

## Mid-Century Modern Monarch: Swords, Sandals and Cleopatras

The prevailing popular image of Cleopatra has generally focused on the best known of her film depictions featuring well known actresses such as Claudette Colbert and Elizabeth Taylor, both heavily influenced by Shakespeare and Shaw with only a hint of Plutarch. They tend to reflect similar themes and preoccupations, which were reiterated recently in HBO *Rome*. There were however some Post-War/Pre-Liz films which display remarkable independence from the usual receptions.

These include Rhonda Fleming in *Serpent of the Nile: The Loves of Cleopatra* (1953), Sophia Loren in *Two Night's with Cleopatra* (1954), Virginia Mayo in *The Story of Mankind* (1957), Linda Crystal in *The Legions of Cleopatra* (1959), Pascal Petite in *A Queen for Cleopatra* (1962), Magali Noel in *Toto and Cleopatra* (1963) and, as a muscle man spin off, Mark Forest in *Son of Cleopatra* (1964). As is the case with many films of the *Sword & Sandal* or *Peplum* genre from this period there is a consistently cavalier attitude toward historical or cultural accuracy.

While these largely Italian productions can be both amusing and distressing to classicists, taken together they offer a snapshot of the scope of the Cleopatra reception in the post war American and European cinema marketplace. That reception displays some notable divergences from the Pre-War queens of Claudette Colbert and Palmolive ads **and** from the implausibly iconic depiction by Elizabeth Taylor and dozens of comic book and other mimics after the release of the 1963 *Cleopatra*. Among the issues to be explored in this paper will be the racialization, sexualization and vilification of Cleopatra, the emasculation of Mark Antony, and the nazification of Romans in general. Brief clips of each film will be shown as part of a twenty minute PowerPoint presentation.