

Portrayal of Cleopatra in Roman literature: A seductress or a political strategist?

Perera, C.T.S. Sathsara
Department of Western Classical Culture, University of Kelaniya
sathsi.perera@gmail.com

Cleopatra VII of Egypt is identified as one of the most popular queens and women from antiquity. Nevertheless, it is questionable how history has portrayed this dignified woman from 1st century BCE. Only surviving literary evidence on Cleopatra is from the Roman Literature. When reading Roman descriptions on Cleopatra, it is notable that the authors have depicted her character based on their personal perspectives. This has directly affected interpretation on Cleopatra in later society. Several scholars have discussed the political role of Cleopatra but not necessarily evaluated the political necessities of her partners in order to defend her from the accusation as 'a seductress'. The research reads surviving Roman literary evidence on Cleopatra and her contacts with the Roman leaders; Julius Caesar, Mark Anthony, and Augustus Caesar. The relationships of Cleopatra will be evaluated to examine the necessities of each party. Further, other surviving archaeological evidence found both in Rome and Egypt will be incorporated. As evident in history, during her reign, Cleopatra was in a critical situation. Thus, as any authority, Cleopatra tried to retain her position and the stability of Egypt with aid of Julius Caesar and Anthony. In consequence, the Roman authors who were mostly biased, portrayed Cleopatra in a negative perspective. This caused for the assumption that she is 'a seductress' than a political strategist of the time. The aim of the research is to re-evaluate the political character of Cleopatra in a fresh dimension while examining the effect created by Roman literature on the character portrayal. The intention is to break down the traditional idea on Cleopatra and bring into light the notion that Cleopatra was not a mere seductress but a political strategist who used her female charms to achieve her target. The study will provide the reader a reliable understanding on how ancient Roman authors have depicted Cleopatra. The discussion would be conducted based on selected sections from Roman literature and relevant readings from history and it would be substantiated by archaeological evidence of the era.

Keywords: Cleopatra, Roman Literature, politics, seduction, Roman politician