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## **TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE IMAGE OF CLEOPATRA VII, QUEEN OF EGYPT. BETWEEN HISTORICAL NARRATIVE AND POPULAR CULTURE\***

Cleopatra Philopator, daughter of Ptolemy Auletes, ruled the kingdom on the Nile in the 1st century BC. Now, over two millennia later, she speaks to us from cinema and television screens, played by comely actresses. Libraries provide not only editions of antique sources, but also plays by William

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\* Authorial synopsis of the doctoral dissertation, written at the Department of Culture and Tradition of Antiquity, Institute of European Culture in Gniezno, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. The dissertation was supervised by Professor Leszek Mrozewicz (auxiliary supervisor: Dr. Magdalena Kamińska, Institute of Cultural Studies, AMU). The defence took place on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017, before the Scientific Council of the Institute of Cultural Studies, AMU in Poznań.

Shakespeare<sup>1</sup>, Bernard Shaw<sup>2</sup> or Stacy Schiff<sup>3</sup>. A few clicks of the mouse will lead us to recipes for the queen's bath, tutorials showing how to make modern-day versions of her make-up or attire. What is more, one can become the queen choosing her character in an online game. Her likeness and name is used to advertise cosmetics, hotels and children's toys. Anyone can book a themed holiday called „Mission Cleopatra”, buy a Cleopatra salad at a restaurant, or a Cleopatra toy doll, and listen to songs devoted to her person and story. The list of examples one could quote here is a long one, but the conclusion that may be drawn is that since Cleopatra's presence is so widespread nowadays, further research concerning her figure is superfluous. However, it should be remembered that the Lagid queen is rather a marginal subject addressed by historians of antiquity, being treated as a secondary protagonist discussed in a few paragraphs relating to Roman civil wars of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. Hence most publications available on the market are in fact popular scientific biographies which often tend to combine historical facts with literary fiction. Only the recent years saw the publication of monographs attempting a thoroughly scientific reconstruction of the ruler's biography. The most important ones include the works by Michel Chauveau<sup>4</sup>, Sally-Ann Ashton<sup>5</sup>, Adam Łukaszewicz<sup>6</sup>, Heinz Heinen<sup>7</sup> and Duane W. Roller<sup>8</sup>. The cultural aspect has been clearly neglected, and a study analysing the image of the Lagid queen from antiquity to modern times from the standpoint of history and cultural studies is lacking as well. And yet, Cleopatra is one of the few examples of a historical figure which has been continuously represented in art over the successive periods. Therefore my doctoral dissertation was devoted to an issue which thus far had not been addressed. The aim of that work, entitled „Transformations of the image of Cleopatra VII, queen of Egypt. Between historical narrative and popular culture” was to verify the hypothesis stating that the contemporary image of the queen emerged from

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<sup>1</sup> Antony and Cleopatra was written around 1606-1607.

<sup>2</sup> Caesar and Cleopatra, a 1901 play.

<sup>3</sup> S. Schiff, *Cleopatra: A Life*, New York 2010; Polish edition: S. Schiff, *Kleopatra. Biografia*, transl. by H. Jankowska, Warszawa 2012.

<sup>4</sup> M. Chauveau, *L'Égypte au temps de Cléopâtre*, Paris 1997; English edition: idem, *Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra*, London 2000; M. Chauveau, *Cléopâtre, au-delà du mythe*, Paris 1998; English edition: idem, *Cleopatra. Beyond the Myth*, London 2002.

<sup>5</sup> P.A. Ashton, *Cleopatra and Egypt. One side of a sensational story*, Malden 2008.

<sup>6</sup> A. Łukaszewicz, *Kleopatra. Ostatnia królowa starożytnego Egiptu*, Warszawa 2005.

<sup>7</sup> H. Heinen, *Kleopatra-Studien: Gesammelte Schriften zur ausgehenden Ptolemäerzeit*, Konstanz 2009.

<sup>8</sup> D.W. Roller, *Cleopatra. A Biography*, Oxford 2010.

an amalgam of its historical vision – or at least what professional historians saw as such – and the image propagated by creators of popular culture, who have exploited (and continue to do so) the tradition of cultural perception of Cleopatra. The interdisciplinary research perspective, combining a cultural studies background with the competences of a historian enabled me to describe the process in which a historical figure transformed into an icon of popular culture. The process lasted for over 2,000 years, leading to a singular coalescence of historical and post-antique layers in the myth of the Ptolemaic ruler, which yielded an entity I chose to call „Egyptian (pop)queen”, a hybrid of the historical figure and the pop culture icon.

Showing the process which transformed the image of the 1<sup>st</sup>-century BC Egyptian monarch into one of the icons of contemporary culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, may offer an incentive for further research, including studies of her image in selected periods or disciplines of art. I am aware that each of the chapters in the dissertation could become a self-standing monograph, as every period forged its own vision of the Egyptian queen, each of which requires an exhaustive analysis.

In order to accomplish the primary research objective, I began with the analysis of the largest possible number of the most quintessential representations of Cleopatra, from the antique effigies created during her life, to popcultural imagery produced in 2016. Relying on Gerald Prince's definition, according to which narrativity is a collection of characteristic, formal and contextual features which distinguish the narrative from something which is not one (i.e. non-narrative)<sup>9</sup>, it may be assumed that the contemporary narrative built around Cleopatra resembles a picture consisting of historical frames and canvas filled with multiple layers of popcultural notions of the ruler. Given the diverse definitions of popular culture, the dissertation employs those suggested by John Fiske and Marek Krajewski<sup>10</sup>.

In order to show the image of the queen as a historical figure, I examined all surviving and identified material effigies of Cleopatra, i.e. fragments of sculptures and reliefs, coins, as well as excerpts in antique literary texts devoted to her, adopting the year 476 as a cut-off point. As regards the time-frame from post-antique times to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the analyses relied on works of art and literature, including paintings, sculptures as well as theatre plays and pieces of music, opera and ballet. In the first place,

<sup>9</sup> G. Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology* (Revised Edition), Lincoln 2003, p. 65.

<sup>10</sup> J. Fiske, *Zrozumieć kulturę popularną*, transl. by K. Sawicka, Kraków 2010; M. Krajewski, *Kultury kultury popularnej*, Poznań 2005.

I examined those which were strictly associated with the figure of the queen and have survived until the present day. With respect to performative arts, such as theatre, opera and ballet, I attempted to provide as much information as possible relating to the probable course of the performance at the time of its creation or first stagings. The material spanning the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century comprised selected examples of cinematographic works, television productions, online resources and well as a number of commercial products and services. The criterion which governed the selection was a connection with the figure or even the name of the ruler; in the latter case, features suggesting „Egyptian-ness” of the product were taken into account, as they enabled identification with Cleopatra VII. The above standard of availability was adopted in view of the tremendous amount of her contemporary representations. Cleopatra inspired countless commercial products (e.g. a brand of cigarettes), as well as isolated actions, such as an amateur video showing how to fashion a figurine of the queen from modelling clay. Here as well, I attempted to provide a broadest possible spectrum of examples belonging to a set that was representative of its type; simultaneously they had available to the contemporary audience and customers online or in relevant studies.

The great diversity of material required an interdisciplinary method, taking advantage of tools, theories and concepts which in my opinion were the best suited, bearing in mind the objective. Subscribing to the view expressed by Nicholas Mirzoeff, who observed that visual culture<sup>11</sup> increasingly often becomes a place of encounter for critics, historians and practitioners who wish to go beyond the traditional research fields of their disciplines<sup>12</sup>, I adopted the approach of Visual Culture Studies, construed as a singular „living methodology”<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, I also adopted the viewpoint shared by W.T.J. Mitchell, namely that both the visual media such as image and film, as well as literary ones, e.g. text of a novel, harbour a visuality component<sup>14</sup>, therefore it is possible to analyze all types of likenesses of queen Cleopatra: those from antique Roman sources and those found in cinematic produc-

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<sup>11</sup> More on visual culture in e.g. Visual Culture, Ch. Jenks (ed.), London-New York 1995; N. Mirzoeff, What is visual culture?, [in:] idem (ed.), The Visual Culture Reader, London-New York 1998, pp. 3-13; M. Bal, Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture, The Journal of Visual Culture 2, 2003, pp. 5-31; N. Mirzoeff, Podmiot kultury wizualnej, transl. by M. Bryl, Atrium Questiones 17, 2006, pp. 249-272; W.T.J. Mitchell, Pokazując widzenie: Krytyka kultury wizualnej, transl. by M. Bryl, Atrium Questiones 17, 2006, pp. 273-294.

<sup>12</sup> N. Mirzoeff, Podmiot kultury wizualnej, p. 252.

<sup>13</sup> M. Smith, Visual Culture Studies, London 2008, pp. X-XII.

<sup>14</sup> W.T.J. Mitchell, Pokazując widzenie, pp. 273-294.

tions, where she is played by successive generations of actresses, as particular types of images denoting a particular perception of the last Lagid ruler. The principal research tool enabling analysis of the image of Cleopatra over the centuries was the concept of myth as conceived by Roland Barthes<sup>15</sup>. According to the researcher, contemporary myth is a word determined by the manner in which it is uttered<sup>16</sup>, but also a „type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the «nature» of things”<sup>17</sup>. In this three-dimensional paradigm, the historical figure of Cleopatra becomes the first-level sign, which facilitates showing the process in the course of which consecutive signifieds (*signifié*) are appended to the signifiers (*signifiant*), until the contemporary popcultural myth develops. Another key element was J. Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality<sup>18</sup> which situates given text with respect to others, thus making it possible to determine the influences, show dependencies and trace borrowings, a fundamental competence for the reading of popular culture according to J. Fiske and I. Rogoff<sup>19</sup>. This method was intended to perform a kind of „vivisection” of historicizing plays and novels which drew on the figure of Cleopatra, and were later adapted for the screen. Intertextuality, in conjunction with Barthes’ concept of myth, served to verify the hypothesis about paraphrases of the antique notion of Cleopatra in successive literary and visual representations, the overwhelming majority of which has been created within the milieu of Occidental culture. Piotr Sztompka’s visual sociology<sup>20</sup> and the concept of Orientalism suggested by Edward Said<sup>21</sup> were used as supplementary methodological tools. The scope of visual sociology is broader than the traditional approach of visual culture, since it focuses both

<sup>15</sup> E.g. R. Barthes, *L’empire des signes*, Geneva 1971; idem, *Image, music, text. Essays*, transl. by P. Heath, New York 1996; idem, *Mythologies*, transl. by A. Lavers, London 2000; Polish edition: idem, *Mitologie*, transl. by A. Dziadek, Warszawa 2008.

<sup>16</sup> R. Barthes, *Mitologie*, p. 239.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 240

<sup>18</sup> J. Kristeva, *Semiotike. Recherches pour une sémanalyse*, Paris 1969, pp. 16, 115, 133–137, 146, 152, 164–166, 169, 191–196, 255–257, 306–315, 332–334; eadem, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, (ed.) L. p. Roudiez, transl. by Th. Gora, A. Jardine, New York 1980, pp. 36, 59–60, 69; H. Markiewicz, „Odmiany intertekstualności”, [in:] idem, *Wymiary dzieła literackiego*, Cracow 1996, p. 229; M. Głowiński, „O intertekstualności”, [in:] idem, *Intertekstualność, groteska, parabola. Szkice ogólne i interpretacje*, Cracow 2000, pp. 13–14.

<sup>19</sup> J. Fiske, op. cit., p. 130; I. Rogoff, „Studying Visual Culture”, [in:] *The Visual Culture Reader*, pp. 14–26.

<sup>20</sup> E.g. P. Sztompka, *Socjologia wizualna: fotografia jako metoda badawcza*, Warszawa 2012; *Fotospołeczeństwo: antologia tekstów z socjologii wizualnej*, M. Boguni-Borowska, P. Sztompka (eds.), Kraków 2012.

<sup>21</sup> E. Said, *L’orientalisme: l’Orient créé par l’Occident*, Paris 1978; Polish edition: E. Said, *Orientalizm*, transl. by M. Wyrwas-Wisniewska, Poznań 2005.

on deliberate representations and on their random visual manifestations. On the other hand, Orientalism had a decisive influence of the development of contemporary perception of Cleopatra as an icon of Egypt and, going further, a woman of the East. Literary and material sources originating from antiquity were analysed in terms of credibility and authenticity using ancillary sciences of history (i.e. source studies, genealogy, numismatics, epigraphy), whilst relying on the basic command of Latin, Old Greek and hieroglyphs, which proved useful in reading and analysis of inscriptions on reliefs and coins. To complement the analysis of the image of Cleopatra, I also took advantage of iconology combined with iconography (as conceived by E. Panofsky<sup>22</sup>).

The historical figure of the Ptolemaic queen is doubtlessly the foundation of her later myth, but one has to remember that the image emerging from the pages of history is in itself distorted by ancient authors and modern-era researchers who studied the issue hundreds of years after her death. Therefore, in the first chapter, I argue that both *signifié* and *signifiant* of the sign that Cleopatra is, requires to be supplemented in a certain way. The name of the queen is not the sole signified; others include uncertain material representations, such as sculptures conjectured to be her effigy by virtue of comparison with coins, her role as a lover of Julius Caesar and Marc Antony, and death caused by snake venom. Therefore I also focused on the circumstances of her death, to underscore that that aspect of her biography, intensely exploited in visual culture, remains in fact a mystery to researchers. On the other hand, the portrayals of the woman in sculpture and on coins are not the only signifiers; her titlature and epithets found in antique literary sources (e.g. „Erinys, the shame of Egypt”, „the harlot queen”<sup>23</sup>), which identify her figure with that particular Egyptian ruler constitute those as well. I underlined that the *signifié* is augmented with the epithet of „tempress which met a tragic end”, but not that of a „suicide”, as Cleopatra’s death is presented as an honourable solution, a redemption of wrongdoings and betrayals of which she was guilty. Moreover, I emphasize that in this case there is no such *signifiant* whose *signifié* would be the role of a loving mother. Thus the analysis of a historical figure, understood as a narrative construct, became a starting point for further deliberations and ultimately permitted me to show, in the subsequent three chapters, how it transformed into an icon of popular culture.

<sup>22</sup> E. Panofsky, *Studia z historii sztuki*, J. Białostocki (ed.), Warszawa 1971, pp. 11-32.

<sup>23</sup> Luc. *Pharsalia* X 59; Plin. *Naturalis historia* LVIII 119.

Chapter Two examined the image of Cleopatra from Classicism to Orientalism, a period in which the second layer of the myth evolved. I showed that the signifier of historical figure was ascribed a new signified, yielding another layer of the myth, whose most characteristic trait is the role of a *femme fatale*. The historical Cleopatra was incorporated in the myth, which in itself makes the contemporary one an icon of popular culture and – still – a historical figure at the same time. The chapter also discusses the correlation between the manner in which the ruler is presented in antique texts and her post-antique depictions in painting, art and literature. Source material was selected depending on whether artists or authors in question originated from Europe and its colonies, as well as on whether their works survived until the contemporary times. Furthermore, Shakespeare's „Antony and Cleopatra” served as context for investigation into the literary and stage image of the queen in the texts of art, opera and ballet. Bearing in mind the interdisciplinary nature of my research, I approached the depiction of Cleopatra as a form of paraphrase of ancient Roman descriptions, conveyed onto to the canvas and into dramatic texts and productions. I highlighted that fact that the Lagid ruler had become a permanent element in European history, and therefore was portrayed in costumes resembling the attire worn by female European monarchs and ladies of the aristocracy. Also, I demonstrated that the period saw the emergence of a particular image of Cleopatra, namely that of a beautiful woman. For that purpose, her biography was reduced almost exclusively to the theme I refer to as „between Eros and Thanatos”, in other words to affairs with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, the war with Octavian and suicidal death by letting herself be bitten by a snake, an animal which would become her attribute. Recapitulating the visions of post-antique artists, I attempted to demonstrate that paintings or literary-dramatic pieces showed her as a woman who brought doom to men with whom she was associated as, being a dangerous and debauched woman, she sought power using their help.

In the subsequent chapter, I showed the formation of yet another layer of myth of Cleopatra: the birth of the Egyptian (pop)queen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which issued from a hybrid of the historical figure, the clichés of Egyptomania and notions saturated with complex symbolism. In that century, the dividing line between history and myth, between high art and popular culture was blurred, while the image of the queen was gradually trivialized. Previously the signified in the shape of the heroine in Shakespeare's play drew on the signifier in the form of the antique *femme fatale*. The new era added

a new role to the *signifiant*, that of a seductive queen from the East, an exotic, black-haired temptress in a skimpy Oriental attire, whose animal attributes – next to snake – now included a large spotted cat, a cheetah or a leopard. I also verified the hypothesis that the image of the female monarch became a cliché of the European understanding of Egypt, while Cleopatra herself functioned as one of leading figures associated commonly with the rulers of Egypt, along with Tutankhamun and Nefertiti. The development of popular culture at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was enough of an impulse to prompt exploitation of the likeness of Cleopatra shared in collective memory in its various manifestations. Thus, at the juncture of Egyptomania and popular culture, the final, contemporary layer of the myth came into being. For this reason, the last chapter of the dissertation is devoted to the evocations of the myth in the sequence of popcultural incarnations of Cleopatra. Cinema in particular, especially Joseph L. Mankiewicz's 1963 motion picture had the greatest impact on the contemporary notions of the queen, delivering a cinematic image of a seductive yet dangerous beauty in a particular dress, hairdo and make-up. Elisabeth Taylor's portrayal, with all details of the appearance, became a lasting standard of popular notions about how Cleopatra should look like, which was then readily transferred into other manifestations of popular culture. Furthermore, I tried to demonstrate that the image of the queen has to be stereotypical and schematic so as to be easily and promptly identified. Simultaneously, Cleopatra was excluded from historical discourse (in the sense suggested by A. Giddens and M. Foucault) only to be commodified elsewhere. To a certain extent, those were the researchers themselves who, due to specialization of disciplines, left her out of the discourse, considering the queen as a figure of marginal importance for the studies of antiquity and ancient Egypt. The vacuum caused by shortage of scholarly publications was filled by fiction, educational books addressed to the youngest readers or comic books, the examples of which are quoted in the text. Thus the figure of the ruler was commodified almost utterly; the *signifiant* of her sign reflects advertising slogans of the product, while the *signifié* becomes the product itself, e.g. „Cleopatra's Creamy Bath” is the bubble bath. The analysis of all popcultural representations led to the conclusion that despite the diversity of cited incarnations and embodiments, the image of the ruler is a consistent one. Cleopatra as a signifier is provided with designations such as „queen”, qualifiers such as „famous” or „great” or the ordinal number assigned by researchers. I also add that the signifier is often reduced to catchwords such as „a beauty”, „Egyptian queen”, „dangerous *femme fatale*”, „Eastern temp-

ress”, or „beauty expert”. Meanwhile the signified assumes the form of graphical image showing a black-haired beauty in a specific make-up, with a characteristic hairdo, and an Egyptian-like costume.

To recapitulate, having analyzed the process of transformation of the image of Cleopatra – from historical narrative to popular culture – I formulated a number of conclusions. The historical image of the ruler, being insufficient given the meagre interest her figure aroused, was superseded by multiplied incarnations in popular culture, yet it remains an inextricable part of the myth, i.e. a key element of its first layer. It should be remembered that the unfavourable and most likely untrue image contrived in antiquity, underwent numerous changes in the course of two millennia and finally penetrated into popular culture. Therefore in my opinion one can speak of Cleopatra as a contemporary myth, whose layers comprise both the historical figure and the popcultural icon. Consequently, if Cleopatra is considered a myth, the historical vision and the vision of popular culture are equally important components of the contemporary notion. According to R. Barthes, myth in relationship with people does not have to be true but useful<sup>24</sup>, therefore the clash of both visions does not translate into a conflict between scientific disciplines and developments in popular culture; it is rather an aggregation of equivalent ingredients of the myth of Egyptian (pop)queen.

Lastly, I would like to express the hope that the tools I employed may facilitate approaching other historical figures anew. I would hazard the opinion that with respect to at least some of the historic protagonists, the perspective of Visual Culture Studies, Barthesian concept of myth, and visual sociology might open new paths for reinterpretations of their image. The composite effect of historical vision and cultural image could result in unexpected answers to questions concerned with the functioning of images of historical figures in contemporary culture.

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<sup>24</sup> R. Barthes, *Mitologie*, p. 279.

