarsos, 41 BCE –
 - The summoning of Cleopatra and her stage-managed arrival.

The Mother

- Birth of the twins, Alexander and Cleopatra, in 40 BCE –
 - As with Caesarion, no attempt made to give them a 'legitimate' parentage.
 - Even more the case now, when she has no putative 'husband'.
- As for Antony, he returned to Rome before their birth in view of his deteriorating relationship with Octavian and married Octavia.
- Absent from Cleopatra for the next three years.

The Monarch

- Antony's return to the east, 37/6 BCE, summoning Cleopatra again.
- Restoration of much of the vanished Ptolemaic empire –
 - Phoenicia, Koile Syria, Cyprus, chunk of Cilicia.²
 - Cyrene? Perhaps not till 34.
- The twins recognized by Antony and given their dynastic epithets Helios and Selene.
- The new era and the partnership tetradrachms: "Cleopatra Thea the Younger".

The Mother

- Birth of Ptolemy Philadelphos – hearkening back to glory days of Ptolemy II.
- Note that Antony's paternity is reflected nowhere in any of the children's name, unlike Caesarion:

² JC had already restored Cyprus in 48/7 (establishing junior couple Pt XIV and Arsinoe there – obviously didn't outlast the Alexandrian War and the second settlement, which would be why Cleo had the viceroy Serapion in Cyprus). Antony's announcement kind of like when the government announces the same money for a new program over and over again.

- Cleopatra was evidently determined to restore *Ptolemaic* Egypt.
- And she had a different relationship with Antony than with Caesar –
 - Age difference much less.
 - The two men themselves were quite different.
 - Cleopatra by 41 had established her hold on her kingdom much more securely (though if she did urge Antony to kill her sister for her, she clearly still had security concerns).
 - With Caesar she was a suppliant, a client relying on his patronage.
 - With Antony she was an ally, a partner.

The Monarch

- Antony's military expeditions –
 - Parthia, 36 BCE
 - Armenia, 34 BCE
- The Donations of Alexandria – stagecraft rather than a really meaningful distribution of territories –
 - Cleopatra (Nea Isis): Queen of Kings. Egypt, Cyprus, Libya, Koile Syria.
 - Caesarion confirmed as her co-ruler, and King of Kings, and explicitly acknowledged as Caesar's son.
 - Alexander: King of Kings. Armenia, Media, and Parthia "*as soon as he should have conquered it*".
 - Ptolemy: King of Kings. Syria and Cilicia.
 - Plutarch does not mention Selene, but Dio Cassius does (49.41): Cyrenaica. Also parts of Crete.
- Although some defend Antony's arrangements of 37/6 (less so the Donations of 34) as "rational and clear-sighted reorganization", in truth if he was still trying to avoid open conflict with Octavian, these really were provocative actions.
- Cleopatra may well have hoped it would come to open conflict between Antony and Octavian...

The War on Cleopatra (or rather, Roman Civil War III)

- Antony divorces Octavia, 32 BCE.
 - Could the divorce of Octavia even have been in some ways a kindness to her? Not to force her to be torn between her brother and her husband?
- Octavian declares war (*bellum iustum*) on *Cleopatra*, using fetial procedures, late 32 BCE.
- The propaganda war (carried on by both sides) –
 - This will not be yet another civil war to tear Romans apart, with nothing really to choose between two powerfully ambitious men.
 - Instead it will be a just war waged against an ambitious – and monstrous – foreign enemy.

- A war almost fought for Antony's sake, so caught is he in the web of the evil seductress –
 - The Great Whore of the East, the Enemy of Rome.
 - Othering, orientaling, sexualizing, dehumanizing.
- The Monstrosity?
 - E.g., Horace and Propertius.
 - The *meretrix regina*, the *fatale monstrum*...
- The Battle of Actium, 2 September 31 BCE
- The suicides, August 30 BCE
 - Her death – Roman-style, so poet like Horace was able to admire her (once she's safely dead, of course). Suicide after defeat, of course, was not solely Roman.
 - Ironical that she gets this nod to virtue from Horace for the one act that subsequent imaginations have so relentlessly sexualized.

Some Final 'Reflections'

- How did Cleopatra view/present herself? How was she seen by others, ancient and modern?
- The visual Cleopatra
 - Central image on slide manages to combine royal robes AND snake(s). No emphasis on breast – arm emphasis closer to Plutarch's remarks.
- Monarch, goddess, mother –
 - The legitimate heir to a 300-year-old dynasty.
 - Prepared – whether through security concerns or ambition – to seize the dominant role for herself –
 - Dominating co-regents.
 - The non-traditional portrayal of herself on her coinage.
 - Claims of divinity – not hybris, just standard and presumably welcome to many (Aphrodite and Dionysos).
 - Cleopatra bringing happiness, joy, and plenty. Unlike current approaches (Trump et al.) to society and international relations.
 - Celebrating birth of children whose legitimacy in the dynasty sprang solely from her, not her as part of a ruling pair.
 - I can't think of a single film that has given her all four children – I am sure because it's not sexy enough.
 - Yet it would be a fulfillment of all that a Hellenistic queen stood for in terms of fertility, dynasty, beneficence
 - Literature/film removes several/all of her children
 - Not sexy enough (in my view)
 - Perhaps moral judgement
 - Whereas Cleopatra herself would have seen her children as a core political asset
 - In terms of world historical/feminist history, she is quite remarkable

Craig's class: Sex, Sexuality, and Gender

Remember it's a class on art – so focus on representation (even if it might be literary rather than visual)

- Because of the *political* role of sex and gender in royal marriage, most of the remarks here are grounded in a heteronormative culture emphasizing cishet relationships and social structures. Craig has no doubt acquainted the class with the extensive nonbinary experience in the ancient world.
- Sex and royal marriage–
 - Sexual mores of the times
 - Incest, incl. incest as power
- The sexuality of Hellenistic Queens.
 - Hell queens sexuality vs Hell kings sexuality
 - Ptolemy II the great lover: Theokritos Idyll 14.61, Athenaios 576e-f
 - Emphasis on sexual love and desire between king and queen (unlikely as that might have been in some Ptolemaic marriages)
 - Competitive mate display. Kandaules and Gyges
 - Precarious manhood
 - Queens as goddesses of love
 - The veiling of brides and goddesses
 - the character of these female principles and the values that queens represented, which fall into certain broad categories: economic (patronage, euergetism, and the prosperity of the realm); dynastic (fertility, legitimacy, stability, and longevity); and, in an attenuated way, political (supporting the king's policies; potential intercession with the king)
- Sexuality as power
 - Notions around where the sexual impulse really lies. Blaming women for sexual desire they arouse in men. The myth of Teiresias.
 - Note the continuing conviction that it is the object of desire that is responsible for the sexual impulse in the subject experiencing desire. Hence, the veiling of women.
 - Cleo may well have inverted the sexual 'exploitation' of queens by taking the reins in her own hands
- Hyper-sexualization
 - The weaponizing of (perceived) sexuality
 - Though I suppose Cleo could have done her own brand of weaponizing
- Gender-busting – Cleopatra as masculine/feminine. Neoteny.
 - Typical feminine portrayals, especially of royalty. Fairly generic.
 - Cleo would absolutely have presented herself as sexual and fertile – but we also have this other strong trend of masculinization
 - Nymphic portrayals of queens – Cleo eschews them, perhaps to say she was never subordinate to a man