

ELIZABETH TAYLOR

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INTRODUCTION
"I'M RULED
BY MY PASSIONS"

In the 1960s, Elizabeth Taylor was the world's biggest movie star. Her fame grew unabated until the public became intimately familiar with the details of her many epic scandals – eight stormy marriages, a jewel-encrusted lifestyle, her struggles with weight and sundry addictions. As a result, her considerable accomplishments as an actress seem to fade in comparison, and today she is remembered as one of the first modern-day celebrities – someone who was famous mostly for being famous.

But the real Elizabeth Taylor was a far more complex and fascinating woman than the caricature of excess created by the tabloid press. In a nearly sixty-year film career that began in 1942 at age nine, she created a stream of iconic film characters, from Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Later in life, she created – and personally advertised – a successful line of perfumes, raised millions for charity, and became a tireless HIV/AIDS activist.

In her heyday, Elizabeth – only the media called her Liz – was often called the most beautiful woman in the world, her sensual good looks accented by penetrating violet-blue eyes and double rows of eyelashes caused by a rare genetic mutation. Her mystique defied all attempts to define it. "Taylor may not have been a sex symbol at all, if by that is meant a figure upon whom the desires of an age are projected," wrote JoAnn Wypijewski in *The Nation* after her death in 2011. "She seemed too frank and restless pursuing her own desires to be captured in that way."

And while she would not have defined herself as a feminist, Elizabeth's portrayals of fiercely independent female characters in popular 1950's films helped pave the way for the women's movement of the sixties and seventies. These included Texas ranch wife Leslie Lynnton in *Giant*, who confronts sexism and racism in the American West, and call girl Gloria Wandrous in *Butterfield 8*, who aggressively takes charge of her own sexuality.

Social critic Camille Paglia called Taylor "pre-feminist" and argued that her work expressed "woman's ancient and eternal control of the sexual realm." Added M.G. Lord in her book, *The Accidental Feminist*, "The characters she played were women to

be reckoned with.”

Indeed. During her lengthy career, which spanned seven decades, Elizabeth both embodied the glamour of Hollywood’s glory days of the 1940s and 1950s and eclipsed it, thriving long after the old studio system faded away. From her breakout 1944 film *National Velvet* at age twelve to Tennessee Williams’s *Suddenly Last Summer* (1959) and beyond, Elizabeth’s rich body of work continues to enthrall movie-lovers. She was nominated for five Oscars and won two (for *Virginia Woolf* and *Butterfield 8*) and was honored by the American Film Institute in 1993 as the seventh greatest female film legend of all time.

To say that Elizabeth was restless in her personal life would be a comic understatement. “I’ve always admitted that I’m ruled by my passions,” she once said, trying to explain why she married so often – she wed four of her seven husbands in the 1950s alone.

But her failed marriages involved much more than private pain and suffering. They were prime-time soap operas, played out in public for all the world to see. In 1959, she was vilified by fans for stealing singer Eddie Fischer from his wife Debbie Reynolds, and her two marriages to the explosive Welsh actor Richard Burton in the sixties and seventies had more plot twists than all her movies combined. Later, she wed Senator John Warner of Virginia, and finally, in 1991, a construction worker named Larry Fortensky, whom she had met in rehab at the Betty Ford Center.

Even her friendships – like her curious relationship with pop singer Michael Jackson that started in the eighties - provided endless tabloid fodder, triggering unfounded rumors that she and Jackson were lovers (they were actually more like Peter Pan and Wendy).

Through it all, Elizabeth tried to salvage whatever bits of privacy she could, penning a bland and unrevealing memoir and trying desperately to keep her four children out of the limelight (she had two sons by her second husband, the British actor Michael Wilding, a daughter with Todd, and an adopted daughter with Burton).

When she failed to keep her personal life out of the headlines, Elizabeth decided to turn the tables on the media by exploiting her fame - for her own benefit and the benefit of those less fortunate. As her acting career tapered off in the 1980s, she became the first celebrity to successfully sell her own line of fragrances and wrote two more books: the diet guide *Elizabeth Takes Off* (1988) and *My Love Affair with Jewelry* (2002). After skillfully using her celebrity status to help fight the AIDS epidemic, in 1987, she was made a Knight of the French Legion of Honour, and in 2001, received the U.S. Presidential Citizens Medal from President Bill Clinton.

None of her fame and fortune, however, could shield Elizabeth from a lifetime of recurring - and often painful - health issues. She was born with scoliosis, curvature of the spine, which required an operation in her twenties, and back problems plagued her throughout her life. She nearly died of pneumonia twice, had a benign brain tumor removed, was a heavy smoker, and became addicted to alcohol and prescription medications (she was the first major celebrity to admit to entering rehab). Diagnosed with congestive heart failure in 2004, she soldiered on until she died of the disease in 2011 at the age of seventy-nine.

Elizabeth Taylor's life was turbulent even by Hollywood standards, brimming with heartbreak and redemption. It was a life destined for superstardom from the moment she refused to leave the stage after her first dance performance at the age of three: "Elizabeth, you must come off!" her teacher hissed.

From that time on, she rarely did.