
Characterisation Of Cleopatra: Myth And Truth

In just about everything you read, Cleopatra is characterised as the power-crazed, murderous harlot who preyed on seducing innocent men. To the Romans, she was an evil eastern sexual predator crushed my moral Rome, all the way to the Hollywood image of her as a highly sexualised villain. But, who really was Cleopatra? Cleopatra was the last of a series of rulers called the Ptolemies who ruled Egypt for nearly 300 years. During her reign, she established political alliances and became romantically involved with Roman leaders Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. Then came her infamous suicide in 30 B.C (39 years old) after being defeated. Cleopatra is now renowned for her alleged striking beauty, viscous nature and role as 'a lustful queen' (Dante Alighieri 1320 AD). It is now that we decipher the misconceptions and false conclusions surrounding Cleopatra that have so dominantly shaped the way we view her today.

The idea that Cleopatra was beautiful is now a central part of her myth. The overriding impression that many of us share is that Cleopatra was a striking beauty who used her charm and good looks to seduce powerful men. It is this image of Cleopatra that has been handed down the generations, reaching its climax in the golden age of Hollywood, where she has been played by some of the most beautiful actresses in history - most memorably by Elizabeth Taylor in the 1960s retelling. But even the Roman historian Plutarch, writing a century after Cleopatra's death, described Cleopatra's looks as 'not altogether incomparable ... as to strike those who saw her.' To penetrate beneath the veneer of the myth, some have tried to discover her 'true face', using what little archaeological evidence there is. 2000-year-old coins displaying Cleopatra's face reinforce this idea that her looks were not extraordinary. In fact, she had a large hooked nose, bulging eyes and thin lips. It can be said, that it was rather her power and charisma that made her alluring. This whole conception of her 'striking beauty' started with the Romans, who to their dismay found that two of their greatest men had fallen under her spell. It suited them to cast her so beautiful she was irresistible because that way it didn't suggest that their most powerful men were weak. Whether she was beautiful or not, the Roman's set this agenda that has endured right up to modern-day.

Cleopatra over decades has repeatedly had the same title; the woman who was a wanton temptress, whose ambition and seduction both augmented her empire's prestige and a woman who seduced her way into power. Sextus Propertius first set the trend, entitling Cleopatra 'the whore queen' (50-c.15 BC), then she would become 'a woman of insatiable sexuality and insatiable avarice' by Cassius Dio, and once more 'the whore of the eastern kings' (Boccaccio). This idea of her planned seduction of Julius Caesar has become a focal part of her story in all subsequent eras, simply because it makes for a great story. However, when you dig a little deeper you draw some rather different conclusions. For one, Cleopatra was just 22 years of age and in a desperate situation fearing for her life and was extremely vulnerable. Ceasar was 52 and at the height of his power with a reputation as a womanizer. So where these 'seduction' myths stem from, is the Romans, who realise that their great hero, Caesar, is consorting with an enemy of Rome. The best way for the Romans to counteract this is to form this notion that Caesar is seduced by Cleopatra away from Roman life and into a shameful eastern way of behaving. And so this theme has continued. 'Throughout history, it has forever been preferable to attribute a woman's success to her beauty rather than to her brains, to reduce her to the sum of sex life'.

If she wasn't being cast as a prostitute, then it was as a romantic heroine. Shakespeare's play, Antony and Cleopatra, has marked Cleopatra's image to be the romantic heroine of the English Renaissance by defining her by her doomed love affair with Mark Antony. The romance always tends to loom large, simply because it makes for a good story and it's this Cleopatra that has held sway.

Economic know-how, strategic thinking and savvy management are most definitely not the attributes we would associate with Cleopatra. We certainly don't inherit a picture of her as a competent ruler from the modern stereotypes or the classic accounts that have defined her. She was, in fact, a shrewd politician with overarching strategies, who fought a losing battle to save the independence of her empire. She governed the most fertile country in the Mediterranean, bringing Egypt almost 22 years of stability and prosperity. She commanded armies at 21, spoke 9 languages (being the first ruler of her dynasty to learn the native language), and was a ruler who stabilised the economy, managed the vast beauracracy and curbed corruption by officials. When drought hit she opened the granaries to the public and passed a tax amnesty, all while preserving her countries stability and independence, having no revolts during her reign. It's in the Western tradition, where her skill and intelligence is often absent from her story or simply seen as another part of her deviousness. In the Islamic world, which was largely free of Roman propaganda, Cleopatra is seen in a very different light. The Islamic historian Al Massud who lived in the 10th century, wrote a positive account of her intellectual ability, describing Cleopatra as "A sage, a philosopher, who elevated the ranks of scholars and enjoyed their company. She wrote books on medicines, charms and cosmetics". In the Eastern world, Cleopatra is not only known as an intellectual but also as having a clear vision for her country and a burning desire to make it a world power once again. Its surprising to realise how in a culture different and separate from our own, the Cleopatra we all think we know is someone altogether different.