

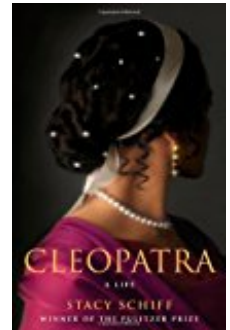
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Jenny McPhee

The Bombshell

Our Cleopatra Moment

We are in a Cleopatra moment. Three books featuring the notorious Egyptian queen have been published in the past few months of which *Cleopatra: A Life* by Pulitzer-Prize winning biographer Stacy Schiff is generating bombshell-size buzz. Michiko Kakutani gave Schiff's book a rave in *The New York Times*, the biography was fodder for Maureen Dowd's op-ed column (NYT), on NPR Tina Brown declared Schiff's book a "must-read" on the subject of women and power, Judith Thurman's round-up (*The New Yorker*) of the goddess' most recent chroniclers conferred upon Schiff's opus alone the honorific "a work of literature." But the mega-buzz arrived with Hollywood producer Scott Rudin's announcement that he'd bought the rights to Schiff's book with James Cameron (our Cecil B. DeMille?) directing a 3-D, action-packed extravaganza starring Angelina Jolie. And rumor has it that Steven Soderbergh is making a rock musical about the Egyptian queen's passions and travails starring Catherine Zeta-Jones.



Cleopatra knew all about mythmaking and how to become a living goddess. She modeled herself on the Egyptian deity Isis, dressing up in the icon's signature garb: form-fitting chiton, pleated linen mantle of iridescent stripes, crown of feathers, solar disk, and cow's horns. (Conjure Claudette Colbert and Elizabeth Taylor.) Cleopatra projected Isis's omnipotence as both mistress of war and über mother who, as Schiff describes, "presided over love affairs, invented marriage, regulated pregnancies, inspired the love that binds children to parents... dispensed mercy, salvation, redemption." Naturally, Cleopatra knew how to throw the party of the century nightly.

Schiff impressively recreates the myth of Cleopatra while deconstructing the legend and unveiling its sources -- a handwritten word, a few coins, sparse first-hand testimony, many second-third-fourth hand accounts, and plenty of gossip. All historical record, artifact, and even architecture regarding the woman who for 22 years ruled Egypt, a territory vastly larger than it is today, has vanished. We are left with the fact of the queen's existence, and her myth, largely manufactured, Schiff argues, by her detractors, the spin factory already operating even before Cleopatra's death. Horace, Virgil, and Propertius applied their literary talents, shaping her

image to satisfy the victorious Octavian (Augustus Caesar) who put an end to that Egyptian woman's evil spell over Rome (i.e., her psycho-sexual domination over first Julius Caesar, then Marc Antony), restoring "the natural order of things: men ruled women, and Rome ruled the world." To enhance Octavian's own glory, his historians fashioned "a tabloid version of an Egyptian queen, insatiable, treacherous, bloodthirsty, power-crazed." For centuries, Plutarch, Appian, Lucan, Suetonius, Dio and countless raconteurs relied heavily on these initial sources, their own political and social agendas informing their renditions.

Schiff efficiently and entertainingly (Tina Brown: "it's almost like a novel in its juicy literary flair") debunks attempts by historians, poets, politicians, and playwrights (all male) throughout the ages to reduce Cleopatra to a nymphomaniac with a diadem. Schiff gives us her version of the Queen: "A capable clear-eyed sovereign, she knew how to build a fleet, suppress an insurrection, control a currency, alleviate a famine... Even at a time when women rulers were no rarity she stood out, the sole female of the ancient world to rule alone and to play a role in Western affairs."

Cleopatra, educated by the highest world-revered Greek standard, was thoroughly schooled in science, rhetoric, classics, medicine, and fluent in at least eight languages. Her business acumen made her incomparably richer than anyone else in the Mediterranean world. That, surely, appealed more to Caesar and Marc Antony, whose war chests and power-mongering required enormous funding, than her supposed insatiable sex drive. In today's money, Cleopatra's approximate net worth would be \$95 billion, making her the twenty-second richest person in history.

Herodotus once said Egypt was a country in which "the women urinate standing up, the men sitting down." In Egypt women had greater legal autonomy than anywhere on Earth at the time, and, grimly, than anywhere for the next 2,000 years, including many places today. Schiff states:

Egyptian women enjoyed the right to make their own marriages. Over time their liberties had increased to levels unprecedented in the ancient world. They inherited equally and held property independently. Married women did not submit to their husband's control. They enjoyed the right to divorce and to be supported after a divorce. Until the time an ex-wife's dowry was returned, she was entitled to be lodged in the house of her choice. Her property remained hers; it was not to be squandered by a wastrel husband. The law sided with the wife and children if a husband acted against their interests. Romans marveled that in Egypt female children were not left to die; a Roman was obligated to raise only his first-born daughter. Egyptian women married later... loaned money and operated barges. They served as priests in the native temples... As wives, widows, or divorcées, they owned vineyards, wineries, papyrus marshes, ships, perfume businesses, milling equipment, slaves, homes, camels. As much as one third of Ptolemaic Egypt may have been in female hands.

In Rome, Schiff specifies, women had the same rights as a chicken. With Cleopatra's death, Egypt became a Roman province; over the next two millennia women would enjoy the legal, if not social, status of "chicks."

Cleopatra remains a rather lonesome icon of female power in all its glory and complexity. Few have ever superceded her stature. The Virgin Mary, Schiff notes, is probably the only other female figure with greater symbolic standing; contrasting sharply with Cleopatra, Mary's status abides due to her radical de-sexualization and intellectual retirement. Stacy Schiff's eloquent, important book makes it eminently clear that the Cleopatra phenomenon throughout the ages has less to do with the Egyptian queen's extraordinary accomplishments as a ruler and politician, than to the pervasive and apparently ineradicable male fear of powerful women. Schiff concludes: "It has always been preferable to attribute a woman's success to her beauty rather than to her brains, to reduce her to the sum of her sex life... Cleopatra unsettles more as sage than as seductress; it is less threatening to believe her fatally attractive than fatally intelligent."

Propertius, author of the adage "the whore queen," once famously asked, "What does our history mean if it leads to the rule of a woman?" Scott Rudin, James Cameron, Angelina Jolie, I'm praying to Isis that you guys will give us a big screen answer worthy of the ultimate bombshell.