

Yasmin Arshad. *Imagining Cleopatra: Performing Gender and Power in Early Modern England*. London: Bloomsbury, 2019. Pp 337. Hardback \$110. ISBN: 9781350058965. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350058996>.

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In her analysis of Cleopatra's representation in early modern drama, art, poetry, and performance, Yasmin Arshad wishes to decentre Shakespeare by focusing on plays by Mary Sidney and Samuel Daniel, on a portrait depicting Cleopatra, statues, tapestries, a staging of Daniel's play, as well as the Cleopatras who come after Shakespeare by writers such as Lanyer, Cary, Sedley, Dryden, Cavendish, and Brackley. The effect is a sweeping analysis of the development of a character over time. *Imagining Cleopatra* is a source study with interests in authorial intent through processes of influence and revision. To look beyond Shakespeare's play, Arshad examines the sources and cultural contexts that produced Cleopatra so that *Antony and Cleopatra* becomes 'part of a continuum, a cornucopia of Cleopatras that turn Shakespeare's version into a work that is part of a dialogue, rather than an isolated monolith' (2).

Arshad's effort is successful, with detailed comparisons between the different plays; Arshad traces the decisions made by each playwright that builds on and differs from sources that come before it. Mary Sidney's *Antonius*, a translation of Robert Garnier's *Marc Antoine*, becomes an excellent starting point due to the choices Sidney made about her characterization of Cleopatra that diverge from those made by Garnier. That Sidney commissioned Daniel's *Tragedie of Cleopatra* as a companion piece to her own makes his play a natural subsequent focus. These chapters are followed by a study of a portrait of a Jacobean lady who Arshad argues is Lady Anne Clifford as Cleopatra in a production of Daniel's play due to an inscription contained in the portrait. Before going on to Shakespeare's play Arshad then discusses a production of *Tragedie of Cleopatra* at University College London in 2013 led by Arshad to demonstrate its performability. The chapter on Shakespeare's play goes a long way toward proving the influence of Sidney and Daniel on the composition of *Antony and Cleopatra*, along with original work in her development. The epilogue brings in later depictions of the queen, further placing her in a continuum of work that cannot be reduced to one vision.

The comparisons between plays are valuable. I learned a great deal from her discussion of Sidney and Daniel, in particular. The focus she places on Cleopatra as a model for women (not just in these earlier depictions but also in those after

Shakespeare's play) expands our understanding of Cleopatra as well as of women in the period. Too often, as Arshad notes in her introduction and as I have also argued, Cleopatra is thought of as the voluptuous, indulgent, capricious queen critics have made of her. But when she is studied in her literary and historical representation, she becomes a complex mother, wife, and monarch, trapped in defeat by Octavius Caesar. In close readings of the choices authors made, what they borrowed and revised from one another, and in Daniel's case of his own revision of his *Tragedie of Cleopatra*, Arshad persuasively argues that there is more sympathy and admiration than condemnation of the Egyptian queen. While I might wish for less authorial intent, the study requires examination of alterations made to different parts of Cleopatra's story and leads to conclusions about intent, or at least, ways of reading those choices that indicate critical, dramatic, and literary decisions made by authors. If Cleopatra is more mother in one play, what changes when she becomes more monarch in another, or more seductress in yet another? These are the questions that Arshad pursues. The result is a study of Cleopatra's infinite variety over time, depending on genre and political perspectives of the day.

In her treatment of race Arshad's work is less persuasive. While she does much to show that playwrights and characters other than Cleopatra saw her as white, she does little to discuss Cleopatra's own self-conception, and this is particularly true of her reading of Shakespeare's play. We could possibly, I would submit, discuss both perspectives. What meanings are made when authors take pains to portray Cleopatra as white? How does that characterization contribute, for example, to authors' attempts at making her sympathetic to their particular audiences? Much work has been done, not least by Kim F. Hall, on how whiteness works in tandem with depictions of female beauty, virtue, and nobility. Antony, therefore, can see his lover as white while Cleopatra sees herself as 'with Pheobus amorous pinches black' (1.5.29). Antony, who objects to Thidius's kiss of 'her ladylike "white hand"' (Arshad 203), speaks in defense of her virtue, of his sole right to kiss that hand. Thus, his perspective coincides with the work of whiteness to signal chaste womanhood. Cleopatra's view, however, speaks not only to her experience as an embattled queen, but also to the author's choices, to a distinctive differentiation of Egypt from Rome, of Cleopatra from Caesar and Antony, and, importantly, from Octavia. While Arshad's book is not focused solely on the racial representation of Cleopatra, her discussion of it lacks the depth of her discussions of gender, of Cleopatra as mother, queen, and lover throughout the works she studies.

Notwithstanding, the book as a whole delivers fresh perspectives on a character who lives in the imaginations of scholars, students, and audiences. While I am not entirely sure it decentres Shakespeare (the epilogue situates readings of the other works in context of his), it does bring important attention to Sidney and Daniel, whose works are certainly marginalized in comparison. Her analysis of Daniel's revision of his own work, in dialogue with Shakespeare's play, is excellent. The book is especially compelling, moreover, when connecting between the works read and the politics of the time in both the Elizabethan and Jacobean courts. In particular, the nostalgia for Elizabeth which Arshad traces in post-1603 versions is persuasive and the focus on sympathetic depictions of Cleopatra in early modern representations of her is important. And when she writes that 'Cleopatra and her story actually spoke to elite and educated women who found affinities with her' such as Bess of Hardwick (219), and notes that there are important representations of her that are 'contrary to Cleopatra's Augustan reception' (220-1), she draws attention to those admirable, exemplary, and powerful aspects which are at the centre of *Imagining Cleopatra*.

