

Cleopatra on Screen: How Western Biases and Orientalism Informed Early Film Adaptations of Cleopatra

Cleopatra has fascinated the 'West' for thousands of years from the Romans to the Victorians, to the directors of old Hollywood as an embodiment of Egyptian exoticism. Egypt and its queen have captured public attention due to the continued curiosity and fetishization of Egypt's age, mysticism, and exoticism. There have been many representations of Cleopatra, and none can be separated from the orientalist lens through which the dominant western world has perceived and reconstructed her character. The popular construction of Cleopatra began when Octavian propagated his power struggle with Mark Antony as pitting Rome against Egypt, western rationality against eastern irrationality. In her seduction of Caesar and Antony away from their diligent Roman ways Cleopatra came to represent the archetypal vamp, a corrupting sex-symbol.

In this paper I argue that the Cleopatra created by the Romans became the Cleopatra disseminated in western popular culture. Specifically, I am looking at early film adaptations of her story that arose from phenomenon of Egyptomania in Victorian England. During the Victorian period Cleopatra became the dominant symbol of ancient Egypt in England's popular culture. England's imperialist endeavors in Egypt kept Cleopatra at the forefront of Victorian pop culture most notably in burlesque shows. The Cleopatra constructed in these shows was meant to conflate the modern woman and modern domestic life with the luxurious and grandiose queen while still showcasing her as a siren from the mystical East. These Victorian burlesque shows served as a precursor to the highly exoticized Cleopatra that would soon take to the screen in the United States.

I look specifically at two notable early cinematic adaptations, *Cleopatra* (1917) and *Cleopatra* (1934), and explore the ways these incredibly successful films further orientalist and sexist stereotypes through the character of Cleopatra. In the 1917 film Cleopatra is portrayed as the archetypal vamp and an exotic almost mystical eastern woman. This conflation of Cleopatra and the vamp pushed the notion of an eternal feminine: this link between the most ancient civilization and its queen attests that women, or at least sexually liberated women, have always been the same. It essentializes Cleopatra's character in relation to her gender and eastern attachments.

The 1934 adaptation also utilizes orientalist imagery to construct the character and setting of the film. It opens with a title sequence displaying the sphinx, pyramids, and a chained-up priestess which then leads into the first shot of the film which displays Cleopatra's bedchamber in disarray clearly having housed not just her the night before. Cleopatra has, in the western world, been a sex symbol and her portrayal in DeMille's film showcases that seduction. I argue that this film feeds into Cleopatra as a symbol of corruption, a vamp, whose existence is defined by attacking, poisoning, and destroying men. DeMille's film stresses the queen's powers of entrapment. Importantly this film, as with the others examined, ends with Cleopatra's falling to male dominance as is expected not just for Cleopatra as a woman but for Cleopatra as an allegory for the East.

Regardless of her actual historical background, Cleopatra has become a symbol of eastern exoticism to satisfy western male fantasies continuing in the tradition of the ancient Roman propaganda surrounding her. As with many women, her story has been defined by the male gaze and the fear surrounding empowered feminine figures. The adherence to a male lens robs women, particularly women that fall into some category of other, of their autonomy and identity

by forcing an archetypal constraint on the feminine role and its expression. Cleopatra is simply one example in a larger discussion on the importance of nuanced classical representation and efforts to deconstruct the masculine western bias present in the field of Classics as it informs broader cultural constructions of the ancient and modern world, including surviving stereotypes.

Select Bibliography

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