RENAISSANCE HISTORY, ART AND CULTURE

Anna Maria Montanari

Cleopatra in Italian and English Renaissance Drama

Amsterdam University Press

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Renaissance History, Art and Culture

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When suddenly, at midnight, you hear
an invisible procession going by
with exquisite music, voices,
don't mourn your luck that's falling now,
work gone wrong, your plans
all proving deceptive – don't mourn them uselessly.
As one long prepared, and graced with courage,
Say goodbye to her, the Alexandria that is leaving.

– C.P. Cavafy, *Απολείνειν ο θεὸς Αντώνιον* (The god abandons Antony; vv. 1-8, trans. by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard)

To my mother

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A Note on the Cover

This extraordinary portrait has been chosen for the book cover as it is representative of Cleopatra's rich cultural 'afterlife'. Painted when the Italian Renaissance was already waning, it possesses all the formal elegance and chromatic refinement of Mannerism.[1] Yet its exquisite responsiveness to different and contrastive tendencies makes it a perfect visual corollary to Cleopatra's adventures across time and space. The neo-Gothic vogue of the Catholic Reformation gives the composition a nearly feudal aspect; Cleopatra's headdress resembles that of Matilde of Canossa in another portrait by Fontana (Torino, Galleria Sabauda, inv. 720)[2]; her clothes have a medieval and warrior-like quality, suggesting the influence of chivalric epic. All that, together with the fascination with Egypt and the exotic, contributes to the mysterious, almost magical atmosphere of the composition (see 3.1, 3.2). Love of the theatre is evident in the choice to represent a moment of high drama, in the striking, vividly coloured costume, and maybe even in the androgynous forms of the subject.

Cleopatra, depicted half-length in profile, facing left, emerges from the dark into full light, exalted by a masterly harmonisation of sealing wax red, white, gold and brown. The sheen along the sleeve and the velvet collar further heighten the dazzling effect. She wears a precious, scarlet tiara, divided into four triangular sections. Beneath the headwear, a white veil with a border and dark and yellow stripes moulds, on the front, into a starched, undulating visor and a broad wimple, both ending with a badge. On the back, the veil falls down, covering her ears and the nape of her neck, then folds and comes forward, its end held in the queen's left hand. Where the visor meets the wimple, a strand of hair demonstrates that this oriental-looking Cleopatra, for a long time mistaken for a 'Turkish woman', is in fact blonde, according to the dominant Italian tradition (see 2.2).[3] This is no seductress, but a high priestess-queen. Her glance, untroubled by emotion, rests in silent complicity on the asp, and she opens its hiding place with a hieratic gesture, as if initiating some esoteric rite (see 6.5). Her union of West and East is finally exemplified by the details surrounding her. The embossed vase on the left (probably depicting Cronus' head as the deity of time's suspension in eternity) has a classical style, while the delicate inlay of the

1 For the painting, see Zeri 1954; Vicini; Cannatà-Vicini; Pomeroy 1998.

2 See Bertelli; Vicini.

3 Vicini; Zeri 1954.

locked piece of furniture on the right shows a fantastic exotic design.[4] The figures on top of it have been identified as an ibis, a bust of Diana and a three-legged vase, respectively.

4 For Cronus, see Cartari, *Le imagini de i dei de gli antichi*, pp. 33, 35.

List of Abbreviations

CAH	*The Cambridge Ancient History*, 12 vols. (1924-1939)
CAH²	*The Cambridge Ancient History*, 2nd edn., 14 vols. (1970-2005)
DBI	*Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1960-)
ELH	*Journal of English Literary History*
GSLI	*Giornale storico della letteratura italiana*
ISTC	*Incunabula Short-Title Catalogue British Library*, http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/istc/
MLQ	*Modern Language Quarterly*
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*
RE	*Real-Encyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft* (Stuttgart, 1893-)
RES	*Review of English Studies*
RVF	*Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*, see Petrarca, Francesco, *Canzoniere*
SEL	*Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*
SHA	*Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, trans. by David Magie, 3 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1921-1932)
ShS	*Shakespeare Survey*
SQ	*Shakespeare Quarterly*

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Introduction

'A Heart in Egypt'[1]

For over two thousand years artists and historians alike have been charmed by the extraordinary figure of Cleopatra. The essence of her fortune lies in her contradictory image, embodying the two opposite and irreconcilable female stereotypes that have long haunted the male heterosexual imagination: the lascivious enchantress and the steadfast lover. Cleopatra is a hybrid: on the one hand she is the empowered seductress, robbing men of their masculinity; on the other the devoted lover, incapable of surviving her paramour's death. She commits suicide, the ultimate sin, and she is also a widespread symbol of lust, often depicted as naked, with serpents applied to her breasts. The impossibility of reducing her to a single portrait transforms Cleopatra into a sort of irresistible, quintessential woman, elusive and mysterious. Moreover, her life had something extra: even though it read like fiction, it was based on historical facts, and the public has always been partial to true stories.

The history of Cleopatra's literary tradition is multifarious by default. Each historical age, each European region, each cultural milieu modified her myth, according to its own moral values, its contradictions, its fears and preconceptions. This book considers some of the main adaptations of her story for the Renaissance stage, travelling from Italy to England to arrive finally with Shakespeare. Its organisation is chronological, making it possible to follow the development of the queen's character and giving the reader the opportunity to identify the inception and changing of a particular motif.

Chapter 1 sets out the historical and literary bases of Cleopatra's myth in the classical period, surveying contemporary works by Greek and Latin authors and focusing on the two opposing images of the last of the Ptolemies that circulated in her lifetime: the lustful corrupter depicted in Augustus' propaganda, and the monarch-goddess of Cleopatra's own. The aesthetic-ideological readings of her figure by poets such as Virgil, Horace, Propertius

1 Shakespeare, *Ant.*, I.3.41.

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and Lucan proved to be immensely productive over time and had a profound impact on Renaissance dramatists.

Chapter 2 moves through late Antiquity and into the Middle Ages, showing how in some late-antique works, Cleopatra is unexpectedly praised for her suicide (Tertullian's *Ad Martyras*) or astoundingly exalted as a stateswoman and a sovereign (John, bishop of Nikiu, Al-Mas'udi), while in Europe, by the Middle Ages, national differences in the treatment of this controversial figure began to emerge: the Italians continued to censure the queen of Egypt as a corrupted enemy of Rome (Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio) while English writers seemed to be more interested in the 'romantic' side of her relationship with Antony (Chaucer, Gower, Lydgate).

The remainder of the analysis centres on Renaissance drama, focusing on Italy and England, but never neglecting the wider context. Chapters 3 and 4, taking the Renaissance renewal of the Cleopatra figure as a starting point, consider, in succession, all the Italian Cleopatra plays produced in the period (Giraldi, De Cesari, Pistorelli, and the anonymous *Cleopatra e Marc'Antonio* of the Aldini codex 392). These texts demonstrate a neo-Senecan style and a marked concern for contemporary issues. Through extensive textual analysis, I offer an assessment of the different ways in which the queen's myth is adapted and interpreted by each playwright, in the light of the shifting social and cultural trends of early modern Italy.

Chapter 5 crosses the Channel (passing through France), turning to the Elizabethan scene, where the cultural and political implications of the story re-emerge, mingling with different historical factors, including the Reformation, the presence of a queen on the English throne and the autonomous development of English theatre. Pembroke's translation of Garnier's tragedy and Daniel's play provide evidence of the attempts to naturalise a dramatic form which addressed important political questions, such as tyranny and the moral stature of rulers. Samuel Brandon's *Virtuous Octavia*, with its adulterous/chaste binary, completes and adds further variety to the picture.

Finally, Chapter 6 is dedicated to Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*: the previously acquired data are used to approach the play from a comparative perspective. In each section of the chapter a different aspect of the text is investigated and compared to the corresponding feature in the preceding Cleopatra plays. The concluding argument, naturally emerging from this contrastive analysis, is that, with *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare created an unrecorded and unique kind of work, where two different plays (a comedy and a tragedy) consciously coexist from the first act to the beginning of the last one, in which tragedy is finally chosen as the definitive genre.

Paradoxical as it may appear, despite her impressive fortune on the stage, Cleopatra's stature as a 'dramatic hero' has been often underestimated. Her life has been considered hard to dramatise. Giraldi Cinthio, in his *Lettera sulla tragedia*, addressed to Ercole II d'Este (1543), was the first to assert that it was difficult to reduce the tale to a tragic form:

> Il fare la tragedia dell'argomento che ci porgono gli avenimenti di Cleopatra e di Marco Antonio suo marito [...] mi si è offerto, alla prima vista, cosa tanto grave e faticosa, per la maestà delle persone che v'intervengono, che ne sono rimasto spaventato [...] io cercherò in ciò di vincere me medesmo per comporne, quanto meglio potrò e saprò, la tragedia [...] Ma se forse tardarò più nel compor la Cleopatra che non ho fatto nel comporre le altre due [*tragedie*], accusine [...] il gran maneggio che porta questo real soggetto con esso lui, non la volontà mia prontissima a sempre servirla.[2]

> [Turning the subject offered by Cleopatra's and by her husband Marco Antonio's deeds into a tragedy (...) appeared to me, at first sight, such a serious and difficult task, due to the royal state of the people in it, that I was scared by it (...) I shall try to overcome myself in that and to write the tragedy, as well as I know and can (...) But, should I be later in writing the Cleopatra than I was in writing my other two (*plays*), blame it on (...) the great difficulty that the subject has in itself, not my will, which is always ready to serve you.][3]

Over a hundred years later, in the preface to his recasting of Shakespeare's play, Dryden would insist that the subject was undramatic:

> That which is wanting to work up the pity to a greater height, was not afforded me by the story; for the crimes of love, which they both committed, where not occasioned by any necessity, or fatal ignorance, but were wholly voluntary; since our passions are, or ought to be, within our power.[4]

Eminent critics later agreed with Dryden's charge that the subject had a meagre tragic potential. Furthermore this was a typically 'closed story,' whose well-known facts potentially reduced the possibilities of innovation to a minimum. Each re-enactment of the episode had to struggle to find

2 Giraldi, *Lettera sulla tragedia*, pp. 485-486. See also below 3.4.
3 All translations are my own, unless explicitly stated.
4 *Restoration Tragedies*, p. 11.

a way of engendering and maintaining suspense. At the same time, the biography of the queen was so fascinatingly alive with potential political interpretations, so filled with latent sentiments and passions, so suitable for moralising or eroding morals that it seemed to have remained almost as irresistible to dramatists as the historical Cleopatra was said to be to men.

The long literary tradition concerning the queen of Egypt has not remained unexplored, yet it largely relies on older surveys, such as the fifth volume of Geoffrey Bullough's *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (1964); Mary Morrison, 'Some Aspects of the Treatment of the Theme of Antony and Cleopatra in Tragedies of the Sixteenth Century' (1974); Marilyn L. Williamson, *Infinite Variety: Antony and Cleopatra in Renaissance Drama and Earlier Tradition* (1974) and Barbara J. Bono, *Literary Transvaluation, From Virgilian Epic to Shakespearean Tragicomedy* (1984). There exists no recent integrated assessment of Cleopatra as a dramatic figure, and past studies, although at the time they represented critical landmarks, are now in dire need of updating and completing.[5] Since the end of the 1970s, literary texts have no longer been considered as autonomous utterances standing outside history, and criticism has become more theoretically sophisticated. Historical contextualisation, cultural codes, cultural reception, interaction between so-called 'high' and 'popular' culture are now fully taken into account, and so are theoretical issues such as the representation of race, of 'otherness' and of women's roles, all of which now naturally demand investigation in relation to the subject of Cleopatra. Other kinds of broader and more specific questions also now demand interrogation, such as the implications of drama as a form distinguished from the other literary writings of the Renaissance, or the controversies and doubts about Chaucer's intention in his *Legend of Good Women*.

Recently there has also been a reassessment of Italian neoclassical tragedy, once almost universally condemned. This reassessment has taken as its starting point the assumption that the general censure of this form was based on anachronistic expectations, conditioned by Romantic and Classicising prejudices and by a post-Shakespearian perspective.[6] Some recent studies

5 At first sight, the list of antecedents might also include Lucy Hughes-Hallett, *Cleopatra*, as well; but Hughes-Hallett's brilliant work does not deal with the queen of Egypt as a literary character, but rather as a universal icon, and literary quotations have a marginal place in her study. An important contribution to our knowledge of the English Cleopatra plays is provided by the study of the subject by Yasmin Arshad, whose articles on Daniel's Cleopatra are superlative. As her research does not have a comparative cut and explores the staging of drama in detail, I see it as necessary and complementary work to my own.

6 Ariani 1974; Guerrieri Crocetti; Di Maria; Morrison and Osborn; Morrison 1997.

have had the merit of rectifying the errors and misconceptions of traditional scholarship, focusing renewed attention onto cultural contexts such as the new conception of dramatic space, the relevance of religion, and the definition of female status in male-authored texts.[7] Regarding the English stage, we have definitively abandoned the long-held view of the so-called Pembroke circle, which was charged with having competed with Shakespeare and the commercial public theatre through the importation of a French, neo-Senecan model. This view profoundly influenced the twentieth-century reception of both Jodelle's and Garnier's plays and of Pembroke's *Antonius*, and even altered the understanding of Daniel's different versions of his tragedy. At the same time the role of so-called closet-drama has been re-evaluated (see below 5.2). In the twenty-first century, any approach to Renaissance theatre must necessarily adopt new perspectives and move away from the models of past criticism.

In my study many interwoven aspects of the Cleopatra plays are taken into account: from the changes in rhetorical strategies employed by the different dramatists in treating the story as they had received it from the preceding tradition, to the sources, genre, and structure of the plays, not forgetting the interaction between the various characters. The originality of this book lies precisely in its particular interweaving of different threads. I take each entire play as a starting point and remain as close as possible to the text. Through textual analysis I am able both to emphasise the changes in the depiction of the character of the queen of Egypt, and to address many different contemporary issues, such as the domestication of foreignness, female types of heroism, the question of suicide, women as rulers, the concept of clemency, racial binaries and finally free will and predestination. As I decided to use the study of character as a way to provide fresh insights into dramatic texts, a more selective approach would end up being reductive. The method I pursue in this book is not often attempted: in most recent books dealing with Cleopatra literary texts are used rather as a means to illustrate socio-anthropological readings and not vice versa. Thanks to the prominence given to the plays, my enquiry on the one hand, provides a wide enough choice of examples to demonstrate the objectivity of the analysis in each case; on the other hand it combines close literary analysis with social history, a study of Western culture and its cognitive conflicts.

My discussion of each Cleopatra play quotes from the original-language versions and also provides the corresponding English translation. Where on occasion I have employed the parallel-text method, this by no means

7 On the 'defects of the Senecan medium', see, for example, Williamson 1974, p. 131.

implies a search for stylistic or thematic echoes, as this study does not deal with literary antecedents, direct contact or indirect absorption, and does not postulate any kind of source-text relationship among the various Cleopatra plays taken into account. It rather investigates the nexuses of continuity and the dynamics of change within the process of re-evaluation of the queen of Egypt's figure, against changing backgrounds.

Following the early development of the Cleopatra-narrative necessitates a series of precautions. Defining tragedies, even within this relatively short chronological arc, is very difficult, given that a variety of different meanings have been attached to the genre. Each work needs to be considered within the conception of drama it exemplifies. Secondly, the notion of character as a coherent and stable entity has suffered over the course of twentieth-century turns in criticism. The integrity of fictional selves has increasingly been regarded with distrust, chiefly for fear of the anachronism of treating personages as real people. In relation to the current debates on the subject I share Lyne's position in taking 'what has become a counter-approach' and give 'the characters a large stake, and great credit, for their words and what they represent'.[8]

The study of the literary tradition about Cleopatra is a complex and fluid task and it requires a flexible attitude. My hope is that a global reconsideration of her place in the works examined here will shed light on the discrepancies, the fears and hopes, the dramatic conventions and innovations of early modern Italy and England.

8 Lyne 2011, p. 26. See also Curran 2014.