

**MARGARET M. MILES (ed.), *Cleopatra: A Sphinx Revisited*. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2011. Pp. xii, 238. ISBN 978-0-520-24367-5. \$US49.95.**

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The minutiae of Hellenistic grain finance is hardly a subject to excite the world's popular press or cause a stir on radio and television. However, add one word supposedly written in the Cleopatra's own hand, and the media come running. The clamour that attended the discovery of "Cleopatra's signature" on a document granting tax exemptions to one of Marc Antony's associates attests to the fact that even in the third millennium AD, this Egyptian queen exercises a fascination for wide and diverse audiences. She is a name to conjure with, a brand that sells, a fantasy, a desire.

This volume of nine essays aims to explore the reasons for our obsession with this Ptolemaic ruler. Originating in a symposium held in 1999, this collection charts some of the various ways that the image of Cleopatra has been utilised by everyone from Roman poets to Renaissance popes to cosmetics salesmen. The volume begins with an introduction that charts the principal features of the reception of Cleopatra and fittingly for a book concerned with the power of myth to generate art the volume ends with a poem on Cleopatra by Peter Green, who must be congratulated for his bravery knowing that his verses would sit alongside works on a similar theme by Horace, Vigil, Michelangelo, and Ted Hughes.

The collection is not a comprehensive survey. There are obvious gaps. The influence of Shakespeare, for example, is regularly alluded to, but never forms the explicit subject of any of the essays. This work is not a replacement for the more general surveys of Lucy Hughes Hallet (*Cleopatra: Histories, dreams, distortions*, London, 1990) and Mary Hamer (*Signs of Cleopatra: History, politics, representations*, New York, 1993). Instead, it supplements our current understanding of this rich tradition with new layers.

There are a number of notable essays in the collection. Brian Curran discusses Cleopatra in Renaissance Rome and the deep interest that humanist thinkers took in ancient Egypt. These are topics that he treats in greater detail in *The Egyptian Renaissance* (Chicago, 2007), but this essay provides a well-crafted introduction to the key thinkers and debates. His discussion of the figuring of Alexander VI Borgia as a descendent of Osiris provides a fascinating example of how humanist

reasoning combined with Renaissance politics could produce original and quirky outcomes.

The lesson that Egyptomania produces the most curious products is reinforced by Ingrid D. Rowland's essay on *Letters on the Infamous Libido of Cleopatra*, a text forged in the seventeenth century that purported to be letters exchanged between Cleopatra, Marc Antony, and the physician Soranus. Here Cleopatra provides the pretext for erotica to masquerade as medical advice as Antony describes his impotency and Cleopatra's nymphomania and Soranus provides his aphrodisiac prescriptions.

Margaret Mary DeMaria Smith presents a very thought-provoking chapter on Alma-Tadema's paintings of Egypt and Cleopatra. Smith uses this corpus of work to engage with Edward Said's notion of orientalism, and proposes a more nuanced model, better calibrated to the diversity of nineteenth-century artistic practice. The essay asks interesting questions and even if one might challenge some of its answers, the essay shows the dangers of taking a too dismissive attitude towards nineteenth-century painting. There are arresting ideas here.

Maria Wyke and Dominic Monserrat's essay on Cleopatra also begins by treating nineteenth-century Cleopatras before moving onto twentieth-century consumer culture and the depiction of Cleopatra on film. Many of the essays in this collection make reference to the cinematic depiction of Cleopatra, so it useful to have Wyke and Monserrat providing such a deft analysis of the portrayal of Cleopatra by Theda Bara, Claudette Colbert, and Elizabeth Taylor. Readers wanting to know more are well advised to consult Wyke's *The Roman Mistress: Ancient and Modern Representations* (Oxford, 2002).