

# Oh die! Die!: An Exploration of Sexual Power and Death

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"On my honor I have neither given nor received unauthorized information regarding this work, I have followed and will continue to observe all regulations regarding it, and I am unaware of any violation of the Honor Code by others."

Cleopatra is an enigmatic historical female icon. She certainly rates as a famous female but how does she rate from a feminist perspective; is Cleopatra a femme fatal or a strong female ruler? It is fruitless to have this discussion about the real Cleopatra because little concrete information remains about her life other than conjecture and a rendering of her profile on a coin. However, it is intriguing to examine how portrayals of Cleopatra in drama and literature have characterized her. Many important works of literature portray Cleopatra but this paper will focus on William Shakespeare's play *Antony and Cleopatra* and the movie *Cleopatra* starring Elizabeth Taylor. These classics represent perspectives from different time periods and portrayals of Cleopatra through unique types of works.

There are many important feminist themes that are relevant to the legacy of Cleopatra, but this paper focuses on power and sexuality, particularly the idea that women can gain power over men through their sexuality. The third wave of feminism emphasizes that women can use and embrace sexuality rather than be hindered by it (Lord 3). Cleopatra is a strong woman who gains much of her power from her sexual aura.

Although Cleopatra is not portrayed as powerful at every moment in her life, through her orchestrated death and the sexual imagery that accompanies it, Cleopatra fulfills the role of a strong female icon. Cleopatra controls "the emotional climate [of her suicide] but this time with a definite purpose" with the goal of asserting her power (Wolf 334). This power is further emphasized through Cleopatra's influence over her servants and their devotion to her even in death. The intersection between physical desire and morbidity allows Cleopatra to be empowered as she gets closer and closer to death (Pearson 219).

The first important form of claiming sexual empowerment for Cleopatra comes from allusions to the female orgasm. Through the use of the word "die" Shakespeare and Elizabeth Taylor both wink at us because the word serves as a euphemism for orgasm (Starks 245). In a time of history focused on male pleasure during sex, it is particularly critical to see how

Shakespeare focuses on female sexual pleasure. This is imagery of power rather than of weakness.

The importance of the word “die,” which features prominently in Cleopatra’s suicide, indicates Cleopatra’s empowerment through sexual pleasure. In fact throughout *Antony and Cleopatra* Enobarbus makes a series of jokes about female orgasm with side remarks about letting women die, directed at Cleopatra and her relationship with multiple men (245). This is echoed because Cleopatra’s fake suicide is described to Antony in a way that mimics the act of orgasm “in the midst a tearing groan did break/The name of Antony; it was divided/Between her heart and lips” (Shakespeare 4.14.30-33). The euphemism of “die” features throughout the entire play and culminates in Cleopatra’s dramatic suicide.

In contrast to Cleopatra’s “dying” as sexual celebration and power, during Elizabethan times male ejaculation was thought to bring a man closer to death, since he gave up a part of himself every time (Starks 245). Furthermore, people in Elizabethan times believed that male ejaculation linked birth and death because it was considered a “return to the womb” (245). However, female orgasm was viewed strictly as a form of “erotic release” (252). Because Cleopatra sets the scene for her own suicide, “it is her own sexual pleasure that is shared with the audience” (250).

In *Cleopatra* Elizabeth Taylor closes her eyes after the snakebite and says that she has been living someone else’s reality. As she dies Cleopatra exclaims, “the stroke of death is as a lover’s pinch/Which hurts, and is desired” (Shakespeare 5.2.288-289) clearly indicating the parallel between the pain of death and the pleasure of sex. Throughout her death scene, there is the “the image of the female body whose sexuality is seemingly active even after death” (Berry 6). In the orchestration of her own death, Cleopatra reclaims her sexual liberty and power by facilitating her own erotic release. Antony’s sexually proclivity represents a

depressing death, while Cleopatra's dying functions as a form of power through sexual ecstasy.

The emphasis on the importance of Cleopatra and her power in this death scene is increased by the role of the asps in her death. The snakes featured in Cleopatra's death serve three important purposes: phallic imagery, allusion to Eve, and eternity. The snakes fundamentally function as phallic imagery. As the Clown sets the basket down he tells Cleopatra, "I wish you...joy of the worm" which implies both joy in death and through sexual intercourse (Shakespeare 5.2.256). In *Cleopatra* Elizabeth Taylor puts her hand into a basket filled with figs and asps to initiate being bitten.

The connection between snakes and phallic imagery is blaringly deliberate (Moore 23). However, Cleopatra uses the male phallus for her own purposes, in this case her choice of death by suicide. One critic writes that Cleopatra "urges the asp to untie with its teeth 'this knot intricate/Of life' [which is] notably sexual" (Berry 155). As a strong woman Cleopatra has reclaimed her sexuality and knows how to utilize the male and/or the asp to achieve her goals.

The image of the snake also conjures up the imagery of Eve and the Garden of Eden. Cleopatra functions as an inversion of the Eve story (6). While Eve falls prey to the whims and seduction of the snake, Cleopatra harnesses the power of the snake for her own purposes (6). Like the phallic nature of the snake, the inversion of the Eve story emphasizes that Cleopatra is the one with sexual power and influence. Since sexual power is synonymous with death in this scene, this imagery also implies that Cleopatra has power over her own fate in the world.

The snake furthermore represents eternity and Cleopatra's control over her future in both texts. As the representation of the goddess Isis which is greatly significant for Cleopatra (helpme.com) the snake features throughout the entire *Cleopatra* film. Elizabeth Taylor

repeatedly performs acts of spiritual divination because she claims the spiritual heritage of the great goddess Isis. In one interaction with Caesar she makes clear her claim to divinity exclaiming:

I shall have to insist that you mind what you say. I am Isis. I am worshipped by millions who believe it. You are not to confuse what I am with the so-called divine origin which every Roman general seems to acquire together with his shield. It was, uh, Venus you chose to be descended from, wasn't it? (Mankiewicz, *Cleopatra*).

The snake often provides an omen of events to come, which is significant because in *Cleopatra* snakes often appear woven into Elizabeth Taylor's costumes and headdresses (Ferber 187). Especially as the movie progresses Elizabeth Taylor's clothing and the scenery surrounding her have subtle nods and explicit depictions of snakes. All of these snakes serve as the omens of what is to come at the end of the story. Similarly, in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* multiple characters reference snakes before the suicide scene. Cleopatra even calls herself "a serpent of old Nile" (Shakespeare 1.5. 26). Even more specifically the snake in the bosom symbolized metal pain or poison (Ferber 187). Although Elizabeth Taylor does not put the snake against her breast this is a common theatrical representation of Cleopatra's death.

Historically, Egyptians saw the snake called ouroboros with its tale in its mouth as a symbol of eternity. Therefore, it is significant that the asps come to Cleopatra in a basket of food, which draws a connection between these snakes and the mouth. Yes the snake is phallic and represents Cleopatra's use of men to achieve her goals, but the snake also foreshadows her fate. In the moments before Cleopatra will be "in the mordant embrace of the figurative serpent by real serpent, her highly emblematic death suggests the familiar image for circular time and Eternity: the coiled serpent with its tail in its mouth" (Berry 116). The connection between food, eating, mouth, snake, and ouroboros alludes to the eternal nature of Cleopatra as a lasting icon. It is significant that Cleopatra chooses her own method of death because it allows her to set the stage and predict her endurance throughout history.

As previously mentioned the asps are delivered to Cleopatra via a basket of figs, which is another important symbol that claims female power. Since figs represent female genitalia and reproduction, their obvious presence in Cleopatra's suicide orchestration reinforces that Cleopatra is in control of her sexual desire and of the factors surrounding her death. In Shakespeare the figs are brought by the Clown (Shakespeare 5.2.333), which is significant because the Clown is the reincarnation of Antony. In the movie *Cleopatra* the figs are brought via Elizabeth Taylor's command. The fig tree "and its many-seeded fruit symbolize fertility which are linked to femininity" is a clear symbol of the power of female sexuality (speeli.com). The shape of the fig is further symbolic of the female genitalia. The snakes and the figs mixed together in the basket symbolize life and death intermingling: the seeds of the fig for life and the slithering poisonous snake for death.

In *Cleopatra* fertility is important too because it is the promise of children, which sways Caesar to sleep with Cleopatra. Elizabeth Taylor lounges across a bed and remarks quite seductively:

A woman that cannot bear children is like a river that is dry. A woman too must make the barren land fruitful. She must make life grow where there is no life, just as the mother Nile feeds and replenishes the Earth. I am the Nile. I will bear many sons. My breasts are filled with love and life. My hips are rounded and well apart. Such women, they say, have sons" (Mankiewicz, *Cleopatra*).

Indeed Cleopatra does bear Caesar a son who she cares greatly about. When Octavius enters the chamber in which she has been hiding, Cleopatra sees the ring of her son and knows that surely he must be dead. It is in this moment that Cleopatra decides to commit suicide.

Elizabeth Taylor calls for the basket of figs right after that, which reminds Cleopatra of her own fertility but also exacerbates the pain felt by the death of her son.

The loss of her seed in the form of her son had allowed the snake to triumph. Initially this would seem to argue against the idea that Cleopatra regains power through her death; however, this is not the case. The reason for this is that Cleopatra's seed as queen is greater

than just her biological son. Cleopatra's legacy through her seed spans the entire kingdom that she rules. There is an inherent "parallel drawn between her body and her nation, beyond the implication that as a female leader she has a maternal connection with her country" (Moore 15). The nation of Egypt would remember Cleopatra as a great queen because of the power and respect she sewed within her own kingdom.

Cleopatra requests figs to eat before her journey because she knows that although her physical life is over, the fertility of her legacy had only just begun (imdb.com). Cleopatra calling for the figs to be brought to her in the midst of her suicide orchestration is intentional. As a clear symbol of female sexuality and fertility, their intermingling with the snakes realigns the balance between death and legacy. Although Cleopatra lets the asp bite her hand, the figs remain in the bowl as a nod to the enduring legacy that Cleopatra has ahead of her to the extent that "she seems to have a clairvoyant view of exactly how the world will perceive her and the events she's witnessed" (Moore 23).

Cleopatra is assisted in her suicide by two of her maids whose devotion to their queen is another demonstration of Cleopatra's power. Influence is an important indicator for the power that a ruler wields. Cleopatra wants to be remembered not just as a woman but also as a queen. In her death Cleopatra's power is revealed as greater than the men surrounding her because of the devoted actions of her servants. In the movie *Cleopatra* the audience has witnessed the entire Roman army, including Anthony's own men, refuse to grant Antony an honorable death. Instead he is forced to kill himself since no one will grant him that reprieve. In his moment of need, Antony's influence evaporates and his men desert him.

In contrast, Cleopatra's two most faithful servants insist on dying alongside their queen. They argue over who will bring her the basket of figs, which contains the asps. It is Cleopatra who commands the devotion of her servants even in her most dire hour. The men in *Cleopatra* do not hold this power because the Senate kills Caesar and Antony's own men

desert him. This devotion elevates Cleopatra and makes her a strong representation of a female ruler with true power.

The final important symbolism of power in Cleopatra's death scene is the act of dressing as a queen. Cleopatra's garments are a physical sign of the "empowerment of a woman with political authority in the seat of royalty" (6). In Shakespeare's version of Cleopatra's death, her faithful maid dresses her and as she lay dying. The servant adjusts the diadem on the top of Cleopatra's head as she wants to be dressed "like a queen" in death in her "best attires" (Shakespeare 5.2 227-228). Cleopatra chooses to die in clothing that represents her temporal power as the Queen of Egypt. Historically, one of the oldest books discussing death was found in Egypt, which indicates the importance of death in Egyptian culture (Ferber 53). According to the Egyptians, death was one of the greatest levelers of people, but Cleopatra wants the men who find her to be reminded that she is not just any person (53). In this way Cleopatra also claims that she will remain a queen in death and through her legacy she has remained as such.

In the Elizabeth Taylor rendition of *Cleopatra* the robes are equally important. She chooses to wear the dress that she wore when entering Rome, which was a moment of political power for Cleopatra. She does not want to die in her everyday clothing but wants to wear an outfit befitting of her power. This act is the culmination of all of the symbols in the scene pointing to her claimed power. Despite being surrounded by an army of angry Romans, it is Cleopatra who glitters like an all-powerful goddess.

When the Romans do finally burst into the room and see Cleopatra dying from the poisonous snakebite, in both versions of the story they are amazed. Cleopatra was the ruler who "had rulers and empires on their knees" (Moore 9). Even as she dies from the poison in her body, "the conqueror...is transformed for a moment by the spectacle of the fallen Cleopatra, enchanting and seductive even in death" (Macmullan 406). In this moment

Cleopatra has claimed her power as a woman and as a queen. As her servant dies beside her Agrippa calls out, “was this well done of your lady? To which the servant replies, “Extremely well—as befitting the last of so many noble rulers” and so it was (imdb.com).

Still, there are some critics who argue Cleopatra’s death is not powerful but rather her act of succumbing to the power of the men surrounding her. One such critic is M. G. Lord who argues in her book *The Accidental Feminist* that Cleopatra’s death as portrayed by Elizabeth Taylor “oscillate[d] between bathos and parody” (Lord 105). She claims that the entire death scene represents the director of the movie misogynistically critiquing Elizabeth Taylor’s weight (Lord 106). In her assessment, Elizabeth Taylor’s rendering Cleopatra “looks like a stupefied Rose Bowl queen (105).

I disagree with this assessment of Cleopatra’s death for several reasons. First, Lord’s assessment is contradicted by passages earlier in the book in which Lord describes Taylor as possessing “the ‘mythic’ sexual power associated with Delilah, Salome, and Helen of Troy” (3). Lord also shows how these women, like Cleopatra, contribute to strife among men for which they are blamed, which shows their impact of the world of men rather than their lack of importance.

Finally as I argued above, the overwhelming imagery in two classic works portray Cleopatra as a strong icon who calls for female empowerment through the way in which she controlled the difficult circumstances of her life and death. The sexual imagery present in Cleopatra’s death scene both in *Antony and Cleopatra* and in Taylor’s rendition of *Cleopatra* project power, not weakness. This sexual imagery culminates as devoted servants dress their Queen in her royal garments and crown, signaling Cleopatra’s power transcending eternity.

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