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Shakespeare and the Mediterranean • 3

Antony and Cleopatra

Edited by Cristiano Ragni

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Shakespeare and the Mediterranean

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Cleopatra, Motherhood, and the Mediterranean

Amelia Platt

Abstract

This chapter explores the differing presentations of Cleopatra's motherhood across William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607), Mary Sidney's *The Tragedy of Antoine* (1595) and Samuel Daniel's *The Tragedy of Cleopatra* (1599). Sidney's and Daniel's plays spend considerable time dwelling on Cleopatra's identity as a mother, with both keen to emphasise Cleopatra as a loving mother. Such characterisation forms a key part of these texts' attempts to present Cleopatra as a more sympathetic figure. Contrastingly, Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* removes most of the references to Cleopatra being a mother. Such changes in the presentation of motherhood can be linked to questions of Cleopatra's racial identity, and the setting of *Antony and Cleopatra*. Sidney and Daniel both have Cleopatra ascribe to conventionally Western standards of beauty. In comparison, Shakespeare highlights how Cleopatra's racial identity is inextricably linked to the Mediterranean setting of the play. This chapter posits that there is a connection between both Shakespeare's changing of Cleopatra's identity as a mother and her identity in terms of race. Ultimately, this chapter will argue that Cleopatra's status as a mother is not completely obscured from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, rather it is simply transformed. Cleopatra's motherhood becomes defined in terms of the nation, 'giving birth' to the myth of Egypt.

Keywords: Motherhood; Mary Sidney; Samuel Daniel; William Shakespeare; Cleopatra

1. Introduction

The concept of 'motherhood' in the Early Modern period was polysemous - containing multiple meanings and attitudes. On the one hand, being a mother was considered an elevated state with women encouraged to aspire to such a status - arising from Mother Mary giving birth to the son of God (Dunworth 2013, 10). However, the act of giving birth also constituted an enactment of the punishment of Eve, suggesting an inherent sinfulness to motherhood (ibid). There

was thus a sort of doubleness inherent to the concept of 'motherhood', with it being understood as something both virtuous and corrupt. This doubleness is also seen in how motherhood was associated with both power and vulnerability. Janet Adelman points to motherhood as a source of fear within the Early Modern period, with the mother not being seen as a whole and separate person, but rather imagined through her body parts which are regarded as having the power to make or unmake the world, and self for their child (1992, 4). The mother figure was a potential source of great power – power that existed outside the male domain and was therefore a source of concern. Yet, while the mother figure could be powerful, she was also a figure in need of protection. The 'mother' is always human, because whatever else it signifies, the signifier always foregrounds the physical vulnerability of the maternal body (Dunworth 2013, 20). Dunworth notes how the mother brings together conflicting and complex ideas: the figurative and the corporeal, the symbolic and real human experience (28).

Crucial also to understanding the figure of the mother in Early Modern England is a recognition of how the mother figure was used as an allegory for the political state of the kingdom. Loving intimacy between mother and child comes to embody the proper relationship between subject and state, just as the relationship between husband and wife was used as an analogy for that between God and the nation (Dunworth 2013, 32). The fact that motherhood as a concept in Early Modern England included all these possible understandings highlights how maternity must be understood as fundamentally performative, with the maternal body functioning as a prime space for cultural conflict (Moncrief and McPherson qtd. in Laoutaris 2008, 17). In this regard, it little surprises that such multifaceted concept should be somehow investigated on the English stages in plays such as William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607).

For much of the twentieth century, *Antony and Cleopatra* was regarded as distinct from all other English adaptations of the Antony and Cleopatra story (Cadman 2015, 10). Instead, when studied in relation to two contemporary plays based on the same story, such as Mary Sidney's *The Tragedy of Antoine* (1595) and Samuel Daniel's *The Tragedy of Cleopatra* (1599), it is possible to notice that all three plays do in fact show, through the character of Cleopatra,

a shared preoccupation with motherhood. Sidney's and Daniel's place similar emphasis on Cleopatra's identity as a mother by making numerous references to her children, who even feature on stage, in the attempt to turn her into a more sympathetic figure. In *Antony and* Cleopatra, if references to Cleopatra as a mother and to her children are generally sparce, Shakespeare's insistence on the queen's racial identity – inextricably linked, as will be discussed below, to the Mediterranean setting of the play – end up shifting her from a mother in the conventional sense (existing within the domestic domain) to being the mother of a nation.

2. Motherhood *vs* Wifedom

Mary Sidney's *The Tragedy of Antonie* is a translation of the French Catholic playwright Robert Garnier's work, *Marc-Antonie* (1578), a play deeply marked by the internal divisions of France in the sixteenth century, where the figure of Cleopatra was used to explore the political responsibilities (and indeed failures) of the ruler towards a war-torn country (Aebischer 2012, 225). *Marc-Antonie* takes the overthrow of Brutus and Cassius as its starting point, with Antony returning to Alexandria and restarting his relationship with Cleopatra. Octavius, in response, takes arms against Antony. After Antony loses to Octavius at sea, he begins to suspect Cleopatra, who in turn conceals herself within the monument. Believing her to be dead, Antony mortally wounds himself. The play ends with Cleopatra and her ladies lifting Antony into the monument and Cleopatra promising that she will follow Antony to the grave.

Mary Sidney belonged to a powerful family, both in terms of its aristocratic and literary status. The Pembroke family name was synonymous with literary heritage, wealth, acres, a great house, political power, and social hierarchy (Purkiss 1998, xiv). An understanding of Sidney's family is important because we can see it influencing her decision to translate Garnier's play. Mary's brother, the poet Philip Sidney, had famously begun to translate the Psalms into English, with Sidney completing the project after Philip's untimely death. Working on Garnier's play thus gave Sidney her own translation project, becoming an important part of her self-

fashioning as the sister and literary heir of Philip Sidney (xx). The act of translation was also well-suited to Sidney's identity as a female writer. Even though Tina Krontiris has argued that Sidney's use of translation shows her reluctance to appear assertive (1998, 158), her work does in fact reveal Sidney's abilities to draw out themes which were evidently important to her. That said, it is certainly true that translation provided a safety net for Sidney, allowing her to push back against any claims that she was overstepping as a female author. If controversy arose over any part of the finished article, she could simply deny it was her own work, and say it was in the original text. When it comes to the actual translation, Sidney's version is close to Garnier's original, with the two having very similar line-by-line content. Stylistically though, there are significant differences with Sidney transforming Garnier's twelve-syllable alexandrines into an equivalent number of pentameter lines, which allowed for more natural, and powerful speeches (Aebischer 2012, 230). These stylistic changes especially impact the characterisation of Cleopatra, making her more believable and sympathetic (229). Transforming Cleopatra into a more sympathetic figure was a key concern for Sidney. Indeed, as will be explored below, Sidney's presentation of Cleopatra as a mother is partly used to invoke the audience's empathy for her. Translation thus provided Sidney with multiple advantages, both in terms of her identity as an author, and when it came to the specifics of working with the story of Antony and Cleopatra (Waller 2020).

While discussing the play's wider context, it must be noted that *The Tragedy of Antonie* is a closet drama: that is, a play which was likely never performed, or at any rate not in front of a paying public (Purkiss 1998, xvii). Instead, it would have been read aloud to a circle of friends. This genre once again aligned well with Sidney's identity as a female author. Court performances and private stagings of plays within the aristocratic household were seen as less controversial than those performed publicly – they did not attract the same kind of moral panic (Raber 2001, 83). By using this genre, Sidney was thus seeking to ensure that her work is not objectionable, heading off any potential challenges to her ability to write and publish as a woman. That said, the closet drama genre also had its own unique strengths. Aebischer explains that the closet drama form sought

moral edification by presenting debates in dramatic dialogue rather than through the visual contemplation of bodies in conflict, grief or death (2012, 231). This form suited Sidney well, especially allowing her to mount a defence of Cleopatra as a mother and consider more broadly what it meant to be a 'good mother.'

The ending of *The Tragedy of Antonie* is pre-determined: everybody knows that Cleopatra will commit suicide. Sidney's play focuses on the fact that, in so doing, Cleopatra leaves her children behind to fend for themselves. The children in Sidney's play are given no names. The *dramatis personae* simply refer to them as 'Children of Cleopatra' (359).[1] However, the historical record tells us that Cleopatra had four children: Caesarion (son of Julius Caesar), Alexander Helios, Cleopatra Selene II and Ptolemy Philadelphus (all children of Marc Antony). The *dramatis personae* serves to indicate, from the play's very beginning, that Cleopatra's love for Antony will win out her love for her children. The 'Children' lose all individual identity and significance, paling in comparison to Antony, who is placed at the top of the cast list, above even Cleopatra herself. Cleopatra's love for Antony is presented as outweighing the love she feels for her children, with her death a symbol of this ultimate commitment. Realising the controversial nature of this decision, Sidney attempts to justify and explain Cleopatra's choice. She paints Cleopatra as a flawed, but essentially loving and sympathetic mother. Such a presentation is seen in the following passage where Cleopatra rebuffs accusations that she has betrayed Antony, instead asserting her constancy and presenting herself as a faithful wife:

> And didst thou then suppose my royall heart
> Had hatcht, thee to ensnare, a faithles loue?
> And changing minde, as Fortune changed cheare,
> I would weake thee, to winne the stronger, loose?
> O wretch! ô caitive! ô too cruell happe!
> And did not I sufficient losse sustaine
> Loosing my Realme, loosing my libertie,
> My tender of-spring, and the ioyfull light

1 All references are from Sidney 1595 and will appear parenthetically in the text.

> Of beamy Sunne, and yet, yet loosing more
> Thee *Antony* my care, if I loose not
> What yet remain'd? thy love alas! thy love,
> More deare then Scepter, children freedome, light.
> (2.399-410)

Concepts such as sovereign power or the loss of freedom are all here presented as inferior to Cleopatra and Antony's relationship. Instead, great emphasis is placed on Antony's love in these lines: "thy love, alas! Thy love" (2.409). The repetition of the word "love" emphasises just how significant the loss of Antony is to Cleopatra. Not even her "children" are placed high in the list, with Cleopatra placing the responsibility of kingship above them. At the same time, however, the fact that her "children" are mentioned is crucial. It suggests that Cleopatra is not only aware of her responsibilities towards them but, crucially, that she is defaulting on such responsibilities. What is so effective about the presentation of Cleopatra's motherhood in Sidney's play is that it does not shy away from complexity. There is no suggestion from Sidney that she does not love her children. It is simply that she does not love her children as much as their father.

The domestic dimension, and how one defines themselves within it, is of crucial importance to the text. The love that Cleopatra feels for Antony is used to present Cleopatra as firmly situating herself within the domestic, committed to occupying the role of the loving wife above all else. This fulfilment is shown in the following lines: "'Live for your sons. Nay for their father die'/ Hardhearted mother! Wife kindhearted" (2.555-6). Sidney uses the technique of stichomythia to effectively contrast Charmion and Cleopatra's differing opinions on what constitutes a fulfilment of the domestic. For Charmion, Cleopatra's decision to commit suicide and leave her children at the mercy of Rome represents a betrayal of her domestic responsibilities. Findlay explains how Cleopatra's attendants, "citing her responsibilities to the kingdom, her dynasty, and to herself as an individual, claim that complete self-abandonment to Antonie is self-abuse" (2009, 132). Crucially, it is a form of self-abuse that causes significant damage to others, from her children to Egypt itself. Yet, Cleopatra rejects such a categorisation: in fact, she presents her actions as fulfilment of her domestic duties to Antony. She wishes to

show that the abandonment of her children is not an action rooted in a lack of love, but more an unavoidable 'side-effect' of her great love for her husband. "If she is to be noble in her end", Laoutaris explains, then she must relinquish her parental claims. In other words, her death will be decidedly an unmaternal, that is to say, an unnatural act (2008, 255). It is not then that she is a "Hardhearted mother!" (2.556) as Charmion labels her, but rather that she is simply more of a "Wife kindhearted" (ibid.). Interestingly, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare will make Charmion have an aspiration to motherhood. Such characterisation maybe said to function as an implicit reference to Sidney's translation, which has Charmion mount the strongest opposition to Cleopatra's neglecting of her motherly duties (Hopkins 2004, 26). In this light, Cleopatra's suicide eventually fulfils her desire for Antony, and at the same time signals her rejection of her responsibilities to her children, dynasty, and kingdom (Findlay 2009, 142).

Sidney again emphasises this characterisation of Cleopatra as seeing herself primarily as the wife of Antony rather than as the mother of their children at the end of the play, when Cleopatra does indeed dedicate her suicide to Antony:

> Antony by our true loves I thee beseech
> And by our hearts sweete sparks have set on fire
> Our holy marriage, and the tender ruthe
> Of our deare babies, knot of our amitie:
> My dolefull voice thy eare let entertaine,
> And take me with thee to the hellish plaine,
> Thy wife, thy frend: heare Antony, ô heare
> My sobbing sighes, if here thou be, or there.
> (5.1945-52).

Here, Cleopatra mourns her and Antony's passion, "hearts sweete sparks have set on fire" (1946). The metaphor suggests an unquenchable, dangerous love. These 'sparks' of passion are now out of control, destroying not only the couple but also those around them, including their children. Cleopatra significantly refers to her relationship with Antony as a "holy marriage" (1947). This imposes a level of conventionality and perhaps respectability onto the couple's relationship (Antony is of course married to Octavia), showing once

again Sidney's desire to rehabilitate Cleopatra and make her into a more sympathetic and acceptable figure. In the forementioned passage, it is also Cleopatra's self-awareness to stand out. She does not idealise her passion for Antony but deplores it, well aware of how it has disrupted her responsibilities, both familial and sovereign. Cleopatra mournfully adds: "Our deare babies, knot of our amitie" (1948). The metaphor "knot of our amitie" emphasises the children's significance – they are the literal product of Antony and Cleopatra's relationship, born of their 'entwining.' This image of the "knot of our amitie" wistfully envisions the classic family unit, now completely overwhelmed by Cleopatra and Antony's passion. We are, thus, presented with a figure unbalanced in her willingness to sacrifice her children and country for her obsessive love for Antony (Raber 2001, 63). While Shakespeare's Cleopatra, as will be discussed below, will use her death to regain her status as a queen and uphold Egypt's independence, Sidney's Cleopatra only uses death to further the image of herself that she has been attempting to project throughout the whole play, that of a loyal and constant wife to Antony (Cadman 2015, 8). In an act of love, she takes Antony's flawed suicide and re-enacts it, elevating it in the process. She becomes a vessel onto which thoughts of the great, heroic Antony are projected.

In Sidney's *The Tragedy of Antonie*, Cleopatra's children are not just referred to, but they also appear on stage. This is seen in the following passage where Cleopatra is bidding them farewell:

> CLEOPATRA Farewell, my babes, farewell my heart is clos'd
> With pittie and paine, my selfe with death enclos'd
> My breath doth faile. Farewell for evermore,
> Your Sire and me you shall see never more.
> Farwell sweet care, farewell.
> CHILDREN Madame, adieu.
> (5.1865-9)

Cleopatra's use of the term "babes" emphasises the children's vulnerability but also suggests that this is how they will forever be remembered within Cleopatra's mind—young children needing her protection. This focus on their vulnerability serves to illustrate Cleopatra's guilt. She is aware that she is abandoning her children at a time of acute need when their status is most vulner-

able. The possessive pronoun "my" also stands out, illustrating the close connection that Cleopatra feels with her children. Furthermore, the lengthy goodbye, with the word "farewell" repeated five times, signals Cleopatra's inability to let go of her children, and the deep-seated affection she feels for them. The line "with pittie and paine . . . my breath doth faile" also emphasises Cleopatra's emotional vulnerability. The alliteration of "pittie and paine" audibly suggests a failing breath. The goodbye is, therefore, both mentally and physically draining. Sidney has Cleopatra's children reply directly to this goodbye: "Madame Adieu" (5.1869). By providing the children with a voice, Sidney makes it impossible for both Cleopatra and us as readers to deny their presence. The same is also true of Daniel's *The Tragedy of Cleopatra*, where Cleopatra's identity as a mother is made prominent by her multiple interactions with her son Caesarion, a key character within the play. Contrastingly, in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra,* it is very easy to forget about Cleopatra's children, as they are neither seen nor heard talking with Cleopatra on stage. Having the children reply to Cleopatra also adds credence to the idea of a close relationship between mother and children, further erasing the image of Cleopatra as a dangerous seductress, in favour of one more focused on Cleopatra as a loving wife and mother. Yet, while Sidney's play does this, it still restrains from presenting motherhood as some powerful natural impulse that overcomes all, instead revealing that for Cleopatra, allegiance to loving her husband triumphs over allegiance to her child (Krontiris 1998, 160).

Overall, then, Mary Sidney's presentation of Cleopatra emphasises the integral role that motherhood plays in defining female identity in the period. We are never allowed to lose sight of Cleopatra's status as a mother – the text includes multiple references to the fact, with much of the text's tension coming from the fact that Cleopatra *fails* as a mother. For Sidney, this failure is a problem – it complicates Cleopatra's position as a tragic heroine and endangers the ability of an audience to feel sympathy for Cleopatra. Accordingly, Sidney focuses on acknowledging and justifying such 'failures'. She presents Cleopatra as torn between her love for her children and the passion she feels for Antony, a passion which eventually wins out.

3. Sacrificial Motherhood

Like Sidney's play, Samuel Daniel's *The Tragedy of Cleopatra* is heavily invested in a presentation of Cleopatra as a loving mother. Daniel's Cleopatra is torn between her deep and abiding love for her children, which manifests in a desire to keep them close and an awareness that to safeguard them properly, she must send them away. As previously mentioned, Cleopatra's identity as a mother is most prominently explored through interactions with her son Caesarion, who features as a character. Context-wise, Mary Sidney was Daniel's literary patron, a fact which helps explain the close structural connections between their respective works. Daniel's play literally continues Sidney's play: it opens with Cleopatra enclosed in the monument, mourning Antony's death, and Octavius's attempts to draw Cleopatra out of the monument so that she can be taken to Rome and triumphantly displayed. After resisting these attempts, Cleopatra has an asp smuggled into the monument and thus takes her own life. The play focuses on Cleopatra's attempts to secure his safety by sending her son Caesarion away with the tutor Rodon, demonstrating motherly strength and self-sacrifice in the process. Yet, this decision is shown to be ultimately futile, with Rodon eventually betraying Caesarion and handing him over to Caesar.

Like Mary Sidney, then, Daniel focuses on Cleopatra's conflicted sense of duty. Yet, for Daniel's Cleopatra, this conflict is less between her children and her love for Antony, and more between her love for children and her responsibilities as queen. She declares:

> Bloud, Children, Nature, all must pardon me.
> My soule yeeldes Honor up the victory,
> And I must be a Queene, forget a mother,
> Though mother would I be, were I not I;
> And Queene would not be now, could I be other.
> (1.94-8)[2]

Cleopatra here expresses her preference for the dimension of motherhood. Her motherly instincts are strong. Cleopatra

2 All references are from Daniel 1599 and will appear parenthetically in the text.

longs to embrace the role of mother, but the duties of ruling prevent her from doing so. She presents her decision to commit suicide as completely unnatural: "Bloud, Children, Nature, all must pardon me". "Bloud" is particularly significant, referring to the unique familial relationship between mother and child, which Cleopatra sees herself as destroying. The roles of Queen and mother are presented then as incompatible – performing one successfully requires the sacrificing of the other one.

Contained within the above lines is arguably a veiled reference to the unmarried and childless Elizabeth I (Kewes 2012). Elizabeth had been on the throne for more than forty years when *The Tragedy of Cleopatra* was published. Daniel's characterisation of Cleopatra as divided between being a woman and ruler, would for contemporary audiences, particularly brought to mind Elizabeth I (Arshad 2019, 75). Elizabeth herself acknowledged her own divided identity in her famous speech at Tilbury: "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king" (qtd in Thackeray and Findling 2012, 325-6). These references to Elizabeth I allow Daniel to respond to English Protestants' fear of a succession crisis. The 'failure' of Elizabeth I to be a mother was increasingly seen in the later stages of her reign as a failure of queenship. Elizabeth's critics saw the lack of a Protestant heir as endangering England, by increasing the likelihood of a civil war and a Spanish invasion (Arshad 2019, 77). Significantly, Cleopatra's striking utterance, "And I must be a Queen, forget a mother" was removed in later editions of Daniel's plays (1.98). After the death of Elizabeth I, the conflict between being a queen and a mother was no longer a key issue for English elite culture (98). Overall, then, Daniel suggests that for Cleopatra, similar to the real-life Elizabeth I, her identity as a mother is inextricably tied up with her identity as a Queen. The failure of one will inevitably cause the failure of the other. Furthermore, for Cleopatra, it is no small failure. Her affair with Antony makes her children appear as threats in the eyes of Rome. It is for this reason that Egypt's heir Caesarion must die – an event which ensures Egypt's ruination, and its subordination to the Roman Empire. Daniel, then, uses Cleopatra to explore the possibility of England's destruction, resulting from a similar failure of motherhood.

Daniel's depicting of Cleopatra's frenzied (and ultimately) doomed attempts to protect her children allow for some of the play's most heartfelt moments. For instance, we have the following passage where Rodon explains how Cleopatra entrusted her son to him:

> For unto me did Cleopatra give
> The best and deerest treasure of her blood,
> Lovely Cesario, whom she would should live
> free from the dangers wherein Egypt stoode.
> And unto me with him this charge she gave,
> Here Rodon, take, convoy from out this coast
> This precious Gem, the chiefest that I have,
> The jewell of my soule I value most.
> (4.859-66)

The semantic field relating to jewellery is crucial: "treasure . . . jewell" establishes Caesarion's importance to Cleopatra. Jewellery is associated with luxury and great material wealth. Yet, the material connotations of the image are subverted here, with the language being used instead to describe a great emotional connection between mother and son. Caesarion is shown to be Cleopatra's greatest possession, far greater in value to her than all her trappings of wealth. However, this language also serves as a reminder of Cleopatra's status as the Queen of Egypt, illustrating again the impossibility of her being able to leave the demands of queenship behind. The scene continues with Rodon detailing how Cleopatra addressed her son:

> Then unto him, O my deere Sonne (she saies),
> Sonne of my youth, flie hence, O flie, be gone,
> Reserve thy selfe, ordain'd for better daies,
> For much thou hast to ground thy hopes upon.
> Leave me (thy wofull Mother) to endure
> The fury of this tempest heere alone:
> Who cares not for her selfe . . .
> (4.886-902)

What Daniel presents here is the image of the sacrificial mother. Cleopatra is willing to give up everything for her children: "Leave me (thy wofull) Mother to endure,' and suffer isolation for the sake of

her children. With the characterisation of "wofull Mother", Cleopatra seems to again be adopting a pre-defined role, one that links motherhood to heightened female emotion. There is a melodramatic feel to proceedings, with Cleopatra enduring the "fury of this tempest" alone. "Tempest" connotes an overwhelming force, with no room left for escape. Cleopatra thus is caught up in the eye of a storm facing the loss of both her crown and life. Such disasters are faced bravely for the sake of her children. Cleopatra's trust in Rodon is also emphasised in this passage "*Rodon* will see thee safe, *Rodon* will guide . . . Rodon (my faithfull servant) . . . And O good Rodon" (1599, 4.895-7). The emphasis on Cleopatra's trust makes the scene all the more painful, as we know how it will be betrayed. Recounting this meeting with Cleopatra, Rodon's shame is acute as he remembers the depth of Cleopatra's love, once again emphasising Cleopatra's deep motherly affection.

The intensity of Cleopatra's grief can also be seen in the fact that she sees Caesarion as a crucial part of herself. Bidding her son goodbye Cleopatra says:

> Yet let me speake: It may be tis the last
> That ever I shall speake to thee my sonne.
> Do Mothers use to part in such post haste?
> What, must I end when I have scarce begunne?
> Ah no (deere heart) tis no such slender twine
> Wherewith the knot is tide twixt thee and me:
> That bloud within thy veins came out of mine,
> Parting from thee, I part from part of me:
> And therefore I must speake. Yet what I sonne?
> (4.945-53)

Cleoptra wonders if all mothers are used to parting so quickly: "Do Mothers use to part in such post haste?". She invokes the customary behaviour of mothers in order to judge her own "mothering'". Cleopatra also points to the close connection between mother and child – "That bloud within thy veins came out of mine" – with mother and child sharing the same "blood". The line also highlights the important role that mothers play within society. Cleopatra presents herself as providing Caesarion with his blood, his life force: "That bloud within thy veins came out of mine".

Daniel's play also suggests that Cleopatra's identity as a mother is crucial to how she sees herself. She declares to Caesarion: "Parting from thee, I part from part of me" (952). Caesarion is an intrinsic part of Cleopatra – she cannot exist without him. The repetition of "part" further emphasises the fact that Cleopatra is now lacking something, she has been left "unhole". Significantly, Caesarion is fundamental to Cleopatra's sense of self. This closeness challenges our expectations. When it comes to relationships in the home, we might expect father-son relationships to be given greater emphasis than mother-son, especially in a scene like this where matters of kingship and inheritance are being discussed. After all, the father and son bond is the bond that drives the house on ensuring its future. Here, though, such a bond is supplanted by one which exists between mother and son. The focus here is not just on the affection between the two, but also public matters of kingship and lineage. Perhaps this is again driven by Cleopatra being a ruler of a nation, she is occupying a typically masculine role and therefore must be attuned to matters of kingship and inheritance.

It is worth underscoring the fact that Cleopatra's motherly love seems mostly directed towards Caesarion. As the oldest boy, Caesarion is Cleopatra's heir. Furthermore, his father is Julius Caesar, which gives Caesarion a potential claim to being the ruler of the Roman Empire. Accordingly, Cleopatra's great love for Caesarion can be seen emerge from a desire for Egypt to become even greater. This idea that Cleopatra's love for Caesarion is tied up with her thoughts about nationhood is seen in the following quotation, where Cleopatra exclaims:

> Then let him stay, and let us fall together
> . . .
> let us divide our starres. Go, go my sonne
> Let not the fate of Egypt find thee here.
> (4.917-22)

The conflicted state of Cleopatra's mind is clear here. At first, Cleopatra considers keeping Caesarion with her. Movingly, she imagines them dying together. In this shared death, they will

provide comfort to one another. This imagining is especially poignant with hindsight – Cleopatra and Caesarion both do die, but alone. However, Cleopatra ultimately resolves to "let us divide our starres". The "starres" refer to the two of them as brilliant figures, referencing their role as rulers of Europe. Therefore, we can see how Cleopatra's motherhood is wrapped up in ideas of nationhood. Cleopatra wants to preserve her son, but she also wants to preserve Egypt: "Let not the fate of Egypt find thee here". If Octavius kills both Cleopatra and Caesarion then Egypt will be left without a ruler. In Sidney's play, as has been discussed above, Cleopatra's love for Antony won out against her love for children. Daniel too suggests that Cleopatra's love for her children becomes a secondary concern but here it would seem to be the demands of nationhood that wins out.

By emphasising Cleopatra's extreme sense of grief over the loss of her children, Samuel Daniel attempts to make Cleopatra far more sympathetic in the eyes of readers and audience members. The fact that Cleopatra leaves her children (and has also helped precipitate their downfall) adds to the poignancy of these scenes. She is struck by her interlinked failures as mother and ruler but is left powerless to reverse them. Seeing Cleopatra's loving maternal nature assures us of her natural femininity and makes her less of an unnatural, dangerous, and frightening figure. That said, the love that Cleopatra feels for her children is still shown to be secondary, being less important than her responsibilities towards Egypt. This focus on how demands of nationhood, coalesce with the demands of motherhood will be picked up and further developed by Shakespeare in *Antony and Cleopatra.*

4. 'Western Cleopatra' *vs* 'Mediterranean Cleopatra'

In comparison to Sidney and Daniel's works, Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* affords far less emphasis on Cleopatra's identity as a mother. This different approach on Shakespeare's part can be understood by analysing another key difference among the three plays: namely, the presentation of Cleopatra's beauty and allure. In Sidney's and Daniel's plays, Cleopatra is presented as decidedly

Western, with no real acknowledgement of her Mediterranean racial identity. Contrastingly, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra's identity is shown to be inextricably linked to the Mediterranean setting of the play. Cleopatra is the 'other' par excellence – with her exotic, alluring and crucially 'foreign' beauty and personality captivating all other characters (Norman 1958; Sanchez 2021).

Plutarch's *The Life of Antonius* – a source which Sidney, Daniel and Shakespeare all likely knew and used – famously describes Cleopatra entering Cydnus with these words: ". . . aparrelled and attired like the goddesse Venus, commonly drawn in picture: and hard by her, on either hand of her, pretie faire boys apparelled as painters doth set forth god Cupide" (North 1579, 274). Plutarch compares Cleopatra to the goddess Venus, suggesting the idea that everyone will understand the frame of reference of what is presented as a universal comparison, "commonly drawn in picture". However, this frame of reference is not universal at all, but specifically Western. The Egyptian Cleopatra is thus being described in purely European/Western terms, starting a tradition that would be continued by both Sidney and Daniel.[3]

In *The Tragedy of Antonie*, Sidney followed Garnier's description of Cleopatra closely, which emphasised the tropes of whiteness derived from both Petrarchan love poetry and the ubiquitous Catholic iconography (Aebischer 2012, 225). However, Sidney's identity as a female author also potentially contributed to such a presentation of Cleopatra. Like her choice to opt for a translation, there is the possibility that Sidney made her Cleopatra white because the alternatives would have been too threatening to the narrow circumstances that allowed Sidney to exist as a female writer (MacDonald 2002, 64). By depicting their heroines as white,

3 Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* too makes significant use of Plutarch, especially in Act 2, Scene 2 when Enobarbus provides us with a description of Cleopatra's arrival at Cydnus. One key change comes with "O'er-picturing that Venus where we see / The fancy outwork nature: on each side her" (Shakespeare, 1606, 2.2.207). The model of Venus fails to provide adequate description, with Cleopatra's beauty being far greater, 'over-powering' any Western imagining. The line, therefore, speaks more broadly of Shakespeare's commitment to focusing on the Mediterranean context of Antony and Cleopatra.

early modern female authors were able to emphasise the propriety of their authorship, by affiliating their speaking voices with dominant racial cultures, even as they challenged dominant social constructions of gender and sexuality (ibid.). We can see Sidney using a Western framework of beauty to describe Cleopatra in the following passage, in which Eras questions the Queen:

> Why with continuall cries
> your griefull harmes doo you exasperate?
> Torment your selfe with murthering complaints;
> Straine your weake brest, so oft, so vehemently?
> Water with teares this faire alabaster?
> With sorrowes sting so many beauties wound?
> Come of so many Kings, want you the hart
> Bravely, stoutly, this tempest to resist?
> (2. 417-24)

Cleopatra emerges here as highly emotional, with "straine your weake brest" connoting a vulnerable femininity in need of protection. Such emotion doesn't provide Cleopatra with any agency – she is simply passively crying. Yet, most striking here is the metaphor, "Water with teares this faire alabaster". Alabaster is a white stone. Thus, this metaphor coupled with the adjective "faire" heavily suggests that Sidney's Cleopatra is white (Cadman 2015, 6). Sidney further leans into the presentation of Cleopatra as white with the following passage:

> Nought liues so faire. Nature by such a worke
> Her selfe, should seeme, in workmanship hath past.
> She is all heau'nly: neuer any man
> But seeing hir was rauish'd with her sight.
> The Allablaster couering of her face,
> The corall couller hir two lips engraines,
> Her beamy eies, two Sunnes of this our world,
> Of hir faire haire the fine and flaming golde,
> Her braue streight stature, and her winning partes
> Are nothing else but fiers, fetters, dartes.
> (2. 709-18)

In the above lines, the multiple references to the "light" emphasise the idea of Cleopatra as being white. However, the presentation of Cleopatra's whiteness seems to become here more complex than is immediately apparent. Cleopatra is made to look like the perfect embodiment of the Renaissance ideal of beauty, with alabaster, coral and gold all being cosmetics (Aebischer 2012, 226). Her hair is golden, her lips are red, and her eyes shine bright. The Petrarchan lady's white-and-red beauty is a mask that can be put on for political and sexual purposes and that can be easily washed off or removed (228). Such an argument suggests a degree of agency to Cleopatra's 'whiteness' with it possessing an intense power: "She was heav'nly . . . / But seeing hir was ravish'd with her sight." Cleopatra's beauty is given a divine quality, with it overpowering the onlooker. However, who does this agency belong to? The verb "engraines" suggests Cleopatra's passivity. She is not painting her lips; it is something that is being done to her. Cleopatra is thus rendered as an object, being passively manipulated. She doesn't seem to have much choice when it comes to being made up. Furthermore, the idea of being 'made up' connotes vulnerability – Cleopatra's make-up and the power it entails by making her beautiful can easily be taken away, with makeup being transient. Implicit in the idea of Cleopatra's makeup is the idea that she is not white, that her 'whiteness' is a mask. If we accept this potential reading of the scene, it raises the interesting possibility that Sidney is subtly acknowledging Cleopatra's racial identity as being non-Western. Ultimately, though, by 'making' Cleopatra white the passage once again serves to uphold a European/Western idea of beauty, arguably suggesting that the alternative is inferior by comparison and must be put 'right'.

The way that Cleopatra is physically described in Daniel's *The Tragedy of Cleopatra* also aligns with a distinctly Western model of beauty. In the following lines, Dolabella is enraptured by Cleopatra's beauty, which stands out even amid great distress:

> What, can untressed locks, can torne rent haire,
> A weeping eye, a wailing face be faire?
> I see then, artlesse feature can content,
> And that true beautie needs no ornament.
> (3.2.719-22)

What first strikes us about this passage is the focus on Cleopatra's vulnerability, with the alliteration of "w" in "A weeping eye, a wailing face be faire?" echoing the act of crying, through the soft, breathy effect of the repeated "w." Despite Cleopatra's dishevelled appearance, 'untressed locks,' her beauty still enthrals, 'true beautie needs no ornament.' At first glance, then this passage does not seem to offer much in terms of understanding Daniel's presentation of Cleopatra's racial identity. The passage seems very much modelled on the work of the poet Francesco Petrarca. In Petrarca's poetry, the love interest Laura was always presented in 'parts' – her beauty as a woman was broken down via blazons into specific sections to be praised (Vickers 1981, 266). Prominent examples include hair, hands, foot and eyes. Similarly, with the passage here, Cleopatra's appearance is analysed in parts, 'hair', 'eyes' and 'mouth.' Daniel adopts here the Petrarchan insistence on the individual fragments of the beautiful female body. Additionally, Dolabella is describing Cleopatra's beauty here to Octavius, Cleopatra is not present. This too shows an aligning with Petrarchan conventions – specifically, the trope whereby the female figure is objectified, and rendered voiceless (Vickers 1981, 277). This commitment to Petrarchan conventions of writing about female beauty, in turn signals a further commitment to Western models of appearance and female beauty. Furthermore, the critic, Kim F. Hall suggests 'whiteness in traditional Petrarchan display is so ubiquitous that it escapes attention' (1996, 466). This ubiquity, Hall suggests should not mean that we lose sight of 'how significant whiteness is to Petrarchan beauty' (ibid). We can see this with the above passage – there are no immediate phrases that immediately foreground race in our minds, and yet the whole passage shores up Cleopatra's whiteness and 'Western' beauty through the commitment to Petrarch's conventions of writing. We are not meant to dwell on Cleopatra's racial identity here because Daniel clearly intends it to be a given – she is white.

Cleopatra's visual appearance features prominently in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, but in a much more complex way than in the other two works discussed so far. Throughout the play, Shakespeare's Cleopatra is presented as deeply preoccupied with her appearance, being well aware of the importance of

projecting beauty. The famous scene between Cleopatra and the Messenger in 3.3, for example, reveals her deep-seated insecurities about the way she looks:

MESSENGER She creeps.
Her motion and her station are as one.
She shows a body rather than a life,
A statue than a breather.
CLEOPATRA Is this certain?
MESSENGER Or I have no observance.
CHARMIAN Three in Egypt
Cannot make better note.
CLEOPATRA He's very knowing;
I do perceive't. There's nothing in her yet.
The fellow has good judgment.
CHARMIAN Excellent.
CLEOPATRA Guess at her years, I prithee.
MESSENGER Madam,
She was a widow.
CLEOPATRA Widow! Charmian, hark!
MESSENGER And I do think she's thirty.
CLEOPATRA Bear'st thou her face in mind? Is't long or round?
MESSENGER Round even to faultiness.
CLEOPATRA For the most part, too, they are foolish that are so.
Her hair, what colour?
MESSENGER Brown, madam, and her forehead
As low as she would wish it.
CLEOPATRA There's gold for thee.
Thou must not take my former sharpness ill.
I will employ thee back again; I find thee
Most fit for business. Go make thee ready;
Our letters are prepared.
(3.3.19-37)[4]

Cleopatra is desperate here to find out as much as she can about Octavia so that she might be reassured that she is more attrac-

4 All references are from Shakespeare 2005 and will appear parenthetically in the text.

tive. Shakespeare brings out the comedy of the scene, through Cleopatra's increasingly contradictory responses to the Messenger. She goes from being delighted at finding out that Octavia is a widow, "Widow! Charmian, hark!" to horrified at discovering Octavia's younger age. Her change in attitude is illustrated through her sudden shift in questioning, "Bear'st thou her face in mind," as she attempts to steer the conversation away from the focus on Octavia's youth. The scene illustrates the importance of beauty to Cleopatra – she is very much aware of the fact that she is an ageing woman, with her beauty declining. Overall, the scene cements the importance of appearance, suggesting that for all of Shakespeare's Cleopatra's brilliance, much of her power depends on her identity as an attractive woman. Cultivating and projecting beauty is thus most definitely a focus of Shakespeare's Cleopatra.

As was the case with Sidney and Daniel's plays, such questions of her visual appearance become closely tied up with questions of racial identity. In terms of the performance history of *Antony and Cleopatra,* for much of the first half of the twentieth century, Cleopatra's look was formalised in terms of whiteness – typically, pale-skinned, red-haired, and scantily clad (MacDonald 2002, 51-52). Over time, this presentation of Cleopatra began to be challenged, by critics such as Ania Loomba, who described Cleopatra as 'the non-European, the outsider, the white man's ultimate "other" leading the way (qtd in Aebischer 2012, 221). Carol Rutter offers a similar understanding of Cleopatra's racial identity arguing that the "play offers no one 'whiter' than the anti-sensualist, utterly sterile, imperialist Octavius; no one 'darker' than the constantly 'becoming' Cleopatra, whose 'infinite variety', like the Nile's, can't be mapped, contained, bounded" (qtd in Thompson 2021, 123). Of course, historical context is important when it comes to exploring Cleopatra's racial identity. For Shakespeare, and his contemporaries, the terms "Egypt" and "Egyptian" did not indicate any one race but instead conjured up images of various people, like gypsies, Jews, and Muslisms, who were all regarded as dark-skinned and seen as connected to the Moors (Loomba 2002, 115). All these groups were characterised by disguise, trickery, and gender inversion, threatening English rule and Christian faith (Thompson 2021, 126). The racial other, then, was automatically connected with something dangerous.

In this regard, evidence of Cleopatra's 'otherness' can indeed be found at the very beginning of Shakespeare's play, which opens with the Roman soldier Philo deploring what he sees as Antony's complete subjugation to Cleopatra: "The office and devotion of their view Upon a tawny front" (1.1.6) The adjective, "tawny" points to Cleopatra not being white. Including such an adjective makes clear that the soldiers' distrust of Cleopatra is acutely wrapped up in her non-whiteness, with the soldiers despairing that Antony has fixated his exemplary Roman self on the 'other.' The quotation also shows a complete devaluing of Cleopatra's identity. She is not being referred to by name or even seen as a real person – the focus is completely on her 'exotic otherness'. The negative labels attached to Cleopatra immediately present her racial identity in a negative light and establish a link between Cleopatra's race and her 'dangerous' sexuality. Philo imagines Cleopatra as a malevolent 'other' not bound by traditional conventions of femininity, able to dominate and control men. This connection between sexual domination and race is sustained elsewhere in *Antony and Cleopatra.* Food imagery is used throughout the play to suggest Cleopatra's status as a sexually available and desirable woman; she is described as Antony's "Egyptian dish" (2.6.126) and a "morsel" that he found left on Caesar's plate (2.13.117) (Loomba 2002, 125). Yet, crucially, Cleopatra is not just a treat to be consumed by Roman men. She also threatens to overwhelm them as illustrated by, "making hungry where she most satisfies" (2.2.243-4), and by comparing Antony to a fish which she intends to catch, 'And say "Ah ha, you're caught" (2.5.12-15) (ibid.). In other plays produced in the period, dark-skinned women are allowed to pay homage to white men, but in English drama, they cannot be whitened and cannot be invited to join the Christian family. Thus, the dark skin of Shakespeare's Cleopatra, and the fact that she revels in it, and crucially that Antony is ensnared by it, is especially striking (ibid.). Cleopatra then is not just simply a racialised other – she possesses her own power. Overall, Cleopatra straddles the line between conquest and weapon, and it is often unclear as to what role she belongs to or is operating under. Yet, clearly established (at least in the minds of the Romans) is the fearful link between Cleopatra's racial identity and her desire to dominate men.

Shakespeare presents Cleopatra as understanding her racial identity in a very different way from the Roman soldiers. She does not attempt to hide her blackness but instead embraces it. Cleopatra playfully presents her dark skin here as arising from the sun's attention. Like the soldiers, Cleopatra openly acknowledges her blackness relatively early on in the play, declaring, "Think on me, that am with Phoebus' amorous pinches black, / And wrinkled deep in time?" (1.5.26-7). The dark skin that Cleopatra identifies as arising from Phoebus's rough sexual play was typically understood as being the result of a cosmic accident when the chariot of the sun and the mighty winged horses which drew it veered out of their normal course under the poor management of Phoebus's son Phaeton (Macdonald 2002, 64-5). In her retelling of the story, Cleopatra gets rid of Phaeton. Phoebus alone determines Cleopatra's racial identity, through his loving touch. In her reinterpretation of the myth, Cleopatra's racial identity is defined not by misfortune, but by a god's desire for her. As such, Cleopatra's changing of the myth shows her rejection of authoritarian and imperialist applications of the myth (65-6). Her racial identity is not a defect that must be apologised for, nor is it a sign of sinfulness (as Philo suggests) but instead something within which she exists confidently.

These depictions testify to how much Shakespeare moved away from the Petrarchan model of beauty used by Sidney and Daniel. Yet, at the same time, Shakespeare invites ambiguity. Returning to the messenger scene, let's focus on the following lines, where Cleopatra invites the messenger to: "My bluest veins to kiss" (2.5.28). 'Blue blood' was typically used to characterise old and aristocratic families, as well as to allude to the blue appearance of the veins of individuals with a fair complexion as compared to those of dark skin (Oxford English Dictionary 2023, "blue blood (n.), Etymology"). Cleopatra's reference here, then, emphasises her royal status, but it complicates matters by possibly suggesting that her complexion was fairer than we might have imagined. Most importantly, it reveals how Shakespeare was far from consistent when it came to the presentation of Cleopatra's racial identity in *Antony and Cleopatra,* demonstrating a certain indecision when it comes to the colour of Cleopatra's skin (MacDonald 2002, 45). McDonald offers a convincing explanation for such inconsistency:

> I believe the play is finally so convinced of the cosmic import of Cleopatra's racial difference from the Romans that it cannot be bothered to be consistent about her skin colour. Its view of what her race means is so large as to render mere consistency of physical description irrelevant. Her fluctuating colour is of a piece with the double gender Plutarch ascribes to the queen-goddesses of Egypt: a performative announcement of her royal prerogative (2002, 60)

The focus then is less on the specifics of Cleopatra's racial identity, but rather on how it foregrounds Cleopatra's difference from the Romans. McDonald sees this as helping to facilitate Cleopatra's powerful identity as Queen of Egypt, an identity which seems to transcend mere mortal understandings, 'goddesses'. Even though it is not possible to come to a wholly satisfactory conclusion regarding the racial identity of Cleopatra in Shakespeare's version, what is crucial to underline is the fact that, by emphasising the Mediterranean context of the story, Shakespeare properly acknowledges the possibility of Cleopatra's being non-white, establishing discussions about Cleopatra's racial identity that are simply not present in Sidney and Daniel's versions. As we will see, such discussions will prove key to understanding Cleopatra's identity as a mother in Antony and Cleopatra, with Shakespeare's presentation of Cleopatra's motherhood furthering the feeling of essential difference between Cleopatra and the Romans, as highlighted by McDonald above.

4. Mother of a Nation

As previously mentioned, little mention of Cleopatra's identity as a mother is made in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Cleopatra's children are rarely talked about, nor do they appear on stage, unlike in Daniel and Sidney's plays. How we are meant to interpret this difference is not completely clear. Just as we saw with Shakespeare's presentation of Cleopatra's racial identity, there is more than one understanding available to us. At first glance, the fact that Cleopatra's children are barely mentioned within the play would at first seem to uphold the Roman view of Cleopatra as an unnatural and cruel woman, with her 'otherness' used to explain her lack of maternal instinct.

This idea that Shakespeare presents Cleopatra's motherhood negatively can be seen through his frequent association of Cleopatra with serpent imagery. Such imagery possesses negative connotations, when considered in light of its Christian context, being associated with the fall of mankind and the rise of sin (Kuriyama 1977, 325). By associating this imagery with Cleopatra, Shakespeare suggests that Cleopatra is unnatural and dangerous. This serpent imagery directly intersects with Cleopatra's presentation as a mother. For instance, te asp that Cleopatra uses to commit suicide has been the focus of multiple critical studies. The critic Kuriyama in one such study, identified the asp in the play as both a 'legal phallus' and a 'baby at her breast' (1977, 330). Cleopatra is adopting the traditional role of here the mother, breastfeeding her baby but the image is a perverted one. Rather than Cleopatra providing life to an infant, the 'suckling child' is killing her. Cleopatra's motherhood is thus presented as something corrupted – her actions with the asp becoming a perverse reflection of the natural processes of motherhood (breastfeeding). Furthermore, the asp as a 'legal phallus,' also has connotations of sexuality. Indeed, we might see Cleopatra's sexuality (the asp as a phallus) as overtaking her commitments as a mother (the asp as a breast-feeding baby). Overall, then, one could certainly make the case, that Shakespeare (from the imagery he utilises to describe her) presents Cleopatra as a bad, non-existent mother. Furthermore, we can gesture to Shakespeare's canon more widely, across which there are not many examples of exemplary mothers. Mothers are frequently absent from Shakespeare's texts, or if present, depicted as dangerous, e.g., Lady Macbeth and Volumnia.[5] The few 'good' mothers presented, tend to experience great suffering, e.g., Hermione in *The Winter's Tale.*

5 Lady Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most famous mothers, infamously remembered for her ruthless assertion that she "would take that baby while it was smiling at me, pull my nipple out of its mouth, and smash its brains out, if I had sworn to kill it as you have sworn to do this deed" (Shakespeare 1606, 1.7.56-57). Yet, it is worth noting that her famous lines about smashing her baby's head are nothing more than hypotheticals- a fantasy of infanticide that we never see realised. This ambiguity of Lady Macbeth's status as a mother is indicative more broadly of Shakespeare's approach to motherhood across his works.

Within much of this criticism exists the implication that mothers who cannot be categorised as 'exemplary' are not really mothers at all (Dunworth 2013, 3), suggesting Shakespeare had very fixed ideas around what constituted being a good mother.

However, it is worth challenging the overly simplistic interpretation (as presented above) that Shakespeare mistrusts mothers, seeing them only as 'bad'. Carol Thomas Neely, for instance, highlights the multiple possible reasons why mothers were absent in Shakespeare.

> The rarity of mothers [in Shakespeare's plays] may reflect or confirm demographic data showing that Renaissance women frequently died in childbirth. It may embody the social reality that patriarchal culture vested all authority in the main parent; making it both logical and fitting that he alone should represent that authority in the drama. It may derive . . . from generic conventions: the uncommonness of mature women in the genres of comedy, history play and tragedy. Or it may result from a scarcity of boy actors capable of playing mature women in Shakespeare's company. (Qtd in Dunworth 2013, 6)

Thus, there are potential dangers to focusing too closely upon absent mothers as evidence of misogyny, with the demands of the dramatic form and theatrical conventions being possible mitigations (ibid.). Furthermore, there is a convincing argument to be had that motherhood does feature in *Antony and Cleopatra*, albeit in a different way from Sidney and Daniel's texts. Throughout the play, motherhood is presented as being intrinsically connected to nationhood and place. Cleopatra's death in *Antony and Cleopatra* seems at face value to mark Rome's total triumph, with Egypt no longer challenging Rome's stability. Representing passion, Cleopatra seems set against cold Roman reason (Wisniewski 2001, 152). Her death would seemingly, therefore, point to the triumph of not only the Roman Empire but the Roman way of thinking over the Egyptian context.

However, such a reading of Cleopatra's death risks oversimplification. Like so much of the play, this is a moment characterised by ambiguity. Cleopatra's retreat into the monument could be interpreted as Cleopatra resisting the public's gaze, hoping to

secure privacy for her final moments. Yet, the critic Adelman argues that the 'retreat' into the monument serves as an act of resistance, allowing Cleopatra to rob Ceasar of his triumph, by preventing him from being able to arrange how events will be remembered (qtd in Cadman 2015, 8). Within the monument, Cleopatra can stage her death and legacy, in one final act of resistance to Rome. Furthermore, it is worth remembering here that *Antony and Cleopatra* stands out amongst Shakespeare's tragic canon, for giving a woman the final and climactic death (Stirling 1964, 127). The final focus is not on Antony, but on Cleopatra, affording her death even greater significance. Dying, Cleopatra embraces the identity of Egypt:

> *Enter* Iras *with a robe, crown, &c.*
> Cleopatra Give me my robe. Put on my crown. I have
> Immortal longings in me. Now no more
> The juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip.
> (5.2.275-7)

Her directives, 'Give me my robe, put on my crown,' show her adopting the markers of queenship, with Cleopatra asserting her identity as Queen of Egypt. The stage directions tell us that Shakespeare wanted the robe and crown to be real objects exuding a presence on stage – not just symbolic markers of power. In the space of the tomb, Cleopatra can define her image – attiring herself in her robe, crown and jewels and dying as a free queen of Egypt, rather than being led through the streets of Rome as Antony's imperial trophy (Cadman 2015, 8). Cleopatra is not a cowed figure here but triumphant, stunning everyone with the majesty of her appearance. In her splendour, Cleopatra finally becomes the Cleopatra that was earlier promised to us in Enobarbus's speech in 2.2. Cleopatra effectively gives 'birth' to a new image of Egypt – an Egypt no longer broken in defeat, but glorious and triumphant. In doing so, she reveals her awareness that a self-authored death would strike at the very heart of an ideological programme that relies heavily on public recognition of such rites (Laoutaris 2008, 240-241). Parading a captured Cleopatra through the streets of Rome would have powerfully demonstrated imperial Rome's power, but as the mother of Egypt, Cleopatra acts to prevent that.

The significance of the serpent imagery used for Cleopatra has been discussed above in terms of how it might fit with the idea of her as a 'bad' mother. Yet, if we consider the above conversations around Cleopatra's death, there is another possible interpretation. As previously mentioned, Cleopatra dies cradling an asp to her breast, with the language decidedly maternal, "Dost thou not see my baby at my breast / That sucks the nurse asleep?" (5.2.308-9). Cleopatra casts herself as a loving mother here, attentively caring for her children. If we consider how for much of the play, the asp has been used as a stand-in for Cleopatra, and more broadly Egypt, the line takes on extra meaning, with Cleopatra in effect nursing Egypt. Such a reading would support the argument that Cleopatra gives birth to the myth of Egypt. Cleopatra's suicide resists the traditions of Roman suicide (by the sword), dying instead from the asp's poison (Thompson 2021, 132), further supporting the argument that her death works as a repudiation of Roman culture and superiority.

Moreover, it is possible to see the connection between motherhood and nationhood as existing throughout *Antony and Cleopatra*, with the monument scene cementing this link. Cleopatra is repeatedly compared to the goddess Isis. Significantly, one comparison comes from Octavius Caesar himself, when he angrily discusses Cleopatra's and Antony's crowning of themselves and their children: "she In th' habiliments of the goddess Isis / That day appear'd" (3.6.16-17). Connecting Cleopatra and Isis further reinforces the idea of Cleopatra as defending Egyptian identity. Isis was believed to be the dominant strength behind the Mediterranean, known as the goddess of 'Mother Nature' (Wiśniewska 2001, 156). Isis who was regarded as the mistress of the Earth, sea and world of the dead, tended to be depicted with a double crown and was worshipped as the ideal mother (ibid). In the final scene monument scene then, Cleopatra is not just dressing up as the Queen of Egypt with her crown, but as the mother goddess herself. Her racial identity and identity as a mother, thus, may be said to work together for Cleopatra, allowing her to give birth to the glorious legend of Egypt.

6. Conclusion

Motherhood is a concept that has always exercised a particularly strong hold over the cultural imagination. Even today motherhood tends to be regarded as something completely natural, uninformed by the society around us (Dunworth 2013, 4). A mother's love tends to be regarded as something so strong and seemingly universal that it must owe something to nature. As such, very little flexibility is afforded to the concept of mothering – society tends to believe that there is only one way to be a good mother (ibid). Comparing Sidney, Daniel and Shakespeare's Cleopatras pushes back against such a view – highlighting how there are in fact multiple ways to be a mother. Mary Sidney and Samuel Daniel both feel in their texts the need to provide some explanation for Cleopatra's treatment of her children. They seek to offer mitigations to suggest that Cleopatra can be viewed as a good mother. Shakespeare is less interested in offering up such justifications. It would be wrong to say that motherhood doesn't feature in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*: in fact, the focus has simply changed. Shakespeare is less interested in Cleopatra as a mother of individual children but as the mother of a nation. This connection between motherhood and nation is further established by Shakespeare's complex and detailed presentation of Cleopatra's racial identity, which crucially commits to the Mediterranean context by exploring the possibilities of a non-white Cleopatra. In her death, Cleopatra gives birth to the myth of Egypt thus ensuring that despite Egypt's actual defeat, imperialist Rome will not be able to triumph.

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