

From Feminism to Orientalism: Grace Harriet Macurdy on Cleopatra and Antony

Grace Harriett Macurdy may well have been the first feminist classicist. In her 1932 book, *Hellenistic Queens: A Study of Woman-Power in Macedonia, Seleucid Syria, and Ptolemaic Egypt*, Macurdy took issue with her male contemporaries, astutely arguing that Hellenistic queens were neither more dissolute nor cruel than their male counterparts, as had been previously supposed (3-5). Instead, she claimed that the worst of their actions were no worse than those of the men. Among the Ptolemies, Macurdy asserted, the women rulers were actually *better* than the men in all but the first several generations (5, 12, 143, 234). While Macurdy was ahead of her time on the curve we now call feminism, she was also a product of her time.

In that vein, Macurdy staunchly defended the sexual morality of the Ptolemaic queens, exonerating them from all charges of lust (234). Even Cleopatra VII was not driven by sensuousness but rather by a keen desire for power; she had been faithful to both Caesar and Antony, even though she was nominally married to her brother, Ptolemy XIV, while carrying Caesar's child (220). From Cleopatra's Egyptian perspective, polygamy was not a problem per Macurdy. Her liaisons with both men were political in nature; she was not the 'courtesan' that the Romans made her out to be.

Cleopatra, Macurdy (221) asserts, was neither the culmination of an evil line of women who had tortured their husbands, as Mahaffy (445ff.) had argued, nor was she the "lonely and sorely-tried woman who fought all her life for the fulfillment of a patriotic and splendid ambition" as Weigall had purported (410). Macurdy instead, following Dio Cassius (50.33), describes Cleopatra as "a woman and an Egyptian woman at that," who grew easily seasick and contributed to Antony's downfall (212-3). Cleopatra had corrupted Antony to the point that he

became “perforce an Oriental king, even though he had promised to restore the republic” (211). In agreement with Orientalizing Roman sources, Macurdy viewed Cleopatra as a strong woman who effeminized Antony, who, in turn, was subservient to his “Oriental” queen. Like Cleopatra III, whom Macurdy calls a “meddlesome despot,” Cleopatra VII was raised “in a court that was a hotbed of corrupt and Oriental softness of living,” and she had indoctrinated Antony into this Oriental excess (170, 206). Never mind the *vomitoria* of Rome, had Antony never met Cleopatra, he would have “been killing Parthians and Medes and strengthening the boundaries of the Roman empire” (221). Of course, Antony did try to do exactly this, as Hölbl (243) has since demonstrated, but Macurdy skirts over Antony’s efforts to focus on his failures, aided and abetted by the Orientalizing force of Cleopatra. While the two should have been preparing for the battle of Actium, they were holding festivals on Samos, indulging in what Macurdy elsewhere labels “the Egyptian vices of sloth and excess” (155, 208-9). Macurdy calls Cleopatra “proud, cruel, domineering, and unscrupulous,” like all the other Ptolemies. One is left wondering if Ptolemy XIV, whom Cleopatra had put to death, may have attempted to engineer her downfall, just as their elder brother, Ptolemy XIII, had done. Was or is self-preservation cruel?

Despite her Orientalizing and moralizing, Macurdy’s work nonetheless stands as an important precursor to feminist analyses of Cleopatra VII, many of which have since focused on Cleopatra’s capabilities and precarious situation under the looming threat of Roman conquest. Macurdy both does and does not seem to understand the “politics of misrepresentation,” the tendency of the victor to damn the conquered (see Johnson, 387-42). On the one hand, Macurdy fairly exonerates Cleopatra from the charges of sexual excess, which had plagued the last pharaonic queen for centuries. Cleopatra’s seduction of both Caesar and Antony were, indeed,

politically motivated. On the other hand, Macurdy otherwise accepts almost uncritically the Roman sources' damning of Cleopatra, a damnation which had been propagated by her colleagues. Yet, as Macurdy herself proclaimed, Cleopatra's actions were no worse than those of her male Ptolemaic predecessors. To judge her character is perhaps *not* possible given the bias of the evidence, but we can say that she was a shrewd politician, and her policies resulted in a mostly successful reign, even if she and Antony ultimately underestimated Roman patriotism in light of Octavian's propaganda.

Bibliography

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