

How have perceptions of women, luxury and excess evolved through history?

The case of Cleopatra and Antony by Sally Riad



In her role as leader of Egypt, Cleopatra has often been depicted not only as a great beauty but also as extravagant. Drawing from four retellings of Cleopatra and Antony from Plutarch, Shakespeare, Sarah Fielding and finally the Hollywood movie starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, my paper evaluates that the display of wealth on the leader is contextual and gendered.

Various societies have gendered conspicuous consumption, (the spending of money on and the acquiring of luxury goods and services to publicly display economic power) defining its practice as part of being 'woman' or 'man'. On one hand, there is the traditional western perception that conspicuous consumption is a typically female characteristic. On other hand, as is proven in national and international business conspicuous consumption is central to what men do and has been core to display of power and authority. In this paper I examine the association of conspicuous consumption with women: both as a woman's weaknesses (according to the theory they are the weaker vessel and more vulnerable to temptation) and in her role as femme fatale. In other words, excess is emasculating, weakening, and softening and so it is something that is done by Woman in her efforts to corrupt Man (i.e. a key weapon in her arsenal of power over him). But essentially, women, from politicians to those portrayed in the arts and films tend to receive much more criticism when displaying wealth than their male counterparts. Even texts that depict Antony's weaknesses focus the vitriol of excess on Cleopatra, and in the twentieth century, it is Liz Taylor rather than Richard Burton that cops the flak.

Plutarch wrote about Antony and Cleopatra a century and a half after their death in his *Parallel Lives*, a series in which he juxtaposed Greek and Roman leaders. He pays tribute to the valor and tenacity of Roman people in war and repeatedly recommends moderation over extravagance. He is generally wary of the effects of luxury and appreciative of self-control. He depicts Antony's indulgence even before he met Cleopatra and is clear that this is offensive and un-Roman. Turning to Cleopatra, Plutarch draws from Homer's description of Hera's seduction of Zeus, to describe how she was urged by Antony's friend to go and meet him in "all the splendor her art could command".

Centuries later, in 1606, Shakespeare drew extensively from Plutarch in writing Antony and Cleopatra – particularly in scenes that describe Cleopatra's opulence, such as her barge and respective entertainments. But what is key here is the polarizing view of Cleopatra that Shakespeare creates. Whilst her opulence pushes the audience to think of her negatively, he also portrays their tragic love as real and beautiful.

Following Shakespeare's work in the comparatively restrained eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Cleopatra was increasingly portrayed amidst exotic clutter in an endless array of artistic images. Add to this pharaonic architecture, animal-headed idols, rich food and drink thus she becomes the embodiment of corrupting hedonism.

Against this background, in 1757, Sarah Fielding wrote 'Lives of Cleopatra and Octavia'. The title and theme were inspired by Plutarch's *Lives*, but sought to focus on women. Written in the first person to read like a confessional moralizing tale, Fielding's portrayal of Cleopatra exploited cultural fears of the moral corruption associated with the luxury and frivolity. The positive role model in this text is the modest Octavia, and her behavior is the one to emulate. To the incipient British Empire at the time, insidious opulence and vanity invoked the degeneration that led to the decline of the Roman Empire.

Moving to Hollywood, attitudes shifted again during the 1960s when the movie Cleopatra was made. The production involved expensive sets, exotic robes and jewellery and thousands in the cast enacting a feast for the senses. Before shooting the film, 20th Century Fox utilized Elizabeth Taylor's star image of her excessive tastes and indulgent habits to drive interest in the elaborate production. Even Taylor's million-dollar fee was celebrated for its excess and was very much a product of the time. However, what is interesting to note is that during the extensive filming the number of squandered resources and Fox's increasing money problems shifted the focus from a celebration of cinema to a negative association of wastefulness and adultery.

There continues to be a strong focus on women in leadership and particularly the story of Cleopatra. In 2008 alone, there were at least four revisionist biographies published about Cleopatra by women authors.

Moving to today, time will tell what perspectives of leadership, women and wealth will be projected into the proposed remake of Angelina Jolie's Cleopatra.

This is a summary of the paper "[Leadership in the fluid moral economy of conspicuous consumption: Insights from the moralizing tales of Cleopatra and Antony](#)" from the *Journal of Management History* (Vol 20 Issue 1).

The paper extends the analysis (of views/representations) of Cleopatra by other women academics and writers such as Hughes-Hallet, Gadeken, Hamer, Kleiner, Royster and Weick. By clicking on the link above you can access the paper for free until 31 March 2015.