

Joe Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra*, The Politics of Sleeping with Powerful Men

In my last entry, I mentioned Joseph Mankiewicz's *All About Eve* (1950), probably his most famous film. Well, let me say, probably Mankiewicz's most honored movie: he won Oscars for both direction and scriptwriting. (*All About Eve* was nominated for fourteen Oscars and won six.) He had won the same identical Oscars the previous year for *A Letter To Three Wives*, thus becoming the only filmmaker to win them both in back-to-back years, indeed, the only filmmaker to win both such Oscars twice whether back-to-back or not, a feat that may never be equaled. So, *Eve* is his most honored and revered film, and the film that made his name, more so than any other, despite his previous record of success. Of that there is no question.

But Mankiewicz's most famous (or notorious) film is almost certainly *Cleopatra*, which starred Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, released in 1963. It was the only film Mankiewicz refused to discuss in interviews. Mankiewicz was not the original director for this epic but rather Rouben Mamoulian who ran into location and shooting problems, script problems, and star problems (Taylor became so ill, the press reported her death was imminent.) Mankiewicz took over because he could both direct and write scripts, and the movie needed both skills desperately. But there were other reasons.

(Mankiewicz's creed was that the same person should write and direct a film or, in effect, does, if a film is to work as a unified creative vision. This, for him, was what a "film author" was: "Writing film and directing film are not, and should not be, separate and mutually exclusive functions," he said. He elaborated in this way: "I cannot think of a topflight director—from Griffith through Lubitsch up to and including Fellini—who was not also, in a very true sense, a topflight screenwriter. That they by themselves could not actually commit the words to paper was, and is, relatively unimportant. What is important is that the shooting script must faithfully represent the one concept of whatever individual talent guides and controls the making of the film." Of course, this concept arose from the personal: "I felt the urge to direct because I couldn't stomach what was being done with what I wrote." Mankiewicz started in Hollywood as a writer and producer before he became a director. His older brother, Herman, wrote the Oscar-winning script for *Citizen Kane*, which I supposed did not make it any less an Orson Welles's movie.)

Mankiewicz was also approached to become director of this snake-bitten film because he had worked well with Elizabeth Taylor, four years earlier, in the filming of Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly, Last Summer*. These are the reasons that are most mentioned but I can think of two others that would have made Mankiewicz a sensible choice to direct *Cleopatra*. First, he had directed a film version of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1953), with Marlon Brando, James Mason, and John Gielgud. So, he had showed some facility with being able to deal with the kind of period piece that *Cleopatra* was: the intelligent, thinking person's epic historical drama. Second, he had great interest in making films about women. He frankly admitted he found women found more interesting and complex subjects than men. *All About Eve* has been called the bitchiest movie ever made, an enormous feat when

one considers the fact that Mankiewicz was not gay. “You know, I’ve written about a lot of women—most of the time not as truthfully or perceptively as I would have liked to, for various reasons—and I’ve speculated about hundreds. They’re my favorite humans. Pondering men, by comparison, is staring at alphabet blocks.” As he continued in a lengthy 1972 interview, “I cannot help feeling that if ever I were to summon up enough talent to make a definitive film about anything, this would have been it—for me, at any rate—about a woman.” Further, “No, the ‘man’s role,’ as presently in vogue, doesn’t interest me very much as a writer and/or director. . . His goals are usually restricted to, variously, conquering or amassing things.”

Two things sank *Cleopatra* even before it was released: the ballooning cost of the film, which made it arguably the most expensive flop ever made. (Several other films have vied for that distinction.) It can be said, to its credit, that a good deal of the money spent on the film can be seen on the screen. Elizabeth Taylor changes costumes and hairstyles for every single scene she is in. The anachronistic quality of some of these costumes need not be mentioned. This is a Hollywood film, after all, not a documentary. The over-the-top scene of Cleopatra’s entry into Rome has to be one of the most stunning sequences ever filmed. Not since Griffith’s *Intolerance* had any viewer quite seen something like it. It is worth seeing the film just to see how gloriously triumphant as a political act Mankiewicz could convey Cleopatra’s incredibly bad, mad taste. And there are a bunch of sets, costumed extras, horses, and all that sort of thing that made the cinemascope historical epic the special thing it was back in the 1950s and 1960s. *Cleopatra* became known as the film that bankrupted Hollywood or at least one major Hollywood studio.

The second problem was that during the filming Taylor and Burton, both married to other people, fell in love with each other, became, as it were, completely besotted with one another. The press buried the seriousness and the artistic merit of the film—whatever it may have possessed--beneath reports of this romance, which eventually led to one of Hollywood’s famous marriages. In short, for the public, the film ceased to be a film and became something like a bad publicity stunt or some sort of morality play about actors behaving badly. (It amazes me that anyone takes the behavior of actors off the set seriously or even as some perverse form of entertainment. They seem like such monumentally uninteresting people.) No one took the film seriously because of the shenanigans of Burton and Taylor.

Last week (mid-April) watched the film for the first time. (I studiously avoided it as a kid because I hated Liz Taylor’s voice. On seeing the film, I realized that I still do. Good God, why can’t she sound like Barbara Stanwyck or Joan Crawford or Kim Novack or somebody like that, I thought as a kid. But the broad had *presence*, without a doubt. Taylor wasn’t an actress, but a professional *star*.) I had been reading the recently published *Joseph L. Mankiewicz Interviews*, edited by Brian Dauth, and published by the University Press of Mississippi, and I thought I finally owed *Cleopatra* a look.

I think another reason I was drawn to watch this film was because of Hillary Clinton's run for the presidency. *Cleopatra* was an interesting, flawed film about an iconic woman's quest for power and her success at obtaining it for a brief period of time, and the tragedy of how she lost both power and her life. (In the ancient days, losing one was tantamount to losing the other as politics in those days were played for keeps.) The film was ambivalent: was Cleopatra merely a vamp who used her ovaries and her sexual wiles to gain concessions from powerful men or was she just searching for true love, after all? In the film, the first part about her love affair with Caesar was much more compelling (love as politics) than the second part about her love affair with Mac Antony (the search for true love). (Rex Harrison's upper-crust British Caesar was much better than Burton's working-class, angry young man Antony.)

Well, I guess nobody in the world would think that Hillary Clinton was ever a vamp, not because of looks. (Cleopatra, by our standards today or even the standards of her day, was no looker, however acrobatic she was between the sheets.) Senator Clinton lacked the disposition to use sexual wiles to get power. She decided to get it by marrying a man who could get power and then using the fact that she was his wife to get power for herself in the same way that he got it. There was something conservative and calculating about this, but also driven and even, in its own strange way, admirable in its dishonest honesty. Mrs. Clinton has done more to elevate the position of the political wife since Eleanor Roosevelt (or, more recently, Lurleen Wallace, who succeeded her husband, George, as governor of Alabama or Mary Bono who succeeded her husband, Sonny, as a congressional representative) and to lay bare the arrangements of the political marriage.

More about Mankiewicz at another time.

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