

An Ancient Character in Modern Media: Cleopatra's Legacy in *Cleopatra*
and *Assassin's Creed: Origins*

Perhaps the most pervasive image of Cleopatra VII comes from Elizabeth Taylor's rendition of the monarch in 1963's *Cleopatra*. Directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, *Cleopatra* became infamous for its gaudy sets, egregious budget, and the resulting off-screen romance between Taylor and Richard Burton. Taylor's seductive and captivating Cleopatra has influenced generations after the film's release, to the point where Taylor's character has become representative of the historic Cleopatra. Taylor's version of Cleopatra, subsequently, inspired other versions of the queen in more modern visual media—with the most recent appearing in the video game *Assassin's Creed: Origins*.

With *Cleopatra* having such an effect upon the general public's understanding of ancient events, it is important to examine Cleopatra's differing identities in ancient sources. In this paper, I shall explore two of these identities: one being the strong, powerful divinity incarnate established by Cleopatra herself, and the much more negative depiction of Cleopatra in Roman literature. The exploration of ancient sources shall enable me to better interpret two different Cleopatras in modern visual media: 1963's *Cleopatra* and 2017's *Assassin's Creed: Origins*. The manifestation of ancient sources within these versions of the Macedonian queen shows a trend that prefers one type of Cleopatra over the other.

For an understanding of Cleopatra's intended legacy for herself, I shall examine two pieces of material evidence. The first is located at the Dendera temple, and depicts Cleopatra as the Egyptian goddess Isis. The second piece of material evidence is the Vatican portrait of Cleopatra, dating to 48 BCE. Drastically different, these two portraits represent two different

identities that Cleopatra wished to convey to her people and those abroad: she is both a pharaoh and *romana matrona*, and therefore, belongs to both Egypt and Rome.

Cleopatra's use of iconography to establish herself as a traditional pharaoh and Roman *matrona* contrasts against ancient Roman literature. For this section of my paper, shall investigate the philology within both ancient poetry and prose to understand the depiction of Cleopatra created by her Roman enemies. How, for example, does Plutarch's use of passive voice upset the gender roles between Cleopatra and Mark Antony in his *Life of Antony*? How does Horace's complicated version of Cleopatra differ from that of Propertius? Such sources shall be essential in understanding Cleopatra's place within Roman literature, and what aspects of these identities—whether from herself or her Roman counterparts—have survived into modernity.

After this examination of two ancient perspectives on Cleopatra's character, this paper shall explore how these perspectives have transferred into more modern interpretations of Cleopatra. Indeed, Mankiewicz' *Cleopatra* has left an infamous mark upon Cleopatra's legacy, yet Cleopatra's character in the film does include a mix of identities created by Cleopatra and her Roman counterparts. Unfortunately, the complex Cleopatra that is introduced to Caesar from the unfurling of a rug becomes burdened by Hollywood grandeur. What begins as a clear attempt to push past a one-dimensional portrayal of Cleopatra becomes precisely that—falling upon foreign tropes and affairs between herself and Rome's most influential male figures of the Late Republic. While opposing identities exist within Mankiewicz creation, the character seems to be more heavily impacted by Rome's writers rather Cleopatra's intended representation.

Despite over fifty years between 1963's *Cleopatra* and the release of *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, the Cleopatra within this video game seems to forgo any attempt at presenting Cleopatra

in the way the ruler intended. Unlike Mankiewicz' version, the Cleopatra in the video game is entirely static, and therefore seems to draw upon the long-established notion of exotic seduction and drugged encounters found in Roman sources. The game portrays reactional drug use and exotic sexuality described by writers such as Propertius, Horace, and Plutarch in their own interpretation of Cleopatra's legacy. With such a one-sided representation of the ancient Roman tradition within the video game, *Assassin's Creed: Origins* draws farther away from Elizabeth Taylor's Cleopatra, and therefore, Cleopatra's self-created narrative.

This paper's conclusion attempts to find a link between ancient and modern interpretation. By understanding both Cleopatra's vision of herself along with other, more roman depictions, one may understand the origin of the two modern Cleopatras discussed in this paper. The inspiration for these new Cleopatras seem to follow a trend from a multi-faceted to a more static interpretation. The conclusion, therefore, shall explore why one interpretation of Cleopatra has ultimately outshined the other. What has made the exotic, sexual, drugged version of the queen more fascinating than the powerful ruler Cleopatra herself attempted to reiterate? As the most infamous woman in history, understanding these deliberate interpretations may provide a further understanding in the legacy of Cleopatra that has existed for two millennia.