

# “Cleopatra a gypsy”: Performing the Nomadic Subject in Shakespeare’s Alexandria, Rome and London

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## 1. *Gypsy Queen*

In the opening speech of Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, the Roman soldier Philo gives the audience an unflattering introduction to the Egyptian queen, as yet unnamed and unseen on stage:

His [Antony’s] captain’s heart [...] is become the bellows and the fan  
To cool a gypsy’s lust. (I.i.6-10)<sup>1</sup>

A lustful gypsy: this is not a good visiting card for Cleopatra. There were three meanings available for ‘gypsy’ in early modern English, none of them positive. The first is the pseudo-ethnographic attribute “of Egyptian nationality or origin” (*OED* 1b). The second meaning, which confines with the first, is “member of a nomadic people” – still the current meaning of the term – in particular what would later be known as the Romanies, who at the time were

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations are taken from William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. John Wilders, London, The Arden Shakespeare (Third Series), 1995.

erroneously thought to be of Egyptian origin, hence the term ‘gypsy’ (*OED* 1a). The third is the still less polite attribute “whore” (*OED* 2b), which seems to be Philo’s predominant meaning (hence “a gypsy’s lust”). There is an inevitable semantic overlap, in the play and in Elizabethan and Jacobean culture at large, between these three competing meanings<sup>2</sup>. This paper addresses the relationship between these three attributes – nomad, Egyptian and whore – in *Antony and Cleopatra* and in cultural history. My enquiry also tells a tale of the three cities invoked by Shakespeare: Alexandria, Rome and London.

The term ‘gypsy’ attributed to Cleopatra is both a pun and a tautology, given the fact that it is an aphetic form for ‘Egyptian’. The semantic migration of ‘gypsy’ into English took place via Latin *Aegyptius*, which influenced Middle English *gipcyan* (*OED*). This derivation betrays, in the first place, the fact that the perception of the Egyptians as a morally questionable ethnic group ultimately stems from the Roman colonial attitude to a subaltern people, since Egypt was a subjugated province of the Roman Empire. Augustan propaganda strategy was to represent the Egyptians as *other* with respect to Roman military and political order. The Egyptians – like gypsies in later cultures – were viewed in Rome as a devious and unreliable people, as testified by the anonymous *Bellum Alexandrinum* (c. 45 B.C.) narrating Julius Caesar’s campaigns in Egypt and Asia:

Yet, as far as I am concerned, had I now the task of defending the Alexandrians and proving them to be neither untrustworthy nor hot-headed, it would be a waste of many words: indeed when one gets to know both the people and its nature there can be no doubt whatever that their kind is extremely prone to treachery.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> On the three converging meanings of ‘gypsy’, see John Wilders’s comment at l.i.10 in the Arden edition.

<sup>3</sup> “At mihi si defendendi essent Alexandrini neque fallaces esse neque temerarii, multa oratio frustra absumeretur; dum vero uno tempore et natio eorum et natura cognoscatur, aptissimum esse hoc genus ad proditionem dubitare nemo potest”, *Bellum Alexandrinum* 7.2, quoted in Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2013, p. 358. See also Meyer Reinhold, “Roman Attitudes Towards Egyptians”, *Ancient World*, 3 (1980), pp. 97-103.

Egyptians are untrustworthy and treacherous: this suspicious attitude is reflected in Plutarch, for example in his account of how Antony "did defend the loue he bare unto this Aegyptian Cleopatra", as he somewhat dismissively calls her<sup>4</sup>, and in his general attribution of Antony's downfall to the deceitful behaviour of the Egyptian queen. Not by chance, in Shakespeare's play, it is Antony's Roman follower Philo who expresses the ideology of inflexible masculine *romanitas*, defined in contrast with untrustworthy feminine Egyptian promiscuity and mutability, qualities that are seen to threaten the Empire itself, especially given Cleopatra's proven powers of seduction. There may be the added implication that Cleopatra is a foreigner, an ethnic other, like all gypsies, in the country she happens to rule over. Which in turn implies that Egypt itself is politically and nationally Roman.

The English *gipcyan-gypsy* is the result not of a false etymology – since the derivation from *Aegyptius* is true – but of a false historical reference, since the Romanies had nothing to do with Egypt, and still less with Ptolemaic Egypt. Historically, the first news we have of the ethnic group, namely their arrival in Persia, dates from around 224 A.D., about 250 years after the death of Cleopatra<sup>5</sup>. The Romanies were not in fact of Egyptian but probably of Indian origin, although the early modern English did not have access to this information. And they never reached Egypt or Africa in general. 'Gypsy' is thus an anachronism and an anatopism, out of time and out of place. Shakespeare exploits the misnomer for the purposes of dramatizing Egypt simultaneously from a Roman and from an English perspective: Cleopatra is an *Aegyptia* for Shakespeare's Romans and Shakespeare's London audience alike.

Philo is not the only Roman in Shakespeare's play to accuse Cleopatra of being a gypsy. Antony himself, in his anger after the defeat at Actium, curses Cleopatra not only through the wh-word ("Triple-turned whore", as he calls her at IV.xii.13: see below, p. 38) but also through the g-word:

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<sup>4</sup> Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans [...] Translated out of Greek into French by James Amyot [...] and out of French into English by Thomas North*, London, Printed by Richard Field, 1579, p. 984.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Kenrick, *Historical Dictionary of the Gypsies (Romanies)*, Lanham, The Scarecrow Press, 2007, p. xix.

O, this false soul of Egypt! [...]  
 Like a right gypsy hath at fast and loose  
 Beguiled me to the very heart of loss. (IV.xii.27-32)

Cleopatra is a right gypsy, a true or proper gypsy (or perhaps an improper gypsy) because of her irresponsible behaviour during the battle: she has played “fast and loose” militarily as well as morally. Like Philo, Antony brings together here the triple meanings gypsy, Egyptian (“soul of Egypt”) and whore. He literalizes the lexical history of ‘gypsy’, rendering it interchangeable with ‘Egyptian’, so much so that he begins the same speech by invoking Cleopatra’s nationality:

All is lost!  
 This foul Egyptian hath betrayed me. (IV.xii.9-10)

For Antony, therefore, the two terms are synonymous. In both there is also an implication not only of whoredom but of nomadism: the accusation is that it is Cleopatra’s excessive mobility during the battle – from which she fled with her fleet, promptly followed by Antony himself (see below, p. 47) – to have caused the disaster. The phrase “right gypsy” therefore portrays a seductive, capricious and peripatetic *Aegyptia* from the viewpoint of an enamoured but humiliated Roman general. Antony’s Roman perspective on Cleopatra is in turn mediated and contaminated by the popular English understanding of ‘Egyptians’ as itinerant Romanies. This sets up a triangular perceptual relationship between Alexandria, Rome and London, where Cleopatra in Shakespeare’s Egypt is judged by the Romans, but from the lexical and semantic viewpoint of early modern England and of early modern English.

Antony’s interchangeable epithets ‘gypsy’ and ‘Egyptian’ are further conditioned by the language of bureaucracy and legislation, as well as popular literature, in Shakespeare’s day. ‘Gypsy’ was the most common popular word for the Romanies, but the ‘official’ public term was precisely ‘Egyptian’. The latter epithet – which may have been a kind of etymological loop, translating the aphetic idiomatic English ‘gypsy’ back to its Latin etymon – entered into English language and culture in the early

sixteenth century<sup>6</sup>, not long after the first documented evidence of Romany presence in England around 1513. The first Tudor 'Egyptians' were apparently well-received as pilgrims<sup>7</sup>, but this welcome was very short-lived. The story of their initial acceptance in England is told by Samuel Rid in his *Art of Jugling or Legerdemaine* (1612):

Certaine Egitianes banished their country (belike not for their good conditions) ariued here in England, who being excellent in quaint trickes and deusies, not known here at that time among is, were esteemed and had in great admiration, for what strangenesse of their attire and garments, together with their sleights and legerdemaines, they were spoke of farre and neere, insomuch that many of our English loyteres ioyned with them, and in time learned their craft and cozening.<sup>8</sup>

Rid's 'historical' account is a thinly-disguised justification for the later persecution of the "Egyptians", due to their supposedly devious and dangerous skills as tricksters, and their negative influence on native English "loiterers", in some ways recalling the Roman attribution of untrustworthiness and treachery to the ancient Egyptians. In England, welcome gave way very rapidly to discrimination. In 1530, only sixteen years after their first recorded presence in England, Henry VIII issued an order, the so-called 'Egyptians Act', expelling 'Egyptians' from the country, on pain of imprisonment and confiscation of their goods<sup>9</sup>. This Act was crucial in defining the official English attitude to Romanies:

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<sup>6</sup> The *OED*'s first example is from 1538, but there are earlier uses, including the 1530 Act mentioned below.

<sup>7</sup> Paola Pugliatti, "A Lost Lore: The Activity of Gypsies as Performers on the Stage of Elizabethan-Jacobean Street Theatre", in Paola Pugliatti and Alessandro Serpieri, eds, *English Renaissance Scenes: From Canon to Margins*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 259-310: 277.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Rid, *The Art of Jugling or Legerdemaine*, London, 1612, B1<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> On gypsies in early modern England, see *Gypsies and Other Travelers: A Report of a Study Carried out in 1965 and 1966 by a Sociological Research Section of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government*, London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1967, [https://archive.org/stream/op1269530-1001/op1269530-1001\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/op1269530-1001/op1269530-1001_djvu.txt) (accessed 1 December 2017); Peter Clark and David Souden, eds, *Migration and Society in Early Modern England*, London, Hutchinson, 1987; Mark Netzloff, "'Counterfeit Egyptians' and Imagined Borders: Jonson's *The Gypsies Metamorphosed*", *English Literary History*, 68:4 (2001), pp. 763-93; David Mayall, *Gypsy Identities 1500-2000*:

Forasmuch as before this tyme divers and many owntlandissh people calling themselves Egipsions using no craft nor faict of merchandise, have comen in to thys realme and goon from Shyre to Shyre and place to place in grete companye and used grete subtile and craftye meanys to deceyve the people bearing them in hande that they by palmestrye could tell menne and Womens Fortunes and soo many Tymes by craft and subiltie hath deceyved the people of theyr Money & alsoo have comitted many haynous Felonyes and Robberyes to the grete hurt and Disceipt of the people that they have comyn among: Be it therefore by the King our Souveraigne Lord the Lords Sp[irit]uall and temporal and by the comons in this present parliament assembled and by the auctorite of the same, ordeigned established and enacted that from henceforth noo suche persons be suffred to come within this the Kinges realme; And if they doo, then they and every of them soo doing shall forfait to the King our Souveraigne Lorde all theyr goods and catalls, and then to be comaunded to avoide the realme within xv daies next afre the comaundement upon payn of Imprisonnement.<sup>10</sup>

Henry's Egyptians Act not only makes explicit the synonymy between gypsies and Egyptians, but spells out the negative moral connotations of this ethnicity: they are "outlandish", i.e. literally foreign or alien, but also bizarre or outrageous, far removed from civilization. Such outlandishness is associated with their "crafty" skills in fortune telling, and their idleness and reluctance to work. According to Henry's Act, it is the Romanies themselves who "[call] themselves Egipsions". As Yaron Matras and John Morgan have shown, the term was in reality an "outward-facing self-descriptor", used only for purposes of communication with outsiders<sup>11</sup>. In other

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*From Egipcyans and Moon-men to the Ethnic Romany*, London, Routledge, 2004; Kenrick (cit.); Pugliatti (cit.); Becky Taylor, *Another Darkness, Another Dawn: A History of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers*, London, Reaktion, 2014; Yaron Matras, *The Romani Gypsies*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2015; David Cressy, "Trouble with Gypsies in Early Modern England", *The Historical Journal*, 59:1 (2016), pp. 45-70; John Morgan, "'Counterfeit Egyptians': The Construction and Implementation of a Criminal Identity in Early Modern England", *Romani Studies*, 5, 26:2 (2016), pp. 105-28.

<sup>10</sup> *Act concerning Egyptians*, 1530, [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/citizenship/citizen\\_subject/transcripts/egyptians\\_act.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/citizenship/citizen_subject/transcripts/egyptians_act.htm) (accessed 1 December 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Morgan, p. 106; see also Matras, pp. 136-37.

words, they called themselves Egyptians only to English authorities, such as magistrates, and as Morgan goes on to warn: "we must remain sceptical even to these self-definitions, as they were frequently elicited through state-directed interpellations"<sup>12</sup>. They were called – rather than being self-called – Egyptians, especially in official legislation, and were thus obliged to name themselves such in their dealings with officialdom.

The 1530 Egyptians Act was part of a mass persecution of Romanies across Europe, that resulted in their expulsion from the Holy Roman Empire in 1482, from Milan in 1493, from France in 1504, etc.<sup>13</sup>. Henry VIII's Act, however, appears to have been ineffective, as is suggested by the new Egyptians Act signed by Queen Mary in 1554. The new Act allowed Romanies to reside in England on condition that they "leave that naughty, idle and ungodly Life and Company"<sup>14</sup>: i.e. settle as honest workers, and thereby cease to be gypsies. The punishment for failing to do so is made more severe, namely the death penalty. The persecution of the Egyptians continued unabated in Elizabeth's reign, and indeed in 1596 106 men and women were condemned to death at York just for being Romani, although most were later reprieved for the sake of their children<sup>15</sup>.

Implicit in the second Act's invitation to the Egyptians to become settled workers is the charge of vagrancy or nomadism. Indeed, legislation on Egyptians intersected with contemporary vagrancy laws. In the same year as the first 'Egyptians Act', 1530, Parliament passed the so-called 'Vagabonds Act', which outlawed travelers

using divers and subtle crafty and unlawful games and plays, and some of them feigning themselves to have knowledge in physic, physiognomy, palmistry, or other crafty sciences, whereby they bear the people in hand, that they can tell their destinies, deceases and

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<sup>12</sup> Morgan, p. 123.

<sup>13</sup> Kenrick, p. xxi.

<sup>14</sup> Danby Pickering, ed., *The Statutes at Large, from the First Year of Queen Mary, to the Thirty-fifth Year of Queen Elizabeth*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1763, vol. VI, p. 29; see also Mayall, p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> *Gypsies and Other Travelers*, p. 2.

fortunes, and such other like fantastical imaginations, to the great deceit of the king's subjects.<sup>16</sup>

Although the 'Vagabonds Act' does not explicitly name Egyptians, the "crafty" activities it legislates against, such as palmistry and fortune telling (fortune tellers were liable to be whipped) are the very crimes cited against Egyptians. By association, the Egyptians become a category of vagabonds or nomadic vagrants.

The accusation of habitual and menacing nomadism is also present in popular literature. In his antivagrants pamphlet *Lantern and Candlelight* (1608) Thomas Dekker describes the quasi-military movements of the Egyptians the length and breadth of England:

They are commonly an army about foure-score strong, yet they neuer march with all their bagges and baggages together, but (like boot-halers) they forage up and downe countries, 4. 5. or 6. In a company.<sup>17</sup>

Ben Jonson's masque *The Gypsies Metamorphosed* (1621) begins with the itinerant gypsy Jackman and family coming onstage with two horses, the sign and means of their nomadism:

*Enter a Gipsy, being the JACKMAN, leading a horse laden with Five little children bound in a trace of scarfs upon him; followed by a SECOND, leading another horse laden with stolen poultry, &c.*<sup>18</sup>

This recalls Shakespeare's own allusion to horse-riding gypsies in *As You Like It*:

2 PAGE

I'faith, i'faith, and both in a tune like two gypsies on a horse. (V.iii.14-15)<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Cressy, p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Dekker, *Lanthe and Candle-light*, London, 1608, G5<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> *The Progresses, Processions, and Magnificent Festivities, of King James the First*, London, J. B. Nichols, 1828, vol. IV, pp. 674-75.

<sup>19</sup> William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Juliet Dusinberre, London, The Arden Shakespeare (Third Series), 2006.



The two gypsies in question, in Shakespeare's comedy, may indeed be, as Juliet Dusinberre suggests, "skilled riders"<sup>20</sup>, as well as jig-singers, but they are surely also vagrant travellers, like Jonson's Jackman. In the opening speech of the masque, Jonson – explicitly invoking the figure of Cleopatra in mocking the supposed origins of gypsies in Ptolemaic Egypt – turns the Jackmans' nomadism into a kind of cross-country promiscuity:

JACKMAN

Room for the five Princes of Ægypt, mounted all upon one horse,  
like the four sons of Aymon, to make the miracle the more by a head,  
if it may be! Gaze upon them, as on the offspring of Ptolemy,  
begotten upon several Cleopatras, in their several Counties.<sup>21</sup>

Jonson's "several Cleopatras" are all strictly English, giving birth to "Princes" across the counties of their native homeland, "from Shyre to Shyre and place to place", as the 1530 Egyptians Act puts it. This image of an English-born Queen of Egypt is similarly invoked by Samuel Rid:

This Giles Hather (for so was his name) together with his whore Kit Calot, in short space had following them a pretty traine, he tearming himselfe the King of Egiptians, and she the Queene, ryding about the country at their pleasures uncontrolled.<sup>22</sup>

Rid's use of "queen" doubtless puns on the slang word 'quean', prostitute (or "whore", as Rid graciously calls Kit Calot). Since gypsy women were considered to be by definition whores, the expression 'gypsy queen' becomes another tautology, as indeed – in the Jacobean context – does 'Egyptian queen'.

The early modern lexical field of Egyptian vagrants and their queens could not fail to condition further the English audience's perception of Shakespeare's Egyptian queen, accused by her own husband of being both "gypsy" and "whore". Antony calls Cleopatra "queen" some sixteen times in *Antony and Cleopatra*, out of a total of forty-three uses of the epithet in the play. This

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<sup>20</sup> See Juliet Dusinberre's comment at V.iii.14 in the Arden edition.

<sup>21</sup> *The Progresses*, p. 675.

<sup>22</sup> Rid, B1<sup>v</sup>.

appellation is usually reverential and affectionate, the more so since it reflects Antony's own status ("Come on, my queen", III.xiii.196), but on occasion it becomes more ambiguous: "I must from this enchanting queen break off" (I.ii.135). Analogously, when Octavius in Rome describes Antony as being – under the effeminizing power of Cleopatra – "not more manlike / Than Cleopatra, nor the Queen of Ptolemy / More womanly than he" (I.iv.5-7), his use of the royal epithet may not be altogether respectful, anticipating as it does Jonson's "offspring of Ptolemy, begotten upon several Cleopatras"<sup>23</sup>.

## 2. Counterfeit Egyptians

A further issue raised by both Jonson and Rid is that of the so-called 'counterfeit Egyptians', namely English-born beggars or displaced labourers who passed themselves off as gypsies, perhaps in the hope of evading anti-vagrant legislation. The 1562 Act 'for further Punishment of Vagabonds, calling themselves Egyptians' singled out false Egyptians for severe punishment, ranging from loss of goods to death<sup>24</sup>. This Act thus apparently affords *alien* nomads calling themselves Egyptians a certain authenticity, even if they were already liable to punishment by existing legislation. In introducing the newer category of *English* vagrants calling themselves Egyptians, the 1562 Act identifies a different crime worthy of separate punishment. Counterfeit Egyptians are rife in Jacobean literature. The falseness of their claimed national origins in 'Ptolemaic' Egypt – again as if they were the offspring of Cleopatra – is one of the gypsy tricks denounced by Dekker:

If they be Egyptians, sure I am they never descended from the tribes of any of those people that came out of the land of Egypt. Ptolemy king of the Egyptians, I warrant, never called them his subjects; no, nor Pharaoh before him.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *The Progresses*, p. 675.

<sup>24</sup> Netzloff, p. 771.

<sup>25</sup> Dekker, G4<sup>v</sup>.

The category of the counterfeit Egyptian is somewhat controversial issue in recent scholarship. The adjective 'counterfeit' may be interpreted as meaning dishonest and deceptive or – as in the Dekker passage – fraudulent, false. According to David Cressy, both meanings are implied in the legislation: "They were 'counterfeit' because of their fraudulent practices, and because they passed themselves as 'Egyptians'"<sup>26</sup>. Paola Pugliatti likewise discerns a double form of deception and disguise:

It is evident, therefore, that the statutes are recording two different levels of disguise observed in two different groups of vagrants: that of Gypsies who 'pretend[ed] to be Egypcians', and that of local beggars who 'wander[ed] in the Habite, Forme or Atture' of the former (i.e., of 'counterfeited Egipcians').<sup>27</sup>

John Morgan, instead, maintains that 'counterfeit' refers to dishonest gypsies as a whole, and that, especially after further legislation in 1598, there was no legal difference between alien Egyptians and 'pretend' English Egyptians:

The distinction between pretending to be 'Egyptian' and wandering in the form of 'counterfeit Egyptains' is the final semantic shift, stripping the originally defined group of a specific geographical label. All 'alien' wanderers are now said to be 'ptending themselves to be Egipcyans' and those deemed to be imitating them are now, in the final analysis, double counterfeiters. The Egyptian identity after 1598 is always a deceitful imposture, and no punitive distinction is drawn between the 'natural subject' and the alien.<sup>28</sup>

Be this as it may from a strictly legislative point of view, there is nevertheless no doubt that in the anti-gypsy literature – as the Dekker, Rid and Jonson passages show – 'counterfeit' is interpreted with reference to false nationality. 'Egyptian' becomes a performative category, acted out by supposed aliens and fraudulent natives alike. This is doubtless one of the reasons why gypsies ended up on the early modern English stage, not only in

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<sup>26</sup> Cressy, p. 57.

<sup>27</sup> Pugliatti, p. 275.

<sup>28</sup> Morgan, p. 118.

Jonson's masque but also in plays such as Thomas Middleton's *More Dissemblers Besides Women* (c. 1622), and Middleton and Rowley's *The Spanish Gypsie* (c. 1623)<sup>29</sup>.

Shakespeare's Cleopatra is not liable to punishment for dissembling her nationality: she not only calls herself Egyptian ("As I am Egypt's queen", I.i.30) but is called Egyptian, in all senses, by others, especially the Romans. If she can be considered counterfeit, it is in the performative sense of playing or being a theatrical role, that of a foreign queen in ancient times. Such counterfeit performativity is made most explicit in her fear of having an adolescent actor "boy my greatness / I th' posture of a whore" (V.ii.219-20: see below, p. 52). On Shakespeare's stage it was the actor boying her greatness who, in the words of the 1562 Act, 'pretend[ed] to be Egypcian', as well as pretending to be a woman. Cleopatra is at once a 'true' Egyptian and a 'counterfeit' Egyptian. Her ethnic identity, as Pascale Aebischer writes in her essay on Renaissance Cleopatras, is a continually renewed and strategically unstable performative construct:

It becomes obvious that Cleopatra's politically and sexually motivated performances of race dismantle the binaries of Rome vs. Egypt, self vs. other which Romans and critical tradition alike have used as a means of fixing her identity. For Shakespeare's theatrical queen, a 'wonderful piece of work' that carefully constructs itself anew in every scene (I.ii.145-46), racial attributes are not properties that are embodied, but theatrical properties to be deployed and discarded at will<sup>30</sup>.

### 3. "Like to a vagabond": on Cleopatra's nomadism

Recent historical commentators have questioned another aspect of Cleopatra's Egyptian ethnicity. As Adrian Goldsworthy underlines she was culturally Greek rather than Egyptian<sup>31</sup>; Greek was her first language and she had been educated in Greek literature and

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<sup>29</sup> Pugliatti, p. 296.

<sup>30</sup> Pascale Aebischer, "The Properties of Whiteness: Renaissance Cleopatras from Jodelle to Shakespeare", *Shakespeare Survey*, 65 (2012), pp. 221-38: 237-38.

<sup>31</sup> Adrian Goldsworthy, *Antony and Cleopatra*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2010, *passim*.

culture. Imagining her as exotically African was again part of Roman propaganda. So was imagining her as erotically African, as the whore or *Aegyptia* of Alexandria. The same might be said of Shakespeare's Romans. Antony, after the defeat at Actium, accuses her of repetitive promiscuity, alluding to her earlier love affairs with prominent Romans (the "credit she had", as Plutarch delicately puts it in North's translation, "with *Iulius Caesar*, and *Cneus Pompey* (the sonne of *Pompey* the great)"<sup>32</sup>:

All is lost;  
This foul Egyptian hath betrayed me.  
My fleet hath yielded to the foe, and yonder  
They cast their caps up and carouse together  
Like friends long lost. Triple-turned whore! (IV.xii.9-13)

Cleopatra is triple-turned in her amorous and military affairs alike, turning, as she does, from the battle, from one sea to another (she lifts her ships, as Plutarch narrates, from the Mediterranean to the gulf of Arabia) and from Antony himself.

Antony's "triple-turned whore" raises the related issue of Cleopatra's supposed gypsy-like nomadism, his other main accusation against her in the play. Cleopatra, in this narration, moves from lover to lover and from place to place: she is, to use Octavius's metaphor, "Like to a vagabond flag upon the stream" (I.iv.45)<sup>33</sup>. Plutarch gives some credit to the image of Cleopatra as a nomadic seductress: he first presents her on the move, in her barge on the river Cydnus, taking her from Alexandria to Tarsus, although, as Plutarch's own account makes clear, it actually was her fascinated Roman visitors, from Julius Caesar to Antony to Octavius, who came and went, while she stayed put in Alexandria to receive them.

Shakespeare himself seems to defend Cleopatra from the charge of gypsy-like nomadism, not in *Antony and Cleopatra* but in an earlier play, *Romeo and Juliet*, where he makes his first proleptic mention of his future heroine. In Act II scene iv, Mercutio makes fun of Romeo in love:

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<sup>32</sup> Plutarch, p. 981.

<sup>33</sup> Compare Jonson's scoffing allusion to "the offspring of Ptolemy, begotten upon several Cleopatras, in their several Counties", *The Progresses*, p. 675.

Laura to his lady was but a kitchen-wench [...] Dido a dowdy,  
Cleopatra a gypsy, Helen and Hero hildings and harlots, Thisbe a  
grey eye or so, but not to the purpose. (II.iv.39-43)<sup>34</sup>

The famous women mentioned by Mercutio – none of them comparable to Juliet – are paradoxically associated either with low rank (“kitchen-wench”), shabbiness (“dowdiness”), or with dubious moral behaviour: “hildings”, “harlots” and “grey eye”, as well as “gypsy” are all more or less synonymous with ‘whore’. The point of Mercutio’s joke, however, is that these attributions are outrageously false, since all the heroines – including, in this context, Cleopatra – are taken instead as models of fidelity, if not of chastity, making it hard for Romeo’s beloved to match them. Mercutio’s use of “gypsy” is thus counterfactual: in other words, to consider Cleopatra a mere gypsy, i.e. a whore and a nomad, is a travesty of historical truth, like considering Hero a harlot. Mercutio is thus defending the honour of the Egyptian queen, rather like Chaucer in *The Legend of Good Women* (of which Mercutio’s ‘good women’ speech may be a parody):

Ye men, that falsly sweren many an oth  
That ye wol deye, if that your love be wroth,  
Here may ye seen of women whiche a trouthe!<sup>35</sup>

Mercutio’s defence regards both Cleopatra’s supposed promiscuity, and, more in particular, her putative nomadism. Dido, Hero and the other good women were essentially infatuated domestic heroines, faithful to their respective visiting lovers (Aeneas landing in Carthage, Leander crossing the Hellespont) and killed themselves for love at home. Much the same, Shakespeare implies, is true of Cleopatra, who remains and dies in Alexandria.

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, likewise, the heroine’s behaviour can hardly be described as nomadic in any literal sense. Apart from the two ‘aquatic’ episodes on the river Cydnus and on the sea at

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<sup>34</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. René Weis, London, The Arden Shakespeare (Third Series), 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *Poetical Works*, ed. F. N. Robinson, London, Oxford University Press, 1957 (second edition), p. 584.

Actium, the tragedy always shows her stably at home in Alexandria until her death. She is, moreover, physically and symbolically associated with ponderously static and permanent architectural structures, characteristic of the Ptolemaic dynasty of which she is the last representative, in particular the monument that she herself has constructed, and which will become her own tomb. She similarly associates herself with the pyramids, by which she probably means monumental obelisks of the kind later known as Cleopatra's needles, and which she again relates to her own death:

Rather make  
My country's high pyramids my gibbet  
And hang me up in chains! (V.ii.60-62)

Cleopatra is also metonymically connected in the play with furniture and household objects that likewise denote static domesticity rather than mobility. She is shown and described in chairs, notably the so-called 'chair of gold' on which, according to Octavius, she was publicly enthroned (III.vi.3-5). Otherwise, as object of Roman desire, she is recurrently associated with the bed. Enobarbus narrates that "She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed" and that "[Apollodorus carried] A certain queen to Caesar in a mattress" (II.vi.70). "I drunk him to his bed", she boasts of Antony (II.v.21). Even at her death, Octavius orders his guards to "Take up her bed" (V.ii.355). The poses or positions in which she is consequently described are those of sitting and reclining. Enobarbus famously describes "The barge she *sat* in" at Cydnus (II.ii.200). "Let me sit down. O Juno!" she pleads to the angry Antony after Actium; "No, no, no, no, no!", he exclaims, but sit down she does (III.xi.28-29). Or alternatively, she lies down, dreaming of eternal Egyptian recumbence:

on Nilus' mud  
Lay me stark naked [...]. (V.ii.57-58)

and indeed she explicitly contrasts Egyptian reclination or horizontality with the prospect of enforced verticality in Rome:

Shall they hoist me up

And show me to the shouting varletry  
Of censuring Rome? (V.ii.54-56)

One of the play's central dramatic antinomies is that between moving and sitting, or between mobility and what is known in cultural anthropology as sedentism. Even today, among scholars of nomadism, as Susan Kent has observed:

There is sometimes a failure to recognize a basic semantic difference between the terms mobility, sedentism, and nomadism. The terms are used here to denote conditions of group movement. Nomadism is the movement of a group on a landscape and sedentism is the lack of movement. Mobility is simply the movement of a group (not a camp) through space. Nomadism and sedentism, then, denote the amount of movement or mobility involved. [...] Nomadism and sedentism represent the extremes of the mobility continuum.<sup>36</sup>

In the case of Cleopatra, this semantic confusion between mobility and nomadism is strategically exploited by the Romans. The Egyptians were a decidedly non-nomadic people, indeed one of the prime examples of a sedentic community whose achievements included, as Shakespeare underlines, the creation of monumental architecture. Even the Egyptian cult of the dead implied the eternal sedentism of the mummified body as a means to the preservation of the soul. At the same time, Egypt was culturally and militarily mobile, intent on extending its influence well beyond national boundaries (not least through Cleopatra's "triple-turned" Realpolitik towards Roman leaders). Shakespeare's Cleopatra is a perfect expression of such mobile sedentism.

It is precisely her sedentism, her reluctance to stand and to move, and especially to move to Rome, that characterizes the finale of Shakespeare's play, as of earlier narrative and dramatic representations. In all versions of the Cleopatra story she is determinedly sedentic and anti-nomadic, in that her one desire is to stay and die in Alexandria. In Plutarch she is anxious not to be buried in Rome, while Antony, paradoxically, is buried in Egypt:

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<sup>36</sup> Susan Kent, *Farmers as Hunters: The Implications of Sedentism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 2.



Whilst we liued together, nothing could seuer our companies: but now at our death, I feare me they will make us change our contries. For as thou being a ROMANE, hast bene buried in ÆGYPT: euen so wretched creature I, an ÆGYPTIAN, shall be buried in ITALIE, which shall be all the good that I haue receiued by thy countrie.<sup>37</sup>

Being 'an Ægyptian' means to stay put in Alexandria, even posthumously. In Samuel Daniel's *The Tragedy of Cleopatra* (1594), she fears being the object, in Rome, of the vengeful gaze of Octavia.

That Rome should see my scepter-bearing hands  
Behind me bound, and glory in my teares,  
That I should passe whereas *Octauia* stands,  
To view my misery, that purchas'd hers?<sup>38</sup>

In Mary Sidney's *Tragedy of Antony* (1592) she likewise resists the journey to Rome, prophesying to her children public humiliation there as cheap manual labour imported from the east:

Who knows if that your hands false *Destinie*  
The Scepters promis'd of imperious *Rome*,  
In stede of them shall crooked shepehookes beare,  
Needles or forks, or guide the carte, or plough?<sup>39</sup>

Shakespeare's Cleopatra likewise foresees the mobility that the Romans intend to impose on her, by way of geopolitical conquest: "he'll lead me, then, in triumph", she says of Octavius (V.ii.108). This raises the spectre of a different form of nomadism, namely enforced cultural, as well as physical, mobility as a Roman trophy. In the words of Stephen Greenblatt:

Mobility is not incidental here: physically displacing conquered chieftains, compelling them to parade through the streets, exposing them to the gaze of strangers are all key elements in what it means

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<sup>37</sup> Plutarch, p. 1009.

<sup>38</sup> Samuel Daniel, *The Tragedy of Cleopatra*, in *Dramaticke Poems*, London, John Waterson, 1635, pp. 429-79: 431.

<sup>39</sup> Mary Sidney, *Tragedy of Antony*, 1592, G3<sup>v</sup>; on Cleopatra's 'needles', in quite a different sense, see below, p. 52.

for the Romans to make a much larger cultural field available for transfer to themselves.<sup>40</sup>

Shakespeare's Cleopatra, unlike Mary Sidney's, fears not Roman needles but Roman representation. She fears having *self*-representation imposed on her in Rome, her living body placed on public display as an "Egyptian puppet" (V.ii.207) to the populace, and she likewise fears representation by *others*, particularly by boy actors in the Roman amphitheatre, and being then obliged to witness the spectacle as member of the audience. In this case, therefore, not self-representation but as it were self-spectatorship:

I shall see  
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness  
I'th' posture of a whore. (V.ii.218-20)

Cleopatra therefore imagines being represented in Rome as a gypsy in all its senses, namely as an Egyptian 'puppet', "I'th' posture of a whore", an exotic and erotic nomadic stranger brought from afar.

The well-known irony in this passage, of course, is that as she speaks she is already being represented far from home, her greatness performed or 'boyed' by an adolescent actor squeaking her lines not in the Roman amphitheatre but on the stage of the London Globe theatre. Her speech is a kind of self-performing prophecy, which projects into the future an event that actually took place in the distant historical past and is now being theatrically recreated in the present. This triple time scheme also involves a triangular spatial relationship, again between the Alexandria where she is supposedly speaking, the Rome she fears being taken to, and the early modern London where the feared performance is currently taking place. In this sense, Cleopatra's geographic and domestic anti-nomadism is belied by her conspicuous cultural mobility. She would like to stay home, but she is already elsewhere. In the event, Cleopatra may avoid travel through her suicide, thereby averting self-performance in Rome, but as she foresees she

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<sup>40</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, "Cultural Mobility: An Introduction", in Stephen Greenblatt, ed., *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 1-23: 8.

cannot avoid posthumous representation and posthumous nomadism.

In Plutarch, the public exhibiting of Cleopatra's body does take place in Rome, post-mortem, and indeed shows her – like the finale of Shakespeare's play – at the very moment of her death, but in the form of a painting:

in his triumphe [Caesar] caried *Cleopatraes* image, with an Aspicke byting of her arme.<sup>41</sup>

If Cleopatra gets *her* way by means of the deadly asp, Octavius gets *his* way by taking both queen and asp to Rome, albeit in symbolic form. She is publicly exhibited in the streets of Rome performing her last act and becomes literally an icon of Roman imperial power.

The attribution of 'Egyptian' nomadism or vagrancy to Cleopatra is therefore justified only post-mortem, and in pictorial form. Otherwise, if she is to be considered nomadic at all, it is only in the performative sense that Rosi Braidotti gives the adjective in her definition of the nomadic subject:

nomadic becoming is neither reproduction nor just imitation, but rather emphatic proximity, intensive interconnectedness. [...] Nomadic shifts designate therefore a creative sort of becoming; a performative metaphor that allows for otherwise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction of experience and of knowledge.<sup>42</sup>

The nomadic self is a subject in flux, intrinsically other, always in the process of becoming, not – from Braidotti's perspective – in direct opposition to the dominant power (in Cleopatra's case Rome), but nevertheless independent and indeed insubordinate, as her resistance to Octavius's attempts to subjugate her suggests. Cleopatra is a nomad only to the extent that she is determinedly other, outlandish, with regard to the hegemonic power of Rome. It is this insubordinate resistance to Roman supremacy that

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<sup>41</sup> Plutarch, p. 1010.

<sup>42</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, pp. 5-6.

constitutes Cleopatra's true 'gypsy'-like nomadism; in the words of Carol Meija LaPerle:

Scenes of Egyptian idleness are considered wasteful and indolent by the Roman critics in Shakespeare's play. However, as a "right gypsy", Cleopatra performs insubordination: resisting the supremacy of Rome, defying the tyranny of function, mocking the duties of royal privilege, and refusing to be a lawful race.<sup>43</sup>

#### 4. Coda: Cleopatra's nomadic cultural afterlife

Cleopatra, therefore, finally leaves her native Alexandria only in the form of a picture. There is a certain poetic or artistic justice to this, since in both Plutarch and Shakespeare Cleopatra presents herself precisely as a painted image in her successful bid to seduce Antony on the river Cydnus:

She was layed under a pauillion of cloth of gold of tissue, apparelled and attired like the goddesse Venus, commonly drawn in picture.<sup>44</sup>

ENOBARBUS

[...] she did lie

In her pavilion, cloth-of-gold of tissue,  
O'erpicturing that Venus where we see  
The fancy outwork nature. (II.ii.208-11)

Her conceit of becoming an erotic picture, a seductive self-portrait, is literalized by Octavius's carrying of her icon in Rome. It is also prophetic of her later cultural afterlife in early modern art, which leads me to consider the artistic nomadism or cultural mobility to which Cleopatra was subjected in late Renaissance Europe.

There are countless sixteenth and seventeenth-century painted images of the queen either sitting seductively in her barge, as in Agostino Tassi's celebrated 1578 painting, or nakedly and erotically

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<sup>43</sup> Carol Meija LaPerle, "An Unlawful Race: Shakespeare's Cleopatra and the Crimes of Early Modern Gypsies", *Shakespeare* (May 2016), pp. 226-38: 236.

<sup>44</sup> Plutarch, p. 981.

recumbent with her asp, in Italian paintings from Michelangelo to Guido Reni to Artemisia Gentileschi. It is to this early modern iconographic tradition of pictorial Cleopatras that Shakespeare alludes in another intertextual episode, this time in a later play, *Cymbeline*, set in an ancient Britain province of the Roman empire. In Act II scene iv, the Machiavellian Italian Iachimo describes to the credulous Briton Posthumus the pictures and furnishings he noted in the bedchamber of Posthumus's wife Imogen, so as to convince him of her infidelity. Among the clues to her guilt, pride of place goes to a tapestry representation of the Egyptian queen on her barge at Cydnus, in what is in effect a Shakespearian reworking, just a few years later, of Enobarbus's description:

First, her bedchamber—  
 [...] it was hanged  
 With tapestry of silk and silver, the story  
 Proud Cleopatra when she met her Roman  
 And Cydnus swelled above the banks.  
 (*Cymbeline* II.iv.83-94)<sup>45</sup>

Since Iachimo's intention is to convince Posthumus of his sexual liaison with Imogen, his underlining of the presence of Cleopatra in her chamber is not casual: she becomes again the erotic object of the Roman gaze associated metonymically with the bed of Iachimo's object of desire, the British princess Imogen. In so doing, he bears witness to Cleopatra's early modern cultural nomadism, the circulation of art objects and domestic items celebrating the cult of Cleopatra across Europe from the sixteenth century onwards.

As in *Cymbeline*, the nomadic geographical trajectory of these objects involved both Rome and London, as for example in the case of the Italian playing card showing the half-naked Cleopatra and her asp, that was imported from Italy to seventeenth-century England and is now found in the British Museum (fig. 1):

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<sup>45</sup> William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, ed. Valerie Wayne, London, The Arden Shakespeare (Third Series), 2017.

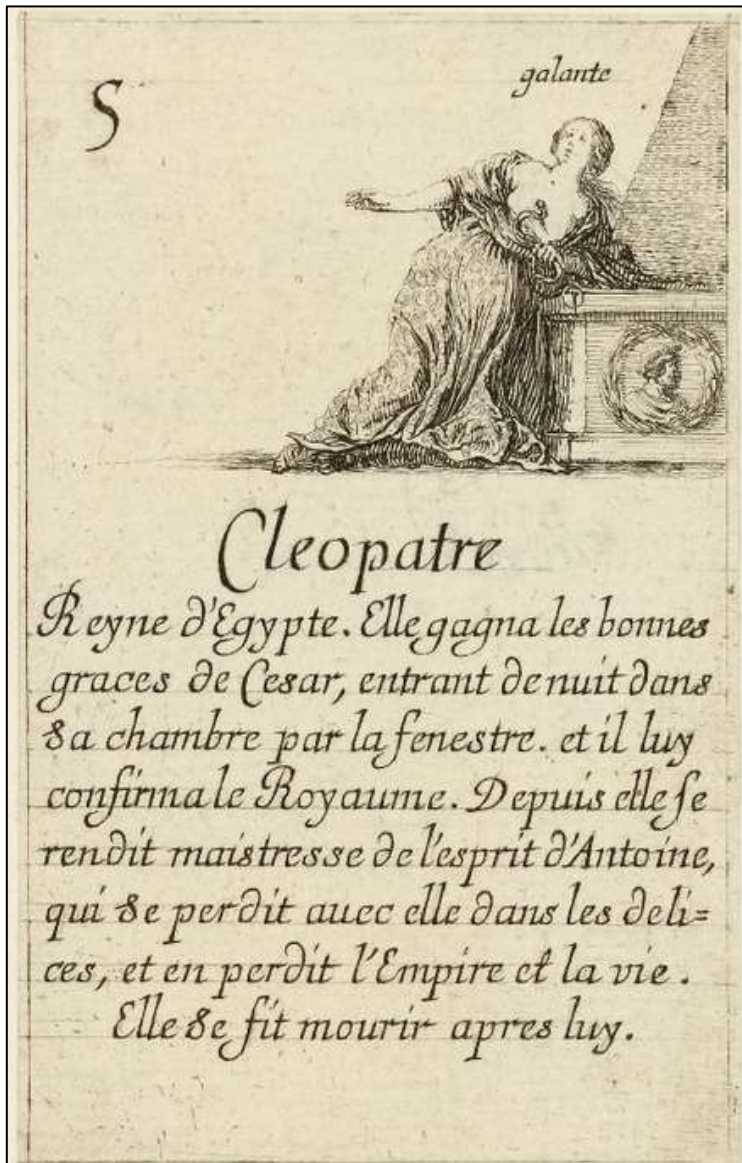


Fig. 1 Cleopatra playing card, Italian school, 1644  
 (courtesy of the British Museum)

Cleopatra is once again the object of Roman and English cultural desire. At the same time, Shakespeare's allusion in *Cymbeline* to his own earlier play may suggest that *Antony and Cleopatra* helped inaugurate the specifically English cult of Cleopatra. Shakespeare's

play certainly influenced the flourishing Cleopatra industry in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain, which produced countless reclining household Cleopatras, complete with asp, in three-dimensional forms, from Staffordshire earthenware (see fig. 2) to Swansea pearlware<sup>46</sup>, preferably to be placed next to analogous china figures of Shakespeare himself.



Fig. 2 Figure of Cleopatra in glazed earthenware, early nineteenth century (courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum)

I cannot conclude this discussion of the gypsy queen's posthumous nomadic progress from Alexandria to London, via Rome, without returning for a moment to Cleopatra's needle. The so-called pyramids or monumental obelisks that in *Antony and Cleopatra* symbolize immovable permanence become in turn the objects of enforced cultural mobility. The first obelisk taken from Alexandria to Rome, in 40 A.D., as colonial trophy, was well-known in England at the time of Shakespeare, especially after Pope Sixtus V had it moved to St Peter's Square to great international (especially Catholic)

<sup>46</sup> See <https://www.skinnerinc.com/auctions/2616M/lots/801> (accessed 1 December 2017).

acclaim in 1586<sup>47</sup>. It was popularly known in England as St Peter's needle, but in the seventeenth century it and other obelisks came increasingly to be associated, by the English, with Cleopatra herself (see fig. 2). The orientalist Robert Huntington mentions in his 1684 letter to the Royal Society on "the Porphyry Pillars in Egypt" that "The *Franks* [the Germans] call them *Aguglia's*, the *English* in particular *Cleopatra's needles*, but the inhabitants content themselves with the general name of pillars"<sup>48</sup>. Again, the anachronistic English attribution of the obelisks to Cleopatra may have been in part influenced by Shakespeare's heroine and by later adaptations of the play such as Dryden's 1677 version.



Fig. 3 Francis Frith, *Cleopatra's Needle*, c. 1850  
(courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum)

<sup>47</sup> See Jason Thompson, *Wonderful Things: A History of Egyptology 1: From Antiquity to 1881*, Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 2015, vol. III, p. 65.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Huntington, "An Account of the Porphyry Pillars in Egypt" (1684), in *Memoirs of the Royal Society*, London, G. Smith, 1739, vol. II, pp. 286-87: 286.



The culmination of the British cult of Cleopatra is without doubt the notorious transportation of another obelisk from Alexandria to London in 1877. This event also involved again a triangular relationship between Alexandria, London and Rome, since it was the great Italian Egyptologist Giovanni Battista Belzoni who persuaded Muhammad Ali Pasha, khedive of Egypt and Sudan, to present Cleopatra's Needle to the British Government in 1819, and then succeeded in having it delivered to Alexandria, where it remained for nearly sixty years by the Nile, waiting to be shipped to London. The appropriation of the obelisk symbolically anticipated the colonial future of Egypt as a British protectorate, although the needle, like Cleopatra herself, seemed reluctant to leave home. For the British, however, it was an object of cultural and colonial desire worth waiting for.



Fig. 4 Edward William Cooke, *The Cleopatra Cylinder Vessel*, 1878  
(courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum)

The extraordinary feat of naval engineering that finally moved the monument some 3600 nautical miles from Egypt to Victorian England involved an enormous 28 metre iron cylinder

container, nicknamed, unsurprisingly but unflatteringly, the Cleopatra (fig. 4)<sup>49</sup>. In a kind of large-scale restaging of Shakespeare's Cydnus episode, the Cleopatra set out from the port of Alexandria in September 1877 and triumphantly completed her journey in just under a year, surviving en route a nearly fatal tempest in the Bay of Biscay. By September 1878 Britain finally had its own conquered Cleopatra, her needle erected on the embankment, on the other side of the river from Shakespeare's Globe, thereby calling on the Thames itself to recreate or represent the fertile Nile. Cleopatra the gipsy had arrived in London to stay, a sedentic nomad to the end.

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<sup>49</sup> See Aubrey Noakes, *Cleopatra's Needles*, London, H. F. & G. Witherby, 1962, p. 35.