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# Table of Contents

1	Introduction.....	1
2	Historical depiction of Queen Cleopatra VII.....	3
2.1	Ancestry .....	3
2.2	Caesar and Cleopatra .....	6
2.3	Antony and Cleopatra.....	10
2.4	Cleopatra's Death .....	19
3	Gender norms in America in the 1910s, 1930s and 1960s.....	21
3.1	The 1910s - the New Woman.....	21
3.2	The 1930s - the years of the Great Depression.....	23
3.3	The 1960s - the decade of change .....	27
4	The Cleopatras: an introduction .....	30
4.1	Theda Bara, 1917: The Vamp .....	30
4.2	Claudette Colbert, 1934: The Glamorous Cleopatra .....	34
4.3	Elizabeth Taylor, 1963: The Unforgettable Diva .....	39
5	Her infinite variety: masquerade and identity.....	44
6	Stardom.....	51
6.1	Stars – a phenomenon of production.....	51

6.2 Star vs character .....	56
6.3 Stars as types.....	59
6.4 Image, Publicity and Promotion.....	60
7 Mise en scène .....	66
7.1 Claudette Colbert .....	67
7.2 Liz Taylor.....	73
7.3 Developments of Cleopatra? .....	77
8 Conclusion.....	79
9 Bibliography.....	81
9.1 Primary sources .....	81
9.2 Secondary sources.....	81
9.3 Pictures .....	85
10 Appendix .....	i
Abstract .....	i
Zusammenfassung auf Deutsch.....	iii

## List of Figures

Figure 1 Theda Bara in Cleopatra (1917).....	32
Figure 2 Claudette Colbert in Cleopatra (1934).....	36
Figure 3 Liz Taylor in Cleopatra (1963).....	40
Figure 4: Claudette Colbert's first appearance as Cleopatra (1934).....	68
Figure 5: Colbert as Cleopatra in her final scene (1934).....	72
Figure 6: Liz Taylor as Cleopatra opening the snake basket (1963) .....	76

# 1 Introduction

The Egyptian queen Cleopatra has always stimulated the imagination, resulting in a large number of representations of her character in high and popular culture over the millennia. Scientists and artists have tried to reconstruct her physical appearance, but Cleopatra remains a mystery, and is thus thousands of years after her death still an object of seductive allure, and an epitome of beauty.

In the early 1900s Cleopatra entered into popular culture: incarnations of her can be seen in several stage performances and in the arts. Many film-makers took up the myth around her persona and were trying to retell the life story of the Egyptian queen. Even though some of these filmic representations are now considered cinematographic masterpieces and are by not necessarily perceived as indecent, it is fascinating to note that at the time of the release of the different movies there was occasional criticism with regard to certain aspects of Cleopatra's representation: nudity was regarded as problematic, as was the depiction of Cleopatra as a classical *femme fatale*.



In my thesis I will have a closer look at these cinematic representations of the Egyptian queen and will analyze them with a focus on gender norms. I will work with the hypothesis that throughout cinematic history the various depictions of Cleopatra have, in fact, influenced and/or overruled gender norms.

## 2 Historical depiction of Queen Cleopatra VII

### 2.1 Ancestry

Queen Cleopatra's full name "Cleopatra Thea Philopatora" originates from Greek and means "*Goddess Cleopatra, Beloved of Her Father*" (Burstein 15) and already implied what major role she would play in Egyptian history.

She was the daughter of Ptolemy XII Auletes and therefore originally is a direct descendant of one of Alexander the Great's generals – Ptolemy I Soter of Macedonia – who had taken over control of Egypt after the downfall of Alexander the Great (Roller 15). The Ptolemaic rulership lasted for two-and-a-half centuries, and was strongly influenced by Hellenistic culture, with Greek being the language spoken by the rulers (Roller 15-16). Cleopatra, however, equally embraced her identity and role as Queen of Egypt by learning Egyptian (Roller 15) and representing herself as the reincarnation of the Egyptian Goddess Isis (Plutarch *Antony* 54.6). The Ptolemaic dynasty ended with her death in 30 BC, and

Cleopatra was the last one in Egyptian history that would rule under the title of Pharaoh (Roller 6).

Cleopatra's ancestry is clear concerning the paternal side; when it comes to the identity of her mother, however, there are a few speculations as to the identity of her mother: Considering the phenomenon of matrilineal succession, the most common assumption is that her mother must have been a relative of Ptolemy XII Auletes, possibly his sister and wife Cleopatra VI Tryphaina (Burstein 11). However, there exist also hypotheses that she might have been of mixed heritage since nothing is known about the lineage of her grandmother. Roller (15) proposes that Cleopatra's mother was "probably [...] a member of the Egyptian priestly family of Ptah, yet also with some Macedonian ancestry herself", while Huß (1990) argues she might have been a high-born Egyptian woman, and possibly a later wife of Ptolemy XII. Later depictions of Cleopatra as fair-haired and fair-skinned, as in the frescoes of Tiepolo (Anderson 32) should therefore not necessarily be taken at face value on account of her Greek ancestry.

What is seen as historically confirmed is that Cleopatra had two older sisters – Berenike IV and Arsinoë IV – and two younger brothers – Ptolemy XIII and Ptolemy XIV (Roller 16). According to Ptolemaic rule, which was closely affiliated with Egyptian practices, future kings usually married one of their sisters before ascending the throne to keep the power within the family (Bevan 360).

When Ptolemy XII Auletes was forced to leave Egypt due to an upheaval triggered by corruption and the centralization of power, he and Cleopatra went to Rome in order to request assistance of Pompey (Roller 20). Meanwhile, Cleopatra VI Tryphaena tried to consolidate her status and take hold of the crown, but she soon died under mysterious conditions (Roller 22). Afterwards, Berenike IV succeeded her and became the sole ruler of Ptolemaic realm until she revolted against her father who returned in 55 BC with Roman troops (Roller 23-25). Ptolemy XII Auletes' soldiers captured Alexandria and arrested and decapitated Berenike IV (Roller 25), and as a consequence, Cleopatra became the oldest child in the line of succession.

The then teenaged Cleopatra supported her father's reign for four years until his death, resulting in the marriage of 18 year old Cleopatra and her younger brother Ptolemy XIII in order to make them joint monarchs (Anderson 38). As she had already made experiences in ruling as co-regent of her father for four years, she made no signs of approving Ptolemy XIII as a co-ruler. She violated this principle of male superiority by removing Ptolemy's name from official documents and minting coins that solely showed her face (Anderson 38).

This disrespectful and power-hungry behavior resulted in her first downfall as the conflict between her and her brother peaked. Ptolemy XIII managed to deprive her of power and therefore forced her to escape to Syria into exile, making Ptolemy XIII the sole ruler of Egypt around 49 BC (Burstein 17).

## **2.2 Caesar and Cleopatra**

In the same year as Ptolemy XIII ascended the throne in Egypt, the Roman Republic was on the brink of a civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey. As Caesar led one of his legions over the Rubicon River, which was prohibited

specifically, a clash between these two parties was inevitable (Plutarch *Caesar* 32.4-8).

After several battles with decisive losses on both sides, Caesar determined the fate of the Roman Republic by winning his greatest victory at the Battle of Pharsalus in 48 BC (Plutarch *Caesar* 42-50). This victory significantly increased Caesar's power and legitimacy but it did not yet mean, however, the end of the civil war as Pompey and many Roman senators fled to republican provinces (Plutarch *Caesar* 52). When Pompey realized his inevitable defeat during the Battle of Pharsalus, he fled to Alexandria, assuming to find shelter as he was considered the conqueror of the east. When he disembarked his ship, he was unexpectedly killed at the age of 58 with his body being beheaded and then burned (Plutarch *Pompey* 79.1-80.6).

It has been suggested that Ptolemy XIII probably planned the execution of Pompey in order to show Caesar his loyalty and strengthen their alliance, taking into account that Egypt was in great financial debt to Rome and therefore depended on Caesar's favors (Roller 23). Pompey's execution, however, did not

achieve this desired effect, as Caesar was disgusted and furious about how Ptolemy XIII had treated Pompey (Bevin 364).

With Julius Caesar's arrival in Egypt and her brother's misfortune of antagonizing him, Cleopatra saw her chance of regaining her power with the help of Caesar. In order to pass Ptolemy's guards at Caesar's palace, sources like Plutarch's *Life of Caesar* claim that she came up with a simple but brilliant solution, which credibility is up until now a matter of dispute among scholars: being rolled up in a carpet, or bed-sack, and then carried past the guards by her loyal follower Apollodorus:

So Cleopatra, taking only Apollodorus the Sicilian from among her friends, embarked in a little skiff and landed at the palace when it was already getting dark; 2 and as it was impossible to escape notice otherwise, she stretched herself at full length inside a bed-sack, while Apollodorus tied the bed-sack up with a cord and carried it indoors to Caesar. 3 It was by this device of Cleopatra's, it is said, that Caesar was first captivated, for she showed herself to be a bold coquette, and succumbing to the charm of further intercourse with her, he reconciled her to her brother on the basis of a joint share with him in the royal power. (Plutarch *Caesar* 29.1-3)

What is interesting to note is that beyond Plutarch's account, it is widely agreed upon that it was her personal visit and the overwhelming first impression that encouraged Caesar to endorse her (Abbott 137). It is bequeathed that Caesar was enchanted by Cleopatra's youthful appearance (which was not that surprising considering her being 21 and him being 52 years old at that time) and her radiating immense power, which made a union between them very attractive for both sides (Abbott 137).

As a result of their new alliance, Caesar defeated Ptolemy VIII's army at the Battle of the Nile, in the course of which Ptolemy XIII is said to have drowned in the Nile (Caesar *Bello Alexandrino* 28-32). As a consequence, Cleopatra returned to the throne around 47 BC, but again had to marry the next male in the line of succession in order to rule – her 11 year old brother Ptolemy XIV (Plutarch *Caesar* 49.6-10). According to Plutarch, about nine months after Cleopatra's and Caesar's first meeting, she gave birth to a son, whom she named Ptolemy Caesar or Caesarion (*Caesar* 49.10).



Cleopatra and Caesarion left Egypt in 46 BC for a visit to Rome, accompanied by Caesar, Ptolemy XIV, and three Roman legions (Bevan 368). In Rome, Cleopatra had to face hostility because of her relationship with Caesar, of whom she was thought to be taking advantage – the queen's public image of a goddess as it existed in Egypt did not prevent a scandal in Rome (Abbott 187).

When Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BC, Cleopatra and her family quickly returned back to Egypt, knowing that she and also their son Caesarion were in immediate danger (Abbott 197). In the same year, Cleopatra's co-regent and brother Ptolemy XIV died under mysterious circumstances; however it is presumed that Cleopatra killed him in order to pave the way for Caesarion's future reign and therefore strengthen the relationship with Rome (Anderson 40).

## **2.3 Antony and Cleopatra**

After Julius Caesar's assassination, the power vacuum in Rome was tremendous. Mark Antony, Marcus Lepidus and Octavian Caesar had all been strongly

attached to Caesar and therefore met in order to discuss the fate of Rome and determine the course of action against the traitors who had caused Caesar's death (Plutarch *Antony* 18). They therefore formed the Second Triumvirate and divided the whole realm amongst them and decided on disposing all enemies that would stand in their way (Anderson 39).

As the Second Triumvirate was officially established in 43 BC, Antony, Lepidus and Octavian shared utmost military and political power in terms of a three-man dictatorship (Plutarch *Antony* 19). The replenishing of the treasury cost some famous victims as for instance Marcus Tullius Cicero who was considered enemy of the state as he had constantly been in opposition to Caesar and corrupted Mark Antony in his speeches (Plutarch *Antony* 19.3). Besides, many other officials were proscribed or killed before the Triumvirs set about bringing Caesar's murderers to justice in 42 BC (Plutarch *Antony* 19).

Marc Antony called for Cleopatra in 41 BC to meet him at one of his camps in Tarsus/Turkey in order to discuss her role in the war against Brutus and Cassius (Plutarch *Antony* 25.1). Cleopatra followed his request, arriving there in a

pompous barge and allegedly dressing herself up like Venus, the Roman goddess of love, for the purpose of winning Antony for her cause:

She herself reclined beneath a canopy spangled with gold, adorned like Venus in a painting, while boys like Loves in paintings stood on either side and fanned her. Likewise also the fairest of her serving-maidens, attired like Nereïds and Graces, were stationed, some at the rudder-sweeps, and others at the reefing-ropes. [...] And a rumour spread on every hand that Venus was come to revel with Bacchus for the good of Asia. (Plutarch *Antony* 26.1-3).

As Antony considered attacking the Parthian Empire, he was supposedly so overwhelmed of Cleopatra's appearance, charm and splendor that he put off his war plans and "suffered her to hurry him off to Alexandria" (Plutarch *Antony* 28.1) As Antony decided to stay in Alexandria for the winter of 41 BC – 40 BC, he got an insight in Cleopatra's ways of preserving her and Caesarion's supremacy (Plutarch *Antony* 29). She persuaded him to kill her younger half-sister Arsinoë VI who had found a place of refuge in Ephesus but whom she still considered a threat to the throne (Bevin 374).

After Antony's departure for Rome in late 40 BC, Cleopatra bore the first two children that resulted from her relationship with Antony: Alexander Helios and Cleopatra Selene II (Plutarch *Antony* 36.3). When Antony decided to resume his war plans against the Parthians roughly four years later, he came back to Alexandria and sealed the marriage covenant with Cleopatra according to the Egyptian rite (Anderson 41). As Antony made Alexandria his main place of residence and married Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, the bond between him and Octavian grew weaker. Besides, it was seen as scandal that Antony tied the knot with another woman although he had married to Octavian's sister Octavia Minor before (Plutarch *Antony* 53.5). Eventually, Cleopatra gave birth to their third child – Ptolemy Philadelphus (Anderson 42).

Several aspects contributed to the rising mistrust between Octavian and Antony. On the one hand, the relationship level between them suffered tremendously due to Antony's marriage to Cleopatra which was seen as betrayal from most Romans, on the other, Antony and Cleopatra's joint forces were considered a threat to the Roman Empire (Plutarch *Antony* 54-55). The tensions between

Antony and Octavian significantly increased when Octavian discharged Lepidus of his liabilities as a member of the Triumvirate and publicly started to complain about Antony and denounced many of his actions:

By reporting these things to the senate and by frequent denunciations before the people Caesar tried to inflame the multitude against Antony. Antony, too, kept sending counter-accusations against Caesar. The chief accusations which he made were, in the first place, that after taking Sicily away from Pompey, Caesar had not assigned a part of the island to him; in the second place, that after borrowing ships from him for the war he had kept them for himself; thirdly, that after ejecting his colleague Lepidus from office and degrading him, he was keeping for himself the army, the territory, and the revenues which had been assigned to Lepidus; finally that he had distributed almost all Italy in allotments, to his own soldiers, and had left nothing for the soldiers of Antony. To these charges Caesar replied by saying that he had deposed Lepidus from office because he was abusing it, and as for what he had acquired in war, he would share it with Antony whenever Antony, on his part, should share Armenia with him; and Antony's soldiers had no claim upon Italy, since they had Media and Persia[.] (Plutarch *Antony* 55)

As Octavian disapproved of these accusations, he began his propaganda war against Antony (Abbott 261), denouncing Cleopatra as “a depraved oriental

woman who had seduced a weak man” (Anderson 42). Octavius further gathered support in his campaign by declaring that he had found Antony’s will which basically outlined the Donations of Alexandria in 34 BC, and which reaffirmed the tight bond between Antony and Cleopatra (Abbott 270).

This hostile sentiment towards Antony and Cleopatra continued to grow among the members of the Roman aristocracy, and peaked in the Donations of Alexandria in late 34 BC:

[Antony] was hated, too, for the distribution which he made to his children in Alexandria; it was seen to be theatrical and arrogant, and to evince hatred of Rome. For after filling the gymnasium with a throng and placing on a tribunal of silver two thrones of gold, one for himself and the other for Cleopatra, and other lower thrones for his sons, in the first place he declared Cleopatra Queen of Egypt, Cyprus, Libya, and Coele Syria, and she was to share her throne with Caesarion. Caesarion was believed to be a son of the former Caesar, by whom Cleopatra was left pregnant. In the second place, he proclaimed his own sons by Cleopatra Kings of Kings, and to Alexander he allotted Armenia, Media and Parthia (when he should have subdued it), to Ptolemy Phoenicia, Syria, and Cilicia. (Plutarch *Antony* 54).

Through the Donations, he divided parts of his countries to Cleopatra and Caesarion but also his three children Alexander Helios, Cleopatra Selene II and Ptolemy Philadelphus. He endowed these lands publicly – even though Cleopatra had already been the formal ruler of most of them – and further claims were made as an outlook for future conquests (Jones 89-90).

Essentially, one of the main outcomes of these festivities was the fact that Caesarion was declared legitimate heir of Julius Caesar and therefore questioning Octavian's legitimacy (Jones 91). The rising rivalry between Octavian and Antony, their inexorable crave for power and their family quarrel due to Antony's divorce letter to Octavia finally resulted in Octavian's declaration of war against the Queen of Egypt (Plutarch *Antony* 60.1). At this time, Antony summoned all Romans that still were loyal to him to Ephesus and Greece (Plutarch *Antony* 61).

The decisive confrontation between Octavian's and Antony and Cleopatra's forces took place at the Battle of Actium in September 31 BC, in which both armies had a fairly equal initial position with Octavian bringing approximately 400

ships and 19,000 men into battle and Antony leading approximately 290 ships and 22,000 men (Plutarch *Antony* 61-62).

After a holdup of several months, the eventual sea battle of Actium resulted in what historians have considered a victory by Octavian, as first Cleopatra and then Antony, in pursuit of her ship, abandoned the rest of their fleet, though Plutarch proclaims that Antony's fleet "held out for a long time against Caesar, and only after it had been most severely damaged by the high sea which rose against it did it reluctantly, and at the tenth hour, give up the struggle." (68.1)

The real reason why Cleopatra abandoned Antony during the battle is not known; however, Plutarch's viewpoint was that she allegedly realized that Antony's forces were inferior and she therefore needed to betray him in order to raise her chances to keep her power (66.3).

One year after the Battle of Actium, in 30 BC, Octavian invaded Egypt from the Syrian border, which Antony had heavily fortified before, but where his forces were nevertheless overrun by Octavian, who soon pushed forward towards Al-



exandria (Plutarch *Antony* 74). When Anthony's forces were again defeated in Alexandria, he was informed by one of Cleopatra's servants that the queen had committed suicide (Plutarch *Antony* 76). Having an overwhelming enemy on the one side and his supposedly dead love on the other, Antony tried to kill himself, lamenting, according to Plutarch: "O Cleopatra, I am not grieved to be bereft of thee, for I shall straightway join thee; but I am grieved that such an imperator as I am has been found to be inferior to a woman in courage." (76.3)

Meanwhile, Cleopatra had taken sanctuary in a mausoleum with her treasures and two of her loyal entourage (Bevan 382). Antony, still struggling with death, as his wound was not immediately lethal, was then brought to the mausoleum, learning that Cleopatra was still alive before succumbing to his wounds (Plutarch *Antony* 76-77). When Roman troops finally took Alexandria, they found Antony's corpse in the mausoleum and took Cleopatra captive (Plutarch *Antony* 78).

## 2.4 Cleopatra's Death

The exact circumstances concerning Cleopatra's death in 30 BC are subject to debate. There exist a number of theories on how and under which conditions she killed herself, all of which are speculative to a degree. Presumably, Octavian's intentions would have been to exhibit Cleopatra during parades in Rome, as it was common after significant war victories, and had an interest in keeping her alive for this purpose (Plutarch *Antony* 78.3). Thus far, most sources are mostly in agreement.

The often repeated story of one or two asps, however, that were smuggled into Cleopatra's final sanctuary and whose poison bites allegedly killed her, has been called into question by a number of people. Though propagated by sources such as Strabo (*Geography* 17.10), Suetonius (*Augustus* 17.5), and Plutarch (*Antony* 86), death by asp poison has been called an unlikely choice of death for a queen like Cleopatra on various grounds, including the fact that no source mentions an actual snake being found at the scene, and the painful nature of such a death. Nöldeke (1885) and Schaefer (qtd. in Gray 2010) have

both individually argued for alternative answers to the question of the queen's death; Nöldeke suggesting that she was simply killed by Octavian (349), and Schaefer proposing that she killed herself by ingesting a mixture of other poisons that would have led to a more comfortable death (Gray 2010).

Regardless of the forensic details, however, it is the image of Cleopatra with the snake(s) at her breast that has found its way into the works of poets like Florus or Velleius, and that has been immortalized in literature and the visual arts over the centuries. As such, her death scene, regardless of what actually happened, has become an essential part of the myth of Cleopatra, the queen of Egypt, that has been reproduced in Western culture in various forms.

### **3 Gender norms in America in the 1910s, 1930s and 1960s**

In this chapter, a closer look will be taken at gender norms within the three decades in which the Cleopatra movies discussed below were released. Contextualizing these movies historically is essential for understanding in how far they stand in communication with changing gender norms and how these norms are in turn reflected and played with in the movies.

#### **3.1 The 1910s - the New Woman**

It is the Progressive era (1910-1919) that brought about new opportunities for women, and a number of organized women's institutions began to press for political and social change in favour of their sex (Kerber et al. 9). With the advance of industrialization, the Victorian model of separate spheres became outdated, and women began to enter the workforce (Dye 3). With this change of situation, a new generation of the Suffragettes movement paved the way for the better-

ment of women's rights: marching to secure the right to vote and improve the working conditions for women and children (Dye 2).

In the course of the 1910s several further socio-cultural incidents led to a new, autonomous, self-confident image of women. First and foremost, World War

One deeply uprooted previously traditional gender roles: as the men were recruited to fight, the women had to go to work to earn their livings in jobs hitherto dominated by men (Jensen 14). Even though they were often not paid as much as men would, their income enabled them to lead an active social life, which had not existed in such a form before (Tone 486).

In this same decade the view on sex was starting to change: social mingling, dating, premarital sex and multiple partners were slowly becoming less of a taboo (Tone 485). As the conventional view on sex changed, women were "permitted" to have an own sex- drive and to enjoy having sex just as much as men did, and the emerging market of contraception options marked a "sexual revolution" of a kind (Tone 500).

Beyond politics and economy, traces of this wave of feminism could also be found in contemporary film, where the genre of the “vamp film” allowed for female agency of a sexual and professional kind, as an extremely well-paid star actress (Whalan 44-45). The Cleopatra of this time, Theda Bara, is even considered one of the most iconic stars of this genre, and she herself claimed later on that the vamps she played were feminist at heart (Whalan 44). Jensen very aptly sums up this new era of women when she says:

The “New Woman” – sexually free, economically independent, and physically unshackled – was a feature of film and fiction, and some aspects of “new womanhood” were becoming a choice for some real women as well. (13)

### **3.2 The 1930s - the years of the Great Depression**

Like the rest of the world, America faced a tough economic crisis in the 1930s: a high percentage of Americans was unemployed, the luckier ones who did have a job earned much less than they used to, and marriage and birth rates fell (Batchelor 7). As a consequence, the effects of the economic crisis extended

from the working life into the private life of families, and despite there not being any reports of starvation, hunger was a common experience for large parts of the population (Batchelor 9). A typical American family consisted of a working husband, who had to keep up with a loan cut in order to still keep his job, and a wife who supported her man and took care of the household and their children (Batchelor 9). A stunning fact about this decade, according to Ware (2009) is that even if the man of the family lost his job, the family often had enough resources to safeguard their future.

Even though both men and women went through hard times during the Great Depression, the experiences of the sexes during this episode differed:

Men were socialized to think of themselves as breadwinners; when they lost their jobs or saw their incomes reduced, they felt like failures because they couldn't take care of their families. Women, on the other hand, saw their roles in the household enhanced as they juggled to make ends meet. [...]The men, cut adrift from their usual routine, lost much of their sense of time and dawdled helplessly and dully about the streets; while in the homes the women's world remained largely intact and the round of cooking, housecleaning, and mending became if anything more absorbing.

To put it another way, no housewife lost her job in the Depression.

(Ware 2009)

These issues described in the paragraph above may hold true for married couples in most cases, but what about unmarried single women? Here, the situation was quite different: divorced, widowed and single women lived on the breadline and had a hard time supplying their families with necessities (Ware 2009). In comparison to the new iconic image of the Great Depression, which is the one of the “Forgotten Man” – an unemployed worker that is selling fruit on the street in order to survive – Ware points out that women in the same situation suffered in silence and were almost invisible (2009).

As described in the previous paragraphs, the 1930s saw a strict role allocation: the man was the breadwinner, the woman was to be the committed housewife. These roles were considered natural (in other words, the “how it should be”), and agreed upon as the accepted norm.

It is not hard to imagine that in a time that was economically challenging for the people, envy and upheaval were not uncommon in the population. Of course



there were women who worked or who had to work due to their social and financial circumstances; however, women as breadwinners had a tough time due to discrimination: because they were breaking the rules and undermining the image of the social accepted housewife, men disapproved of working (married) women, who might be taking jobs away from male workers (Batchelor 9). In other words, (primarily unemployed) men demanded an immediate dismissal of female workers, for the sake of the economy: "Simply fire the women, who shouldn't be working anyway, and hire the men. Presto! No unemployment. No relief rolls. No depression" (Ware 2009).

This statement should soon be revealed as a misconception: in fact, working women usually had employment within the social sector, which meant stereotypical "women's jobs" such as cleaning, nursing or clerical jobs (Batchelor 9).

Calls for the dismissal of women were soon silenced, because most men obviously were not qualified or interested in such "women's jobs" (Ware 2009).

These circumstances had a negative connotation in terms of reinforcing traditional gender norms, but a positive effect on economy: While the tough "men

jobs” were hit hard by depression, “women jobs” began to thrive (Batchelor 9).

As a consequence women workers contributed considerably, yet again without being recognized, to the financial situation of the decade (Ware 2009).

### **3.3 The 1960s - the decade of change**

The 1960s were an important decade for American women: ushering in the second wave of feminism, they represented a time in which the number of working women was increasing gradually, and with this increase, women became dissatisfied with the rising sexism encountered in the workplace, the wage gap between them and their male colleagues, and issues of sexual harassment at work (Collins 165-168).

A striking change for women of the 1960s was the approval of the birth control pill: around 60% of women were using this innovative method in order to prevent unwanted pregnancies, and to have more freedom and autonomy in their life choices (Allyn 30). While sexual liberation was initially a primarily male privi-

lege (Allyn 103), pre-marital cohabitation and intimacy became more widely accepted as time went on (Allyn 99) and censorship laws in the media were loosened (Allyn 65).

In addition to entering the workspace, and advocating greater sexual independence, women also fought for further improvements of their situation, the key word being equality. This struggle throughout the 1960s is commented on by Walsh as having yielded respective successes:

Gradually, Americans came to accept some of the basic goals of the Sixties feminists- equal pay for equal work, an end to domestic violence, curtailment of severe limits on women in managerial jobs, an end to sexual harassment, and sharing of responsibility for housework and child rearing. (Walsh 2010)

It is commonly agreed upon that the sixties were a decade of change: the traditional gender norms were challenged by the efforts of second-wave feminism, and the radio played "You don't own me" by Lesley Gore which can be considered as representative of new outlooks on gender entering popular culture as well. In this time of social and political firestorm more and more women started to work in formerly male dominated branches such as television, diplomacy, and

the Supreme Court. Furthermore, it was the decade that broke with the strict, traditional gender norms of the previous decades, as well as it changed the relationship between the genders revolutionarily (August 95).

## **4 The Cleopatras: an introduction**

Having discussed the gender norms of women in the 1910s, 30s and 60s it is now time to introduce the Cleopatra movies as well as their female protagonists.

This section of the thesis offers a brief overview and some hard facts about the movies' productions, as well as their stars' private lives.

### **4.1 Theda Bara, 1917: The Vamp**

Today, the actress Theda Bara is known largely as an image in still photographs – the Vampire Supreme, slightly ridiculous to our jaded eyes, and yet strangely compelling (Ford and Mitchell 71). She made forty-two films, but to the largest part the talent that made her one of the movie's first great stars is lost to audiences today, as Bara's surviving films are not representative of what audiences and critics considered her best work (Golden 9). Golden also points out that Theda Bara was a highly successful actress in the 1910s, even though her appearance no longer conforms to the 21 century's perceptions of beauty (9).

Theda Bara starred in director J. Gordon Edwards' *Cleopatra* in 1917. Her performance as Cleopatra has been described as "the biggest American box-office success of 1917" and "the most advertised, written about, and talked- about film of the year" (Miles 179), and, as Miles continues, "formed part of an early twentieth-century *Cleomania* that concerned spectator desire but only star identification" (179). Her favorable reception effectively set Bara as an example for all following depictions of Cleopatra on film.

The film was directed by J. Gordon Edwards, based on the works of Shakespeare and Emile Moreau, and produced by William Fox (Osmond 55). This film promotes her as "the ultimate Oriental femme fatale, embodying all the fears linked to the mysterious and dangerous otherness of Egypt and womanhood" (Hughes-Hallet ch. 11). As a femme fatale she represents all facets of the term's dictionary definition of "an attractive and seductive woman, especially one who is likely to cause risk to or the downfall of anyone who becomes involved with her" (OED).



Figure 1 Theda Bara in Cleopatra (1917)

As already mentioned, only a short fragment of the film has survived to the present day. Hatchuel and Vienne-Guerinne reconstruct and describes the movie's structure as follows: The first part of the film was devoted to the affair between

Caesar and Cleopatra, and ended with the murder of Caesar, probably followed by the battle of Philippi (243). The second part moved on to the affair with Antony until the couple's suicide (243).

Concluding from Hatchuel and Vienne-Guerinne's description of the plot and her work's title *Shakespeare on screen: The Roman Plays*, the film was largely based on Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. However, Hatchuel and Vienne-Guerinne point out that "many of the intertitles used Shakespeare's text, but the film was not marketed or even received as Shakespearean. It was viewed (...) as an eye-filling recreation of glamorous pseudo-history" (243). It can be speculated that this was a marketing strategy by the producer to blur the story's link with the old Shakespearean tradition and text in order to put the focus on the female protagonist, making it a one-woman-(vamp)-show, though evidence for such a motivation has not been documented.

Aside from her personal scandals, which will be dealt with later on in this thesis, Bara was and is (especially nowadays) celebrated for her representation of Cleopatra (Miles 181). What has to be kept in mind is, that due to a lack of an



audio track, Theda Bara had to employ different acting strategies and techniques than her successors. She had to get the message across by playing with mimics and gestures even more than her colleagues in subsequent films. Even though there is just a short sequence left of the movie, the value of her acting can still be noticed. As Miles declares in her treatment of the movie, Bara was indeed “too extraordinary to be imitable” (181).

## **4.2 Claudette Colbert, 1934: The Glamorous Cleopatra**

The movie *Cleopatra* starring Claudette Colbert was first released in 1934 and was directed by Cecile B. DeMille. Unlike Theda Bara’s earlier film, the 1934 production did have an audio track, though it was still filmed in black and white.

“Driven by energy and humour”, and “never static or boring” (Ford and Mitchell 74), the movie was intended to target a broad audience, and as a result the consideration of a female viewership affected the production on many levels, as Miles states:

By the 1930s, as women became its core audience, the Hollywood film industry gave female stars a central role both on- and off-screen in differentiating its mass production of films, and in glamorizing commodities and activating their consumption. (183)

For attracting the female audience's attention, the Paramount studios hired Claudette Colbert who established the term of "Cleopatra vogue" and scored one of the top five female box-office draws of the early 1930s (Miles 183). She embodied the image of a modern American woman who had several important features: she was sleek, sophisticated, witty, resourceful, and chic (Miles 183). This image had been built by Colbert already before filming *Cleopatra* through her success in former films (Miles 183).

Despite DeMille's periodic use of silent-cinema grammar (the Battle of Actium even includes footage from *The Ten Commandments*), the film's charm lies, as Miles describes, in "its brazen 1930s quality, right from the gilded art-deco Egyptian settings and Travis Banton's nightclub-on-the-Nile costuming to the snap-and-crackle of wit that makes Colbert's Cleopatra as much feisty dame as femme fatale" (183). However, Miles also adds that Cleopatra, while initially de-

picted as dangerous seductress, changes throughout the plot and eventually gives up on everything in order to find love (184).



Figure 2 Claudette Colbert in Cleopatra (1934)

What keeps it from becoming two-dimensional kitsch or tinselly tragedy is Colbert's effortlessly layered performance, sliding from girlish flirtation via cold cal-

culatation to a self- sacrificing hero worship (Ford and Mitchell 78). Like her character, she's a creature of infinite variety and DeMille's account of Colbert's screen presence recalls the basic image of attractive, successful women communicated in Hollywood films of the 1930s (Ford and Mitchell 80-81). There is also extensive use of the image of the femme fatale in the movie: as Ford and Mitchell argue, "this Cleopatra-as-temptress story cleanses the queen of motherhood, erasing all her children. [...] Cleopatra looks the part of a woman who decimates her Roman lovers" (75-76). In this vein, Claudette Colbert falls in line with other Hollywood divas of the time that seduced men with their stunning beauty and sexuality: Jean Harlow, Mae West, Joan Blondell, and Constance Bennett (Doss 2).

Claudette Colbert plays the role of Cleopatra in perhaps the most erotic way out of the three Cleopatras discussed here: Ford and Mitchell describe the film as exuding a "reckless sexuality" (75), in which they still acknowledge Colbert's professionalism and effort "to give this portrait of the queen's public life a private shadow" (75). Though the film does not feature explicit sex, it is ripe with sexual

tension and innuendo that is eventually unresolved for the viewing audience (Ford and Mitchell 78).

Just as Cleopatra herself, Colbert became a fashion icon and role model for women in the 1930s: As Hatchuel and Vienne-Guerinne describe, at the release of the 1934 film, in a context where strong economic links had developed between the cinematic industry and general commerce, American women were encouraged to equip themselves as Claudette Colbert in the role of Cleopatra, through the purchase of promoted goods- jewelry, shoes, hair curlers, negligees, cosmetics, and Palmolive soap, whose ad proclaimed, "Age cannot wither, nor custom stale, her infinite variety" (251).

Not only did Colbert work as a role model and boost the cosmetics and clothing industry, but also within the movie industry director Cecil DeMille was equally pleased with his choice of protagonist and claimed: "In all her scenes she was perfect. She was the imperious Queen. She was a vivacious, alluring woman. She was Egypt" (Doss 2).

Considering all the positive feedback actress Claudette Colbert got for her role as Cleopatra and having numerous women inspired by her looks, one might think that Colbert would have been proud of her performance and embraced her image as the great seductress, the femme fatale, and the role model. While Theda Bara had indeed held on to her image as the Vamp, Colbert, however, was unhappy with it: As Chaneles claims, “Colbert did not wish to be portrayed as overtly sexual and later refused such roles” (97).

#### **4.3 Elizabeth Taylor, 1963: The Unforgettable Diva**

Perhaps the most striking portrayal of Cleopatra was achieved by Elizabeth Taylor in one of the most written-about films in Hollywood history (Ford and Mitchell 101). Through her personification of the Egyptian queen in 1963, she shaped the image and the perception of Cleopatra over many generations up to today: One of the most expensive movies ever made, Miller, Browning and Meier describe its effect and extravaganza as still “holding the world under its spell”, and not least because of its unforgettable protagonist (94).



Figure 3 Liz Taylor in Cleopatra (1963)

According to Kashner and Schoenberger, when Elizabeth Taylor was offered the role for *Cleopatra*, she was still under contract with another film- studio and initially, she did not even want to play the role, so her manager advised her to

demand a ridiculously high sum of payment, hoping that the studio would not agree to employ her: “Elizabeth asked for 1 million [...] her typical salary at the time was 125,000 dollars” (Kashner and Schoenberger 10). In fact, Taylor was Fox Studios’ last way to get over financial difficulties, and they were eventually, after a long time of negotiating, willing to invest the money into the actress, in order to have an option for financial recovery (Kashner and Schoenberger 10). When the movie was finally underway, the filming in Rome was delayed and had to be stopped several times due to the ongoing Olympic Games, adverse weather and Taylor’s bronchitis, which developed into pneumonia (Kashner and Schoenberger 12).

It has been argued that the making of the film and the air of scandal surrounding it has to be considered half the movie’s success (Miles 189). While filming on the set, Liz Taylor first met her co-star Richard Burton, who had been cast in the role of Mark Antony, and they both eventually fell in love with each other:

So when they first clapped eyes on each other on the oversized set of Cleopatra, Richard in his too- short tunic and Elizabeth in



her dark Egyptian eye makeup and stunning Irene Sharaff gown, there was a lot of hemming and hawing. Burton, the great seducer tried to ignore her at first, then he edged over to Elizabeth and said fatuously, "Has anybody ever told you that you're a very pretty girl?" (...) She couldn't wait to go back to the dressing room where all the girls were and tell them: here's the great lover, the great wit, the great intellectual of Wales, and he comes out with a line like that." It was actually a brilliant gambit- in a world in which everyone catered to Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton showed he was willing to make fun of her. (Kashner and Schoenberger 19)

Ever since the bathtub scene in which Cleopatra negotiates teasingly (and completely naked) with a servant of Marc Antony, Burton had fallen for the mermaid-like Taylor and their on-screen kisses lasted longer than they should have (Kashner and Schoenberger 22). The whole situation would not have been scandalous if the two of them had not been married to different partners at that time. In true Hollywood fashion, the press loved a scandal, and Taylor and her co-star were omnipresent in tabloids and magazines (Hughes-Hallet ch. 11). Their affair might have been morally questionable, but still it was a major factor that influenced the success of the film by raising the public interest in their rela-

tionship, especially as Richard Burton became one of Liz Taylor's numerous husbands – twice (Kashner and Schoenberger 22).

## 5 Her infinite variety: masquerade and identity

The Queen of Egypt has left her marks in various industrial fields of the twentieth century. Osmond states that her “look”, displaying excessive opulence with stereotypical ancient Egyptian features, has greatly influenced fashion, masquerade and catwalk shows (56).

These features are linked with female power and the power of seduction ensuing from the mysterious and exotic concept of the “Other” (Osmond 56). From a historical perspective, the image that modern society associates with Cleopatra is not accurate; however, it is still permanently persistent in twentieth century popular culture: the black bob-cut, smoky eyes with a thick eyeliner, pompous golden jewelry, and voluptuous dresses (Osmond 56).

The specific visual concept society has come to consider authentic, as well as the beginning hype around the persona can be credited to numerous cinematographic depictions of the queen of Egypt, with Theda Bara’s, Claudette Colbert’s and Elizabeth Taylor’s performances among the most striking (Hughes-

Hallet ch. 11). Their portrayals of the Queen of the Nile caused on the one hand an immense “Cleopatra-fever”, on the other hand various scandals and discussion of their personal lives (Miles 181-182). With respect to historical accuracy, Osmond adds that the Queen’s “contemporary appearance owes more to the fashionable contemporary aesthetic of each period” (56). Thus, these depictions give an insight not only into the contemporary values of aesthetics, but mirrors also the contemporary gender norms and femininities (Osmond 56).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Paul Poiret, a French couture designer, was the first one to include Cleopatra-themed designs in his fashion shows (Osmond 56). His main inspiration were clearly two oriental-themed ballet productions, *Cleopatrè* and *Scheherazade*: it subsequently was his work that influenced Theda Bara’s styling in 1917s silent movie in which she wears a typical “harem-girl’s” outfit mixed with a belly dancer’s costume (Osmond 56). To remind again of the historical inaccuracy, Anne Hollander declares:

[...] this vaguely belly-dancerish costume resembles nothing specific in history, is an all-purpose Hollywood device, used over and

over, decade after decade, to signal unscrupulous sex in a barbaric setting. It will do for Ancient Egypt, Babylon, Greece or Rome [...]. (68)

In her consideration, Hollander criticizes not only the fact that the actresses' wardrobes do not apply to the original Cleopatra but also the fact that the dresses' design of "the basic exotic vamp suit" has barely changed over the course of a century (Hollander 68). The style of Cleopatra and the aesthetic of what was broadly understood as "the orient" has since taken hold of the fashion industry: Osmond names two of today's fashion moguls, John Galliano and Alexander McQueen (57), who have included Egyptian themed couture:

More recently, fashion designers John Galliano and Alexander McQueen are amongst those who have celebrated and subverted the visual tropes of Ancient Egypt and the iconic figure of Cleopatra within the contemporary theatrical space of the catwalk. (Osmond 57)

Within the fields of fashion, visual and performing arts, the way in which the body is dressed contributes to the definition of the concepts of racial and gendered identity (Osmond 58), which gains great significance when discussing the costumes worn by actresses depicting an iconic female character like Cleopatra

and their cultural influence. Representations of the female body in cinematographic productions as well as fashion have become a major field of interest in cultural theory and feminist analysis – in the late twentieth century the aim was to “deconstruct the ideological aspects of representation of the feminine in cinema” (Osmond 58).

Another field of investigation is the *clothed body* especially with regard to meaning-making, creating identity and the normalization of cultural assumptions about race, gender and the “Other” (Osmond 58). This interest in costume, however, is not confined solely to gender studies, as historians and anthropologists have been also analyzing performance costumes from a historical perspective (Osmond 58).

From the late twentieth century onwards the importance of performance costume relating to contemporary notions of identity as part of creating a visual frame for performing arts has gained significance, as “the costumed body on stage can [...] be regarded as a point of reference for shifting notions of feminine identity” (Osmond 58).

On the one hand, *masquerade* is a feminist concept which allows disguise and construction of, but which also critiques feminine identity, on the other hand it is also articulated as a marker to spell out the boundaries between performer, character and audience (Osmond 58). In other words, masquerade “explores and transgresses accepted notions of femininity” (Osmond 58).

The leading approach about the function of masquerade has been proposed by Joan Riviere in her work “Womanliness as masquerade” (1968), in which she labels masquerade as a defensive strategy: women that aspire to masculinity put on a temporary mask of femininity in order to protect and defend themselves from male vengeance (303). Efrat Tseelon expands the functions of masquerade by attributing the given concept analytical and critical features:

[...] both for identity construction, and for critical deconstruction. As an analytical category, it is a ‘technology of identity’ that deals with literal and metaphoric covering for ends as varied as concealing, revealing, highlighting, protesting, protecting, creating a space from where one can play out desires, fears, conventions and social practices. (Tseelon 108)

Masquerade is not only a tool but also a highly perilous weapon of the *femme fatale*: it combines an aggressive, assertive sexuality with the awareness of being armed (Osmond 59). Being the ultimate embodiment of a *femme fatale*, Cleopatra's performance is both innovative and daring. Strictly speaking, Cleopatra turns all common notions upside down, by using her looks to "destabilize notions of gender by transgressing boundaries and challenging traditional power relations" (Osmond 59). The effect of her on-screen appearances thus leads to a shift within the perception of various notions such as "femininity, sexuality, normative gender roles and the implications of female political power" (Osmond 59). She maintains this political power by playing games of illusion at the border of normative gender norms: she plays and maintains a spectacle of desire (Osmond 59). This is also an example for what Riviere has remarked about the mask of female seduction as a disguise for her repressed masculine tendencies (9).

Masquerade can thus be considered womanliness and vice versa, with the two concepts constantly interacting with each other. Whether or not masquerade



implies that the identity of the person wearing the mask is lost or not, is an ongoing discussion – even Riviere does not propose a definite answer to this question, but concedes that a mask can still be taken off, which implies that the individual behind it has not, in fact, disappeared entirely (9).

## 6 Stardom

In order to understand in how far Theda Bara, Claudette Colbert and Liz Taylor broke the concepts of traditional gender roles, it is important to have a look at their signification, meaning not the real –life women, but the stars they are constructed as in society. The questions central to the issue of signification, as Richard Dyer puts it, are: “How do stars signify; [...] how do star images function within film texts themselves in relation to other aspects of the text, including those such as characterization and performance which directly coincide with the stars’s presence” (Dyer 2).

### 6.1 Stars – a phenomenon of production

Stars or celebrities are “media texts and as such are products of Hollywood (or elsewhere)” (Dyer 10). In other words, stars are manufactures of the huge Hollywood plant. Many people would assume that stars are famous for their talent or their outstanding appearances in media texts, when in fact Dyer states that

the exact opposite is the case: stars are simply known for their knowingness and lack of a strong character, in order to be definable and publicizable, a “nationally advertised trademark” (12).

Dyer’s approach further claims that stars manipulate their audience and they do so by help of fashion and nudity, the “ultimate manipulators” (14). As proposed above, a star him-/herself is a meaningless product, yet serves various functions, such as the establishment and stabilization of a certain kind of beauty, or “norms of attractiveness (Dyer 14). All three Cleopatras described in this thesis did or do stabilize certain norms of attractiveness. Even though the movies were produced in different decades, the costumes worn by the actresses have the same belly-dancerish traits, yet they adhere to the values of beauty within their respective time periods (Ford and Mitchell 79).

Considering the case of Theda Bara, it has been said that “the film focused on its star (in extravagant dress and undress) and featured many spectacular scenes displaying magnificent costumes” (Hatchuel and Vienne-Guerinne 243).

In the remaining sequence, Theda Bara can be seen in an amazingly glamor-

ous dress that barely covers her breasts. The costume designer was George James Hopkins, who “combined Egyptian elements with the then fashionable hairstyle, silhouette and popular burlesque costumes of the day, to create a Queen of the Nile whom the audience of 1917 would find believable – and irresistible” (Nadoolman 112). Osmond describes how “her costumes embody the generic ‘harem girl’ look of full trousers softly draped into the ankle and a revealing bodice draped with jewels and pearls; a costume which had hardly changed for over one hundred years” (56).

Theda Bara’s Cleopatra playfully lolls herself with an overtly mischievous and confident grin on her face, and seduces the camera as well as the audience by pulling the veil of her dress teasingly. Bara wears a very dark makeup around her eyes and dark lipstick. This might have two reasons: In black and white movies, light makeup can hardly be seen. Furthermore, the dark makeup again highlights the femme fatale and the infamous and mythical appearance of the 1910s sex symbol (Hughes-Hallet ch. 11).

Nowadays it is hard to imagine that a performance such as Bara's would be perceived as particularly scandalous, but in the first half of the twentieth century, this was considered offensive nudity, and several scenes had to be cut from the original film: Golden claims that "all scenes of suggestive advances of Cleopatra on Caesar, and all close-ups of exposed limbs were ordered cut" (59).

Fifty years later, Elizabeth Taylor's Cleopatra can be considered a trendsetter of the 60s. *Lizpatra*, as the merged construct of the star actress and her character was referred to, initiated a Cleopatra-themed hype: women wanted to copy Taylor's look (makeup, hairdos, dresses) from the movie (Miles 189). Also in the 1960s women were taught that seduction was a matter of consumption, and that a woman's looks were (still) who she was. As Hatchuel and Vienne-Guerinne sum up, "associated with material possession(...) the Egyptian queen in these films is once more articulated in exotic, imperialistic and Oriental terms" (251). Hatchuel and Vienne-Guerinne furthermore describe how this extends to the aspect of Cleopatra's seduction of her Roman lovers:

“(…) Cleopatra’s body becomes the dark, Oriental land that the Romans want to invade and subdue. The Cleopatra icon thus gives the opportunity to display spectacles of seduction and conquest of the same time” (251).

Nadoolman writes that Irene Sharaff, the costume designer, had to face several issues when designing the costumes:

The actress had a voluptuous bosom, a tiny waist and round hips that Sharaff accentuated with revealing pleated silk jersey gowns and brilliantly adapted organza kaftans embroidered with Egyptian- style flourishes. The fashionable silhouette of the early 1960s was narrow and sculptural, as seen in the classic silk jersey gowns by Paris couturier Alix Grés. Irene Sharaff translated this look into costumes that referenced Ancient Egyptian art while at the same time retaining the hourglass shape preferred by Miss Taylor. (Nadoolman 112)

Sharaff’s costumes and their trendsetting popularity are an example of a successful mix of traditional and modern elements. Elizabeth Taylor wears numerous different dresses and costumes throughout the movie, accompanied by luxurious jewelry and elaborate makeup, perfecting Sharaff’s effort in staging Elizabeth Taylor as the mythical beauty of Cleopatra. According to Royster, “[a]s the film’s chief marketing focus, Elizabeth Taylor changes what it means to play

Cleopatra for all of those who follow” (93), and Bosley Crowther (1963) lauded the film, and especially Taylor’s performance, stating:

Elizabeth Taylor’s Cleopatra is a woman of force and dignity, fired by a fierce ambition to conquer and rule the world – at least, the world of the Mediterranean Basin – through the union of Egypt and Rome. In her is impressively compacted the arrogance and pride of an ancient queen. (qtd. in Cashmore 150)

## **6.2 Star vs character**

Stars represent people by the roles they play and thus give a certain, fixed image of how people are – still they are real people themselves. It is clear that, for example, Liz Taylor is not Queen Cleopatra herself, but embodies her in the movie. However it is tempting for an audience to see parallels in her appearance as Cleopatra and in her personal life, considering the fact that she and her co-star started an affair while filming, and that while both of them were still married to other people: According to Kashner and Schoenberger, their love affair and its parallels to the story of the movie they were acting in contributed considerably to making Cleopatra “the Most Talked About Movie ever made” (11-

12). The love triangle between Cleopatra, Marc Antony and Cesar, which lent Cleopatra notoriety in her time, could be seen as a mirror of Taylor's private life.

Upon watching the movie, several similarities between Taylor and the role she plays spring to mind. *Lizpatra*, as already mentioned above, is the expression that was used in *Esquire* in order to describe the melting of the two characters (Miles 185). Elizabeth Taylor was famous for her elegant and glamorous lifestyle, and Cleopatra wallows in luxury throughout the film, which is one similarity that can be noticed (Kashner and Schoenberger 193). The Egyptian queen is portrayed as intelligent and well educated, just like the actual historical figure, and after her first appearance in the movie, Caesar is informed by his councilors that "if she were a man, she would be considered an intellectual".

Cleopatra also knows how to tease men in order to have all her wishes fulfilled, and entices and manipulates a number of male characters throughout the movie. Likewise, Elizabeth Taylor was married several times to wealthy, often influential men: She had learned a lot from them which she made use of during the negotiations for the film (Kashner and Schoenberger 10-11).



Her exceptional beauty was certainly not a disadvantage, either, when it came to applying for roles, or in her private life. As already described earlier in the thesis, Taylor gave her co-star Richard Burton the cold shoulder in the beginning of the film production, which is also a shared commonality with her role: Cleopatra teases and keeps both Caesar and Antony at distance, initially.

Stardom, as witnessed in the case of Elizabeth Taylor and Theda Bara, is the image of the celebrity lifestyle, as Dyer describes:

It combines the spectacular with the ordinary, and is seen as an articulation of basic American/Western values, there is no conflict here between the general lifestyle and the particularities of the star. In certain cases, however, the relationship between the two may be ambivalent or problematic. (Dyer 35)

Furthermore, stardom can be considered an adaption of the American Dream based on consumption, success and ordinariness (Dyer 35). Consumption in this case means the way stars live their wealthy lives, their “fabulousness” (Dyer 35). Features of celebrities’ wealthy lifestyles are large houses, limousines, parties and high fashion (Dyer 38). The focus of these features here lie on the ex-

clusiveness and the expensiveness and “promotes the notion of woman as spectacle” (Dyer 38).

Stars are symbols of success – what they earn opens a new a new world of wealthy living (Dyer 42). The third and last concept, which has already been mentioned before, is the concept of ordinariness: it contains the ambiguous question whether stars are people like everyone else, or whether they are larger than life driven by success and consumption (Dyer 43). What is clear is that stars like Elizabeth Taylor are likely to be the “most” of something: “the most expensive, the most beautiful, and the most married and divorced, being in the world” (Dyer 42).

### **6.3 Stars as types**

Dyer presents types or certain classifications for both stars and society in general. These types include “The Good Joe”, “The Tough Guy”, “the Pin Up”, “The Rebel” and the more important type for this thesis “The Independent Woman”

(54). All three Cleopatra impersonators considered in this thesis could be considered as independent women, since all of the following statements hold true for them:

A woman who, while exceedingly “feminine” and flirtatious, is too ambitious and intelligent for the docile role society has decreed she play... She remains within traditional society, but having no worthwhile project for her creative energies, turns them onto the only available material – the people around her – with demonic results. (Dyer 54)

Reconsidering the concept of masquerade and that it is used by the woman behind the mask to castrate the opposite, it becomes obvious that the *femme fatale* takes advantage of gender norms of the opposite sex: the character traits of the *femme fatale* include intelligence and strength as well as male characteristics “in order to enjoy male prerogatives” (Dyer 54).

## 6.4 Image, Publicity and Promotion

The different types of stars presented before are useful to get a rough overview, however, classification in general is too superficial for an in-depth analysis and

comparison of the three stars at hand. Dyer also concedes that even tough stars might be ambassadors of the classification units, their image, which is based on the type, is much more complex (60).

Promotion is a key term, which, in this context, refers to texts that were deliberately manufactured for certain celebrities; these texts include potted biographies, fashion pictures, press announcements, and so on (Dyer 60). Promotion is conducive to the image of a star, among other contributors, since an image is a much more complex construct built by multiple factors (Dyer 60). One of the first promotion-constructed images was Theda Bara's (187-190).

Theodosia Goodman, which was Theda Bara's real name, became a "vampire" and got the nickname *The Vamp* after playing the role of a man-eating vampire in one of her movies (Whalan 44). Miles states that Bara was a "victim" of a marketing strategy (178): her PR agents created a mystical past, an "occult lifestyle" and the image of a "modern vamp or home wrecker who takes pleasure in ruthlessly seducing men, and abandons them, once drained of their fortunes

and their will to live, and she was placed under contract both to play and seemingly be the part” (Miles 178).

The press instantly responded to the invented image of the actress and claimed that “a star was born at an Egyptian oasis in the shadow of the Sphinx and had sucked the venom of serpents as an infant” (Miles 178). Furthermore the media noticed that her stage name was an anagram for Arab Death (Miles 178). But not only the media and her press agents contributed to the hype that surrounded Theda Bara, it was the actress herself that played her role even off- screen during interviews, in public as well as in private:

Her home in Los Angeles (to which she moved in mid-1917) was reportedly furnished in “Early Vampire” ottomans, rugs and beaded curtains, and reeked with musk. In the presence of the press she would stroke a snake and speak of her attachment to a statue of Amun-Ra. She was not to be seen outdoors in daylight. More specifically, in anticipation of the release of *Cleopatra*, Fox suggested that Bara had received a tribute in hieroglyphs from a reincarnated servant of Cleopatra, then posed her in a museum gazing reflectively at “her own” mummified remains [...] (Miles 178)

As can be seen, Theda Bara gained media attention through a created image about her persona. Due to the fact that it was unusual and rare back in the 1910s that a woman was not only performing but also living the life of a *femme fatale*, caused an immediate public response and interest in her (Miles 178). In a time where women were the jewelry of men and their domestic servants, Bara successfully stepped out of this role and became the first sex- symbol of silent movies (Miles 181). Besides her amazingly gifted acting skills, the myth that was created around her was one of the major factors that granted her a huge success (Miles 181).

In addition to promotion, publicity also plays a major role in creating an image. In this case we do not speak of deliberate image-making, but of the information that the press finds out, or that the star reveals (often unintentionally) in an interview (Dyer 61), which makes it the more authentic factor in image creation. This type of information is published in magazines, tabloids etc. Scandals, whether deliberate or not, are also part of publicity and show a strong link to

success: according to Dyer there are only two possibilities what a scandal can do to a career – it can harm it or it can push it to the next level (61).

Elizabeth Taylor is the best example for the latter: she preserved her career until her death by pushing it with healthy scandals, though it must be noted that in her case, the development of her image was not controlled by any studio or management, but entirely outside the control of the movie company responsible for the film:

At the start of 1962 the studio publicity that was fed into magazines like *Look* and *Vogue* attempted to pre-sell interest in the troubled film by winning Taylor and Cleopatra as two legendary glamour girls who both enjoyed a fabulously luxurious lifestyle. But, at the very same time, the Taylor/Cleopatra link was being taken out of the hands of the studio and redirected to signify not glamour and luxury, but wastefulness and adultery. [...] This Cleomania, unlike Theda Bara, operated outside the control of the Hollywood studio. Its apparent escape from the star image Twentieth Century Fox had attempted to promote made it seem more authentic and, therefore, more like a privileged glimpse of the real Lizpatra. (Miles 189)

Dyer comments in this respect that success and publicity are so strongly linked because the audience prefers their celebrities a little maniac (61). Apart from

Taylor, this construction of stardom through eccentricity and scandal could already be seen in the image of Theda Bara, though she was not as lucky as Taylor, and her career eventually found an abrupt end in 1920 (Hughes-Hallet ch. 11).



## 7 Mise en scène

Mise en scène is “the cinematic rhetoric of lightning, color, framing, composition and the placing of actors” (Dyer 117). It is a tool to give insight into the character’s state of mind. In the Cleopatra films, the scene in which the female protagonist is shown for the very first time is crucial and gives first hints on the attitude the actresses depict throughout the movie. To complement the first appearance, the last scene in which the Queen of the Nile is presented is at least as important as the first view the audience gets: it is a sort of message to take home, the last picture that remains in the heads of the viewers. Comparing the first and last scene can furthermore imply in how far the character has developed throughout the movie.

For each movie, these two important scenes regarding the character of Cleopatra will be analyzed by means of mise en scène. Due to the fact that Theda Bara’s film is unfortunately lost and only fragments could be saved, descriptions would have to be restricted to the remaining parts, and the drawing of conclusions related to her character developments in the course of the movie must be

forgone. Therefore, the focus will be on the movies starring Claudette Colbert and Elizabeth Taylor.

## **7.1 Claudette Colbert**

### **First appearance**

The first appearance of Colbert as Cleopatra depicts the abduction of the character. She is bound and covered with fabric, which means her face cannot be seen initially. This serves the purpose of building up tension, since the audience is waiting for her to reveal her face. Cleopatra is on a chariot with the kidnapper and the leader of the chariot. They ride through the desert with a lot of speed and we can see her fighting back. They reach a place where the queen is tied to a pillar. She tries to escape and moves in a very sexual way.



Figure 4: Claudette Colbert's as Cleopatra tied to a pillar (1934)

The captivation itself is a symbol for subjugating a strong personality and has also sexual connotation and tension. This fits to the already discussed overtly sexual performance Claudette Colbert used in this film. Cleopatra appears very confident, strong, and fearless, and even though she struggles to free herself, she seems very calm. The audience is left very curious by having a lot of action and tension involved. Today, her behavior could be considered a bit exaggerat-

ed and diva-like by an audience. However, the protagonist's deprivation of freedom tears the audience's sympathy towards her side, even though the portrayal seems extremely theatrical and unrealistic.

Not only Cleopatra herself, but also a man of her entourage is veiled, which symbolizes their affiliation. He is ordered to free her. There is a lot of aestheticism involved through her clothing, her (probably red) lipstick, thick black eyeliner and Cleopatra-typical haircut with a clean-cut fringe. The scene has a strong undertone of lust, sensuality and sadomasochism. Instead of being worried, Cleopatra sulks and behaves a bit childish, since her only problem seems to be her not having had breakfast yet.

## **Props**

The props in this scene consist of long knives and pompous dresses, the chariots, horses, the statue of a pharaoh, columns, against the backdrop of the desert. The kidnappers all wear headgear, whereas Cleopatra does not. The music in the background is orchestral and causes drama, tension and interest.

## Cuts

The scene starts with a transition from her chamber, where the maids are surprised and devastated that the queen is missing, to the scene where we first see spinning wheels of the chariots, which we can see through a long shot from the side. The camera zooms out to a long shot revealing the chariots and the people riding on them as a whole. Then, the chariots and the characters move out of the screen and an extreme long shot depicts the whole group riding down a hill in the desert.

It continues with a long shot from side to front where we can see the still veiled Cleopatra being bound to a pillar. Then the camera makes a medium shot from the side and moves to the front – this is the part when Cleopatra's face is revealed. The kidnapper unveils her with a long knife. Cleopatra is always in a central position within the shots, whereas all her opponents are shown from the side.

What follows is a frontal close up of the queen and the big pharaoh statue can be seen in her background. This can be read as a symbol for her power, even

though she is tied up. While she is arguing with her opponent, the camera switches between medium shots and long shots. Another close up of her follows as her opponents leave the occasion and she is freed by her servant. Again, the statue is visible in the background. The scene ends with another transition to Caesar, who was a major topic within the conversation with her opponent. Even though Caesar is not physically present throughout the scene, he is still there by being talked about. The transition to him rounds the scene.

### **Last appearance**

Colbert's very last scene as Cleopatra in the movie shows her suicide: Colbert reaches for a basket in which a serpent is caged. She then takes out the animal and holds it against her chest. Her servants, who have witnessed everything, start to cry when Cleopatra speaks her last few words. When they have left her alone, the gate is being broken open by Octavian and his raging entourage. Eventually, the Romans find Cleopatra's lifeless body still sitting on the throne.

## Props

The props in the last shot are minimalistic except for Cleopatra's magnificent throne. The queen herself is dressed in metallic (probably golden) headgear which covers her hair completely. She also wears a matching, not less magnificent dress.



Figure 5: Colbert as Cleopatra in her final scene (1934)

## Cuts

The camera movement is limited to medium shots and longshots only. The only switch that is prominent happens when the gate is broken open by Octavian and his men.

## 7.2 Liz Taylor

In her first scene, the filmmakers wrapped Liz Taylor's Cleopatra in a carpet. This scene also does not occur until twenty minutes into the movie, which also causes the audience's interest and tension in her character to increase. A servant carries her, still draped in the carpet, into a room where Caesar is already awaiting her. He pulls on the free side of the carpet and rolls her out of it, leaving her lying on the ground seductively staring at him. Caesar helps her up and their conversation begins. She wears a long red dress that accentuates her body, and lends the scene an aura of seduction, and highlights her *femme fatale* entity.



Her jewelry consists of big golden bracelets covering her ankles and she wears a golden knife on the left side of her hip. She seductively moves towards a table where she fills her golden goblet and leans towards Caesar while talking to him, her eyes never leaving his. Both are standing, and Caesar eats fruit, probably apples, when Cleopatra approaches a desk with a map on it.

She studies the map and when she looks up she again plays with her eyes and thus with Caesar. When Caesar sits down, she does the same still holding the golden cup in her hands from which she erotically drinks now and then. The audience can feel an atmosphere fraught with tension building up between them. As Caesar heads towards the gate, Cleopatra follows him instantly and they share another moment talking. Caesar opens the door and watches the Egyptian queen walk out. There are Roman servants waiting for her, who eventually accompany her as she leaves the scene.

### **Props**

The room is kept in dark colors and reveals the statue of a pharaoh in front of a wall covered in hieroglyphs. The furniture is luxurious, consisting of wooden

chairs and tables as well small torches burning in the background. We can also see a big bed with white sheets behind the seated Cleopatra. In front of Caesar there is a bowl of apples. Palms and big feathers are also part of the set decoration.

### **Camera**

The camera hardly ever leaves the long shot and constantly follows the protagonist's movements. When Cleopatra lies on the floor after being unveiled we can see her in a high-angle shot, which means that the camera is looking down on the actress. Furthermore, Cleopatra is centered in most of the shots, whereas Caesar is hardly ever the actual focus of the camera. When the queen walks behind the desk with the map on the top, the camera switched to medium shots depicting the respective speaker as the conversation goes on.

### **The last appearance**

In contrast to Colbert's last scene, Taylor speaks her farewell to her servants before she is bitten by the serpent. Both of her servants are devastated and beg her to overthink her plan, even though they hand her the basket. Cleopatra

places herself on a stone altar and puts her hand into the basket to take out the snake. The bite cannot be seen, but the audience knows from Cleopatra's facial expression when the poison enters her veins. While waiting for her own death, she begs the deceased Antony to wait for her.

As Octavian breaks the door open, he finds Cleopatra already dead on the stone altar. The servants, in the meantime, have changed Cleopatra's sophisticated outfit to the magnificent, wing shaped gown and head jewelry that she already wore in the scene where she first enters Rome.



Figure 6: Liz Taylor as Cleopatra opening the snake basket (1963)

## **Props**

This scene depicts much more detail than Colbert's last scene: In the background there are golden lanterns aside of the stone altar. On the stone wall in the background there are hieroglyphs.

## **Camera**

The camera follows her movements in a medium shot and changes into a close up as soon as the Queen puts her hand in the basket. Like in Colbert's version, the only longshot is when Octavian breaks in and finds her dead body lying on the altar.

## **7.3 Developments of Cleopatra?**

As a conclusion in how far Cleopatra's character has changed throughout the movie, it can be stated that Taylor's and Colbert's depictions are extremely similar: In the beginning of the films, both Cleopatras are tough, witty and slightly stubborn. In the end, however they are proud rulers of their country, longing for

death rather than being afraid of it. In both movies, their death is depicted as a victory over their enemies, rather than a defeat, and their elaborate outfits in their very last scenes hint at the notion that Cleopatra's beauty even outlives death.

## 8 Conclusion

The research question was if and in how far the cinematographic depictions of Cleopatra have influenced traditional gender norms. Having discussed the phenomenon of stardom, the gender roles in the first half of the twentieth century and the different depictions of the Queen of the Nile, I will now draw my conclusions from what was depicted earlier in this thesis.

The analysis of gender norms in the Cleopatra movies has shown that they have hardly anything in common with the gender norms of the decades in which they were published. This has several reasons:

Firstly, stars portray a constructed version of their image. Due to their being constructed, the protagonist's roles, behavior and outward appearance cannot be compared to real, middle class women. Stars are exaggerated, slightly crazy images surrounded by promoted personalities. Real women, however, were by no means *femmes fatales*, because society would not accept them being, man-eating, semi-nude vamps. Instead they were mothers and/or workers that be-

haved in the way society wanted them to: taking care of their husbands and children, doing the domestic work and some of them were even working. Still, in the field of fashion, the Cleopatras had some influence, as they were trendsetters. Their influence was obviously of attenuated character.

Secondly, Theda Bara, Claudette Colbert and Elizabeth Taylor were always one or even more steps ahead of their times. They were always more of something: more emancipated and more accepted as normal females at the time. The reason for this was their star status: it was socially accepted that a Grande Dame had several men, divorces and wore less. Not only was it accepted but also in many cases living a scandalous private life (deliberated or not) guaranteed them a long-lasting career. Thus it can be stated that the ordinariness of the divas discussed in this thesis is not valid. They are exceptional in their appearance, their roles and their lifestyles as a whole.

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### 9.3 Pictures

Figure 1. Theda Bara in Cleopatra (1917) Source: *British Film Institute*

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Figure 2. Claudette Colbert in Cleopatra (1934) Source: *The Red List: Claudette*

*Colbert* <[http://theredlist.com/media/database/muses/icon/cinematic\\_women/1930/claurette-colbert/008-claurette-colbert-theredlist.jpg](http://theredlist.com/media/database/muses/icon/cinematic_women/1930/claurette-colbert/008-claurette-colbert-theredlist.jpg)>

Figure 3 Liz Taylor in Cleopatra (1963). Source: *The Red List: Elizabeth Taylor*

<<http://theredlist.com/wiki-2-24-525-529-view-the-one-profile-elizabeth-taylor.html>>

Figure 4: Claudette Colbert's as Cleopatra tied to a pillar (1934). Still from: *Cleopatra*. Dir. Cecil B. DeMille. Perf. Claudette Colbert, Warren William, Henry Wilcoxon. Paramount Pictures, 1934.

Figure 5: Colbert as Cleopatra in her final scene (1934). Still from: *Cleopatra*. Dir. Cecil B. DeMille. Perf. Claudette Colbert, Warren William, Henry Wilcoxon. Paramount Pictures, 1934.

Figure 6: Liz Taylor as Cleopatra opening the snake basket (1963). Still from: *Cleopatra*. Dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz. Perf. Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, Rex Harrison. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1963.

# 10 Appendix

## Abstract

Gender norms are prescribed roles men as well as women have to fulfill within society: what makes a woman, what makes a man and how are they supposed to behave? These prescriptions have been part of human culture for thousands of years, yet they are an unstable, dynamic phenomenon: in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, gender norms experienced significant change due to external, historical influences.

The World Wars, the Suffragettes movement and economic crisis are major factors involved in gender construction. In order to “measure” the change that has happened in the 1910s, 1930s and 1960s, three cinematographic adaptations of *Cleopatra* were taken into account, the main question being: has the portrayal of the Queen of the Nile influenced or changed traditional gender norms?

The historical approach of Queen Cleopatra and her representation in Hollywood productions were first focused on as theoretical framework. In combination with the aforementioned decades' gender norms, conclusions are allowed to be drawn:

Movies in general can work as a mirror or a "snapshot" of society within a certain context. Hence these films and their female protagonists were analyzed. As a result, the movies had hardly any influence or overruled gender norms, because their stars were exceptional, "non- normal" human beings. Their non-ordinariness was accepted, since stars do not play in the same league as average people when it comes to gender norms. This privileged position accounts for celebrities only and does not by no means affect their esteem.

## **Zusammenfassung auf Deutsch**

Die Forschungsfrage dieser Diplomarbeit beschäftigt sich mit den Gender Normen der 1910er, 30er und 60er Jahre und ob und inwiefern diese durch die verschiedenen Darstellungen in den Kleopatra Filmen beeinflusst wurden.

Nachdem die Aspekte des Berühmtseins, die Gender- Normen der ersten Hälfte des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts und sowie die verschiedenen Darstellungen der Königin des Nils besprochen wurden, können nun Rückschlüsse darüber gezogen werden.

Die Analyse der Gender- Normen der Kleopatra Filme hat gezeigt, dass sie mit den Gender Normen der damaligen Jahrzehnte kaum etwas gemein haben.

Dies hat verschiedene Gründe:

Berühmtheiten stellen eine konstruierte Version, auch Image genannt, dar. Aufgrund dieses absichtlich generierten Bildes, können weder das Verhalten, die Geschlechterrolle noch das äußere Erscheinungsbild mit jenen von realen Frauen aus der Mittelschicht verglichen werden. Stars generieren ein überzo-

genes, teilweise auch leicht verrücktes Bild umgeben von ihren konstruierten Persönlichkeiten. Reale Frauen waren jedoch keineswegs „femmes fatales“, da die Gesellschaft sie nicht als männerfressende, halbnackte Vamps akzeptiert hätte. Mit anderen Worten: dieses Verhalten schickte sich nicht für normale Frauen. Sie waren hingegen Mütter und/ oder Arbeiterinnen, die sich an die Gepflogenheiten der damaligen Zeit sowie der Gesellschaft fügten: sie waren zuständig für die Kindererziehung, den Haushalt, die Verpflegung ihrer Ehemänner und manche von ihnen gingen auch einem Beruf nach. Auch wenn man die Gender- Normen der Filme mit denen im realen Leben nicht vergleichen kann, so haben die Hauptdarstellerinnen mit der Verkörperung ihrer Rolle als Kleopatra doch Spuren hinterlassen und zwar im Bereich der Mode. Sie waren Vorbilder und Trendsetter für viele was Styling und Outfit betrifft. Bara, Colbert und Taylor waren zu ihren Zeiten der Inbegriff von Schönheit- Taylor ist es sogar heute noch. Es ist wichtig anzumerken, dass deren Einfluss auf Mittelschicht Frauen jedoch nur auf eine abgeschwächte Version beschränkt.



Ein weiterer Grund warum man die Gender- Normen beider Parteien nicht vergleichen kann ist der, dass die drei in dieser Arbeit besprochenen Schauspielerinnen ihrer Zeit nicht nur einen, sondern vielmehr einige Schritte voraus waren. Sie waren so zu sagen der „Komparativ“ in jeglicher Hinsicht: emanzipierter und akzeptierter als normale Frauen. Der Grund dafür liegt an ihrem Status: gesellschaftlich gesehen, war es einer Gran Dame „erlaubt“ viele Partnerschaften zu haben, viele Scheidungen hinter sich zu haben und weniger Kleidung zu tragen als es eigentlich üblich gewesen wäre. Dies war auf der einen Seite wie gesagt gesellschaftlich akzeptiert auf der anderen war es durchaus förderlich ein skandalöses Image (ob konstruiert oder nicht) zu pflegen um eine langlebige Karriere zu garantieren. Deshalb ist hier anzufügen, dass die „Gewöhnlichkeit“, in jenem Falle nicht gegeben ist. Diese Stars sind außerordentlich im Hinblick auf äußeres Erscheinungsbild, Rolle in der Gesellschaft und Lebensstil.