

Cleopatra



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The scarcity of objective information about Cleopatra has allowed poetic licence for each generation to interpret her story as it sees fit, reflecting the changes in society's view of women, together with the preoccupations of each period. Cleopatra (1934) starred Claudette Colbert in a reprise of her previous romantic-comedy roles: lightweight, flirtatious and funny but this time in a revealing historical costume. The emphasis is on her romantic liaisons with Caesar and Antony rather than any political manoeuvring. The men are the serious players here.

Her role as Queen and stateswoman is secondary; she is a woman who follows her man and her heart. At one point she states, " I am no longer a Queen; I am a woman". The 1930's saw movements in America, such as the Catholic organisation, the Legion of Decency, attempting to stem the progress of women's equality. (Fear, T. DVD Cleopatra (2009)) Their aim was to encourage women to return to their traditional role as homemakers. A new production code threatened moviemakers with boycott and censorship if they strayed from this message.

The genre of the historical drama allowed the studios to present more controversial and risque material, sidestepping this threat. The tone of Cleopatra (1963) is one of excess, opulence and decadence, typified by the scene showing Cleopatra's entry to Rome. These themes spilled over into reality; at the time, the film was the most expensive ever made and the two leads, Taylor and Burton, met on set and began their famous love affair, adding an extra dimension to their on-screen scenes.

Taylor's portrayal acknowledges Cleopatra's reputation as an intelligent and resourceful stateswoman, unafraid to use her sexuality when necessary to

achieve her political ends. She is commanding and in control, as in the scene where she instructs Antony to kneel. However, as in the 1934 film, she is still ultimately portrayed as a woman consumed by love. The film recognises the concerns of the day when Cleopatra talks to Cesar of “ One people on Earth, living in peace”; the Cuban Missile Crisis occurred in October 1962, bringing Russia and the US dangerously close to nuclear conflict and the role of the United Nations is alluded to here.

Both these films depict a Westernised ideal of Cleopatra’s beauty: Hollywood glamour, with costumes worthy of the fashion pages. Later, twenty-first century portrayals demonstrate more physical variety, with brown-eyed actresses and darker skin tones, although still predominantly white Caucasians. These later versions are more representative of the diversity and equality of women today, showing Cleopatra in battle and generally playing men at their own game. For example, the HBO series, Rome (2005), depicts a Cleopatra who is sexually assertive and in control, undoubtedly ruled by her head rather than her heart.

She is not afraid to use sex to secure her position and that of Egypt, demonstrated when she deliberately gets pregnant and passes off the child as Caesar’s. Physically, she does bear some resemblance to the images of Cleopatra on ancient coins, particularly with regard to hairstyle. Examining these representations, we can see the changing attitudes and traditions of each generation reflected therein. The mystery clouding the true story of Cleopatra ensures that we will continue to revisit and remodel her story for decades to come.