

**Cleopatra and Fake News:** How ancient Roman political needs created a mythic temptress

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“Future generations will not believe it – A Roman soldier, bought and sold, bears stakes and arms for a woman!”

Horace, writing not long after the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, reflects the contemporary Roman horror at the behavior of Marc Antony fighting with Cleopatra against Rome, where traditional Romans demonized and stereotyped her as a fearsome and loathsome manipulator. She was a foreign woman without morals who possessed a sexual allure so powerful as to corrupt even a Roman soldier as honorable as Antony.

The glamour of this story was, and still is, worthy of a Hollywood movie and a Shakespeare play. However, we must ask ourselves if we can find the historic Cleopatra in all this salacious drama. The wealth of the Egyptian queen dazzled and horrified the Roman peoples, who valued military austerity and plain living. Rome was in the last years of its Republic era; Roman senators were always at pains to emphasize their sobriety and economy. Octavian, the man who vanquished Cleopatra, was also about to vanquish the republican style of rule and declare himself emperor. To smooth his way to power he also emphasized his traditional Roman “family values,” so that his ascent to absolute power would be acclaimed rather than rejected.

### **Antony and Cleopatra**

The Roman distaste of powerful women, their misunderstanding of the Egyptian way of life, and Octavian’s political need to consolidate his rise to dictator created our image of Cleopatra today. Writers under Octavian/Augustus Caesar had a vested interest in emphasizing the rumors about the immoral and weak natures of both Antony and Cleopatra. Antony was a popular politician who stood in Octavian’s way, so he was branded as a weak drunkard, powerless to resist the Egyptian queen. Cleopatra is likened to the more frightening women in Greek and Roman myth, cast as an eastern Medea. The accounts of the time emphasize the fortune of the Roman people that their newly created dictator vanquished such a terrifying creature.

Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra was inspired by Plutarch, who was writing in the 2nd C AD – almost 200 years after the death of the famous couple. His Cleopatra was the consummate manipulator who loved not Antony but power and pulled his puppet strings to make him dance to her tune. Plutarch’s account can be no more accepted as fact than any other Roman account of Cleopatra, but it also forms the backbone of most Hollywood movies.

Egyptian sources on this famous queen were mostly lost when the library of Alexandria was destroyed. Cleopatra’s primary residence was located in the delta area of Egypt where archaeological remains are notoriously poorly preserved. The Egyptian record of the historic Cleopatra is sparse, so the accounts of those who hated and feared her speak that much louder.

Her myth became more fantastically overheated as the centuries progressed. A late antique writer insisted that “she was so insatiable that she often played the prostitute...so beautiful that many men paid for a single night with their lives” (*De viris illustribus*, 86.2). Instead of a shrewd and sophisticated ruler, trying to stave off Rome’s subjugation of her peoples for as long as possible, we are left with an imaginary Cleopatra, born of fantasy and fear. She embodies all the concerns of the misogynistic Roman male elite whose advancement depended on blackening her name.

Jacquelyn Williamson - Learn more about how, from Roman times onward, the “idea” of Cleopatra, or the “imaginary” Cleopatra, has been manipulated as a means to discuss contemporary political issues and anxieties. Dr. Jacquelyn Williamson of George Mason University will discuss Cleopatra in the ancient Roman imagination, which informed Shakespeare’s play. She will also focus on American films, discussing their use of the imaginary Cleopatra as created by the Romans and Shakespeare, looking at Theda Bara, Claudette Colbert, and Elizabeth Taylor, whose performances play out a variety of fears about gender and sexuality.