

**Women's Review of Books  
May 2004**

**Beyond Elizabeth Taylor.  
By Serinity Young**

*Becoming Cleopatra: The Shifting Image of an Icon (Book); Cleopatra Dismounts (Book)*

*Cleopatra Dismounts by Carmen Boullosa, translated by Geoff Hargreaves. New York: Grove Atlantic, 2004, 192 pp., \$22.00 hardcover.*

*Becoming Cleopatra: The Shifting Image of an Icon by Francesca T. Royster. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 258 pp., \$19.95 paper.*

Cleopatra, actually Cleopatra VII, was born in Egypt in 69 BCE and committed suicide on August 10, 30 BCE. She was a descendent of Ptolemy, one of Alexander the Great's generals, who created a royal dynasty that ruled Egypt for 300 years. Like Alexander, her ancestry was Macedonian, or northern Greek. She was the first in her line to actually speak Egyptian in addition to her first language, which was Greek. So much for historical facts. Under review here are two very different books about Cleopatra one is an act of imagination, and the other engages her various theatrical and cinematic depictions, especially in terms of race, from Shakespeare to the present. Years ago the French feminist Monique Wittig called upon women to remember a time when women were powerful, or, if memory failed, to invent such a past. Whether or not they are aware of answering Wittig's call, feminist novelists have re-imagined historical and mythic women long imprisoned within the strictures of male understanding. Christa Wolf's deeply felt depiction of the Trojan War, Cassandra, and Marion Zimmer Bradley's presentation of the women around King Arthur in *The Mists of Avalon* come to mind. Now Mexican novelist Carmen Boullosa has reinterpreted Cleopatra in *Cleopatra Dismounts*. The novel is carefully constructed over the quicksand of memory itself. It is narrated by Cleopatra's scribe, a eunuch named Diomedes addled by the blasting currents of history that had him first transcribe Cleopatra's history from her own dictation, then destroy the record of that history so that new versions could be invented to suit Rome's patriarchal pride and Orientalist fantasies. The scribe's job is to transmit the words that are dictated issues of truth and accuracy are not relevant to his trade, and his own personality cannot enter the record. Yet, as the scribe's grip on the

present loosens, he wrestles mightily with memories that suck him down only to spit him up. Inevitably, our sense of Cleopatra's charisma--her power to attract and compel others--comes from his struggle to face his own intoxication with her, to understand how distorted his memory has become, and finally to recognize her within her own fantastic realm.

Diomedes' memory seduces him down three different paths, on which we meet three Cleopatras at different periods of her life. There is Cleopatra with Anthony (the woman in love) Cleopatra as a teenager (the woman of action) and finally Cleopatra among the Amazons (the woman on the line between the patriarchal and matriarchal worlds). It is in the last segment, in which Cleopatra is propelled into the magical world of the Amazons by an opening in the cosmos, that Boullosa's visionary powers immerse the reader in a realm that both fascinates and repels. She accomplishes this in large part through the sensual strength of her writing: We see, feel, touch, taste, and smell sea, earth, blood. It is a fantastic realm and Boullosa's skills as a writer are fully deployed in her subtle shading of the border between the everyday and the mythic. Cleopatra is not, however, passively swept up into this magical realm her imagination draws her to it. The power that fascinates others is also what allows her to perceive things that are hidden to most. It makes her daring and draws her toward forces that might even surpass her own. When among the Amazons, she balances between choices, between worlds: patriarchy/matriarchy, Rome/Egypt, the real and the mythic. Boullosa's Cleopatra is rendered with a will that has the potential to move or even dissolve boundaries. Boullosa keeps a tight rein on her narrative, peppering it with established historical references, all the while emphasizing the deceptiveness of memory and the way each person's responses to events shapes her or his world. By suggesting that Cleopatra's choices still dangle before us, she makes Cleopatra's story all women's story. In *Becoming Cleopatra* Francesca Royster, too, sets Cleopatra free by documenting her many theatrical and cinematic depictions, which she is careful to place within their historical contexts. She begins with Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, in which race plays a crucial role, with Shakespeare imagining Cleopatra, and all of Egypt, as black: "Think on me,/ That am with Phoebus's amorous pinches black." Yet in spite of our cultural reverence for Shakespeare, even to this day Cleopatra is rarely cast as black.

Royster's historical acumen informs her discussion of the birth of film, which she shows coincided with heightened interest in the Orient and Egypt as well as with fluid categories of immigrant whiteness. For example, Italians and Jews were perceived as less white than immigrants of Anglo-Saxon ancestry. Orientalist fantasies and racial

ambiguity came together when Theda Bara was cast in the silent film *Cleopatra* (1917). Despite the fact that Bara described herself as "a nice Jewish girl from Cincinnati," the Fox film studio invented a more exotic, Arabian past for her. (They made up her name by spelling "Arab" backwards and ordered her to remain silent during interviews, pretending that she did not speak English.) Royster argues that Bara's racial indeterminacy as a Jewish woman complemented *Cleopatra's* racial indeterminacy.

*Cleopatra's* race is again raised in Cecil B. De Mille's *Cleopatra* (1934) when a minor character asks "Is she black?" The question is laughed away in the film, but for Royster it lingers. *Cleopatra* is both of Egypt and above it. In the film, her power is a product of her whiteness, which is contrasted and emphasized through the presence of her black slaves. This is continued in George Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1900), filmed in 1946 with Vivian Leigh, whose whiteness was purposely highlighted to contrast with the blackness of her slaves. Despite this history, Royster argues that for African-American women "the creative possibilities as well as the constraints that accompany the *Cleopatra* icon for black women ... become a means to articulate the desire for creative possibility and control." She cites Leslie Uggams, who in 1968 became the first African American to portray *Cleopatra* in *Her First Roman*, a musical parody of Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*. In her book on beauty and etiquette, *The Leslie Uggams Beauty Book*, Uggams proposed a new and quite specific definition of African-American womanhood as respectable, tasteful, and ladylike. In the book she advises her readers to avoid "flashiness, overtly sexual looks and any look that calls attention to itself." Ironically, Uggams warns her readers against the "*Cleopatra* look."

The blaxploitation film *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) defined another model for African-American women. Jones is an all-powerful superhero, but at the same time she represents an ideal of the authentic black woman based on the black cultural nationalism that was sweeping the country in the '70s. She is a complex character with competing loyalties to the two worlds she bridges: that of the white power of the CIA and the black power of her old neighborhood, the Watts section of Los Angeles. Queen Latifa pushed the role of *Cleopatra* even further in *Set It Off* (1996), in which she played a lesbian bank robber named Cleo. This film dramatizes the dead-end lives of black single mothers stuck in low-paying jobs, for whom crime is their only chance at a way out. In her epilogue, Royster brings the reader back to the question of *Cleopatra's* race through her discussion of the Chicago Field Museum's exhibition, "*Cleopatra of Egypt: From History to Myth*," in October 2001. The exhibition, too, raised the question, "Was *Cleopatra* black?" and answered by stating that this would not have been an issue in

Egypt. But as Royster's study shows, Cleopatra's race has been and remains an issue today. She remarks pointedly that in the exhibition it was acknowledged that Cleopatra's race is unknown, yet it featured a white marble bust of her image. And nowhere did it include a discussion of Cleopatra in African-American culture, although it did include images of Cleopatra in American popular culture. Royster has demonstrated that Cleopatra's race remains a question that resonates with meaning above and beyond any particular historical moment. Cleopatra continues to intrigue us because she is one of the few women in history who held great political power, yet we cannot get a handle on her. In very different ways these two books reposition Cleopatra yet again, still keeping alive her vitality, allure, and power. Copyright 2004 The Women's Review, Inc.