‘What helps…this everlasting love?’: an examination of womanly and queenly virtue through depictions of classical women in late Elizabethan Theatre

Ross Moncrieff

The title quotation, ‘What helps…this everlasting love?’, is spoken by Charmian in Mary Sidney’s translation of Robert Garnier’s *Antonius* (1592) in an attempt to convince Cleopatra to abandon Antony following the battle of Actium. Charmian suggests that Cleopatra’s constant love for Antony is harmful not only to them but also to her kingdom of Egypt, and pleads with Cleopatra to forsake her lover. Cleopatra refuses, saying that future generations would damn her for disloyalty in Antony’s moment of greatest need.[[1]](#footnote-1) This dispute between Cleopatra and Charmian evokes a wider debate in Elizabethan political culture over differing expectations of female virtue driven by anxieties about female rule. An explicit focus on the separation of women’s private morality from the political public sphere is an element of political culture which deserves more attention from historians and literary critics alike.

It has been widely accepted that “the long 1590s” marked a period of decline and even crisis in Elizabethan England.[[2]](#footnote-2) Politically, the “decade” was marked by factionalism caused by conflict mostly revolving around Robert Cecil and Robert Devereux, the 2nd Earl of Essex. Outside of court politics even greater crises loomed, with harvest failures from 1594-7, recurring anxiety about continental conflict, especially with Spain, and rebellion in Ireland. The challenge to England’s political and socioeconomic stability during the late Elizabethan period was reflected in the political culture of the time. On the one hand, the Elizabethan regime increasingly promoted an authoritarian vision of monarchy, manifest, for example, in an increasing interest in the works of Tacitus as a historian concerned with imperial power.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, this mainstream narrative of authoritarian rule was challenged in wider political culture, often centred around Essex, which emphasised classical and quasi-republican themes. In these more critical circles, Tacitus could be used to suggest tyrannical rulers’ contempt for their virtuous subjects and other classical authors were invoked to provide a language of tacit resistance to authoritarian rule.[[4]](#footnote-4) Political culture in the 1590s was, therefore, a battleground in which the regime’s assertions of authority were questioned and challenged, with the classical world being used to explore these themes by both sides.

One significant battle in this wider conflict was over the nature of female rule: its legitimacy, authority and the question of the relationship between the queen and her chief counsellors. Elizabeth promoted writers and literary works throughout her reign which to some degree legitimised her rule, for example the life pension awarded to Edmund Spenser for the *The Faerie Queene*.[[5]](#footnote-5) Despite this, Elizabeth’s gender laid her open to more criticism than a male monarch would have faced, even from works promoted by her regime, with the importance of male counsel being repeatedly reiterated.[[6]](#footnote-6) Such theorising about female rule and gender roles in the political sphere fitted into a discussion in wider society about the role and conduct of women, expressed in a variety of media. These discussions presented female morality in terms of virtues, especially chastity and constancy. Whilst it is important to not assume that these theoretical abstractions about women reflected the reality of women’s everyday lives, they did have a significant influence on how women were conceived of in wider intellectual and political culture.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This intellectual and political culture was pervaded by discussion of the classical world, especially Rome, fostered amongst the educated classes by grammar schools and the universities whose curricula were centred around the Latin language and Roman texts.[[8]](#footnote-8) Beyond the Latin-literate elite, the sixteenth-century saw the first translations of classical texts into English, such as Thomas North’s translation of Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* (1579) and Henry Savile’s translation of Tacitus’ *Histories* (1591). By the mid-seventeenth century there were ‘over five times as many English translations as Latin titles’, considerably broadening access to knowledge of the classical world.[[9]](#footnote-9) Censorship made direct literary commentary on politics dangerous but the ‘functional ambiguity’ of works about the classical world served as an ‘indirect language’ by which authors could circumvent censorship with an appeal to history and the legitimacy of classical learning.[[10]](#footnote-10) In representing key moments from Roman history, late Elizabethan authors self-consciously positioned themselves not only with regard to the classical sources, but also reflected prior representations within contemporary literary culture, prompting the audience to reflect upon the political inferences of the ‘re-presentation’.[[11]](#footnote-11)

This thesis will interrogate the relationship between political culture and literary depictions of the role and virtues of women. Specifically, it will ask how the literary representation of gender roles influenced political debate about female rule through looking at presentations of classical women in drama during the ‘second reign’. Methodologically, this thesis draws on Peter Lake’s argument that the interaction between literature and political culture is reciprocal: political context provides an interpretation of a text or performance which can then be used ‘to cast light back upon…political culture’.[[12]](#footnote-12) This methodology thus emphasizes the importance of both a contextual *and* a textual analysis of literature when studying its relationship with political culture. Drama is a particularly interesting medium because its different genres aimed to appeal to a wide range of social backgrounds and classes, from the aristocratic, poetical pretensions of the closet drama to the populism of the London stage plays.[[13]](#footnote-13) Focusing on classical women within drama reflects not only late Elizabethan interest in antiquity, but also has specific relevance to female morality. Constancy was perceived to be the cornerstone of female virtue, as well as being an area of particularly womanly weakness. Ancient Romans, partly through the influences of neo-stoicism, were seen as being obsessed with constancy as a virtue and thus present an especially apt way of exploring female morality.[[14]](#footnote-14) Moreover, the classical world was often used to provide historical exempla for moral (and immoral) behaviour.[[15]](#footnote-15) A synoptic analysis of classical women as portrayed in drama, therefore, provides a broad vision of how female morality was conceived of and female rule conceptualised.

This thesis will argue that female rule, as negatively presented in most of the plays from this period featuring classical women, was shaped by a concern that the virtues expected of women were incompatible with politics. Whilst historians and literary scholars have frequently examined the relationship between queenship and virtue during the late Elizabethan period in relation to Spenser and, to a lesser degree, Shakespeare, the relationship between female public and private morality in literary culture with specific reference to female rule is still frequently overlooked.[[16]](#footnote-16) Much work has studied the broader political questions of republicanism and monarchy in literature, especially Shakespeare’s history plays, but comparatively little has made women the focus.[[17]](#footnote-17) This study of classical women in drama will give some sense of how literature reflected and perpetuated wider political considerations of female virtue, particularly with regard to female rule.

I

Presentations of classical women in drama drew on perceptions of female virtue in wider intellectual culture. Writings on women’s morality took a variety of forms throughout the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries but, despite this, consistent themes emerge. The first is the emphasis which writers placed upon the unwavering loyalty which wives owed their husbands. *A homily of the state of matrimony* (1563) quotes 1 Peter 3: ‘You wives, be you in subjection to obey your own husbands.’[[18]](#footnote-18) Thomas Becon’s *Catechism* (1564) also sets down that ‘the fyrst [duty of a wife] is that she submit herself to the wil of her husband…’[[19]](#footnote-19) One of the chief elements involved in the subjection of a wife to her husband is that she should stand by him regardless of his faults, spiritual or worldly. Samuel Rowland’s poem *The Bride* (1617) ends with an exhortation to wives to

…love and chiefe regard to husbands honour,

Which if at true affection it begunne:

Then be he poore or sicke, or in distresse,

See still remaines most firme in faithfulnesse.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Similarly, Henry Smith’s *A Preparative to Marriage* (1591), demands that a wife be her husband’s ‘yoke fellowe’, making ‘his griefe…her griefe; and whether it be the yoke of pouertie, or the yoke of enuie, or the yoke of sickenesse, or the yoke of imprisonment, she must submit her necke to beare it pacientlie with him…’[[21]](#footnote-21) The virtue of constant loyalty to one’s husband regardless of circumstances, is thus conceived of as the chief virtue that a wife can have.

This virtue of constancy was especially emphasised because women were often perceived as being less capable of constancy than men due to being overly emotional. *A homily of the state of matrimony* stresses this: ‘For the woman is a weak creature, not endued with…constancy of mind…she is a weaker vessel, of a frail heart, inconstant, and with a head soon stirred to wrath.’[[22]](#footnote-22) John Knox in his *The first blast of the trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women* (1558) also emphasises that women are ‘unconstant, variable, cruell, and lacking the spirit of counsel and regiment.’[[23]](#footnote-23) Thomas Elyot’s *The Boke named The Governor* (1531) gives some credit to ‘women nowadays’ who can sometimes be found to be more constant than men, but does also emphasise the natural inconstancy of women, comparing them to children.[[24]](#footnote-24) Women’s supposed weakness with regards to constancy, therefore, was set in a tension with the prescriptive morality surrounding a wife’s constant loyalty to her husband. It is this conception of female virtue to which we shall regularly return throughout this thesis, to understand how the portrayal of classical women in drama measures up against this moralising ideal.

Classical women were often used to demonstrate that these demanding moral standards were practically realisable. In Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier*, translated into English by Sir Thomas Hoby in 1561, the Magnifico Juliano, defending the virtues of women against signor Gaspar, presents four Roman women as examples of idealised virtue: Octavia, Portia, Caia Caecilia, wife of Tarquinius Priscus, and Cornelia, Scipio’s daughter.[[25]](#footnote-25) Interestingly, of these four examples of idealised female virtue, three feature prominently in late Elizabethan Roman plays: Octavia in Samuel Brandon’s *The Virtuous Octavia* (1598), Portia in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (1599) and Cornelia in Thomas Kyd’s translation of Robert Garnier’s *Cornelia* (1594).[[26]](#footnote-26) Within these plays, the womanly virtues praised and demanded by the various authors of sermons and guidebooks above for womanly conduct are epitomised by these women.

Kyd’s *Cornelia* most clearly portrays idealised female virtue. In The Argument to the play, Cornelia is described as ‘a young Roman lady, as much accomplished with…the virtues of the mind as ever any was’.[[27]](#footnote-27) The play is set after the death of Pompey, Cornelia’s husband, and revolves around her overwhelming grief at this loss. During the play, her father, Metellus Scipio, commits suicide after being defeated by Caesar.[[28]](#footnote-28) Cornelia considers suicide as a response but is repeatedly warned against it by Cicero, who preaches a typically Christian neo-stoical rejection of suicide in favour of tolerating evil.[[29]](#footnote-29) The tension in the play therefore centres on what the purpose of a virtuous woman should be once her husband has died: should she show her constant loyalty by committing suicide or resist the evils of the world and continue living? In the end, Cornelia compromises, choosing to live only in order to mourn Pompey and her father:

Cornelia must live- though life she hateth-

To make your tombs, and mourn upon your hearses…[[30]](#footnote-30)

Cornelia’s story is thus one of constant dedication to her husband and father, which clearly affirms the moral prescriptions of writers on female virtue. The play was dedicated to Bridget Fitzwalter, the Countess of Sussex (1575-1623) whose father, Henry Radcliffe, the 4th Earl of Sussex, had recently died in December 1593, followed shortly by his wife.[[31]](#footnote-31) Kyd’s dedication of this translation, therefore, had an ostensibly practical aim of providing Cornelia as a model of idealised womanly grief to a recently bereaved patron in need of literary and philosophical comfort.

Cornelia also briefly appears in the anonymous *The Tragedie of Caesar and Pompey or Caesar’s Revenge*, printed in 1607 and probably performed in Trinity College Oxford during Elizabeth’s reign.[[32]](#footnote-32) Cornelia appears twice in the play. Her first scene emphasises her constant devotion to Pompey, demanding to accompany him to Egypt, despite the dangers:

O let me go with thee, and die with thee,

Nothing shall thy Cornelia grievous thinke

That shee endures for her sweete Pompeys sake.[[33]](#footnote-33)

In her second and final scene, the Cornelia of *Caesar’s Revenge* kills herself to prove the devotion of her grief for Pompey beyond ‘womanish exclamations.’[[34]](#footnote-34) The image of Cornelia in literary culture from Hoby’s Castiglione to Kyd’s Garnier to *Caesar’s Revenge* therefore is that of a woman whose life is one of constant devotion to her husband, in line with the moral pronouncements of writers on female virtue.

Brandon’s Octavia displays similar constancy with regards to her husband under testing, albeit very different, circumstances, namely Antony’s infidelity. Octavian wants to declare war on Antony to revenge the mistreatment of his sister, but Octavia restrains him, hoping that Antony will return to her and saying that she does not want revenge. Octavian backs down, saying

Well sister, then I see that constancie

Is sometimes seated in a womans brest.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Even after Antony’s suicide Octavia remains loyal wishing that she had died in his place.[[36]](#footnote-36) The play operates on a more fundamental level as a play of contrasts: Octavia’s constancy is compared favourably with the inconstancy of Antony, Cleopatra and Sylvia, whose only description in the cast list is ‘a licentious woman.’[[37]](#footnote-37)

Sylvia is the most radical of Brandon’s characters, especially since she is entirely invented. Although she only appears in one scene, she mounts a sustained attack on constancy and typical conceptions of female virtue, arguing that ‘constancie is that which marreth all’, enslaving women under husbands who grow tired of their piety and so seek other women. Sylvia instead proposes that women should play suitors off against each other and never commit to just one man.[[38]](#footnote-38) Sylvia’s view of female conduct closely resembles the descriptions of Cleopatra in the play, who has captured Antony with ‘hir Syren tongue’ and ‘sunne-burnt beautie.’[[39]](#footnote-39) However, although Sylvia challenges typical moralism about women, her ideas are rejected by Camilla who defends constancy, and therefore Octavia’s actions, by claiming that Sylvia ‘will be punished by the constant Gods’ for her lack of virtue.[[40]](#footnote-40) More practically, Sylvia’s ideas about female virtue are shown to be immoral in Cleopatra’s inconstant flight at the battle of Actium and her later deception concerning her death which prompts Antony’s suicide: the conclusion that Antony would have been a lot better off staying with Octavia is inescapable.[[41]](#footnote-41) The presence of conflicting views about female morality thus only serves to show how laudable Octavia’s virtue is. The chorus at the end of the play emphasises this, suggesting that Octavia’s constancy amidst great evil means there is no excuse for any other woman not to do the same:

She was what heaven requireth.

How through affliction great,

Great troubles and annoy:

We finde the doubtfull way,

That leads to vertues seate.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Portia makes a far briefer appearance in *Julius Caesar* than either Cornelia or Octavia do in their respective plays, but she also displays a similar virtuous constancy. She demands to know Brutus’ plans and claims that, as Cato’s daughter and Brutus’ wife, she is stronger than other women, wounding herself as ‘strong proof of my constancy.’[[43]](#footnote-43) Later in the play, Brutus tells Cassius that Portia has killed herself out of sorrow at Brutus’ absence from Rome and concern for him due to the might of Antony and Octavian.[[44]](#footnote-44) Portia thus goes to great lengths to demonstrate her constant loyalty to her husband. Caesar’s wife, Calpurnia, is similarly portrayed to Portia in that the defining aspect of her character is her devotion to her husband, seen when she pleads with Caesar not to go to the capitol.[[45]](#footnote-45) A similar scene plays out in *Caesar’s Revenge*, except that Calpurnia declares that she will kill herself if Caesar leaves and her vision is proved right.[[46]](#footnote-46) There is also a later scene where Calpurnia grieves for Caesar in similar terms to Cornelia’s grief for Pompey: ‘All that I am is but despaire and greefe.’[[47]](#footnote-47) Calpurnia, therefore, is portrayed much like the other Roman women as being concerned chiefly with the safety of her husband.

However, although these classical figures are all presented as the ideal types of virtuous women, there is also a degree of ambiguity concerning how pragmatically useful their constant devotion might be. This can most clearly be seen in the case of Shakespeare’s Portia for, whilst Portia is a devoted wife, her constant love for Brutus proves dangerous. She persuades Brutus into telling her about the conspiracy by claiming to be ‘stronger than my sex’, but the next and final time she appears she risks giving the plot away to a servant boy because she is worried about Brutus’ safety:

Ay me, how weak a thing

The heart of woman is!...

Sure the boy heard me…[[48]](#footnote-48)

Portia is here being a virtuous woman in that she is demonstrating her constant love for her husband in her concern about him, but she is also simultaneously jeopardising Brutus’ safety and the success of the conspiracy. Her constancy is thus admirable, but also potentially impractical and unsuited to the world of politics. We can also see the downsides of Portia’s constancy with regards to her suicide. In *Brutus*, Plutarch gives two versions of Portia’s suicide: the first is that she killed herself after the defeat at Pharsalus to prevent herself from being captured; the second is the version in *Julius Caesar*.[[49]](#footnote-49) The fact that Shakespeare chooses to present the second version of Portia’s death emphasises her overbearing constancy: she is so overemotional that she kills herself before the battle of Philippi has even begun. Therefore, whilst Portia’s suicide is virtuous in its constancy, it also shows that female virtue, in excess, can lead to impractical and irrational actions.

A similar ambiguity is also present in Kyd’s translation of *Cornelia*. Cornelia’s devotion to her husband leads her into such despair that she repeatedly considers suicide. However, the play strongly rejects suicide as a viable option for relief from evil, with Cicero consistently putting Christian neo-stoic arguments against it.[[50]](#footnote-50) The fact that Cornelia does not kill herself at the end of the play suggests that she has managed finally to get a hold of her emotional side, submitting herself to the reasoned arguments of Cicero, in a similar way to that of Lipsius in his dialogue with Langius in *De Constantia*, who has to learn to subject his emotions to reason in order to achieve true constancy.[[51]](#footnote-51) Tellingly, in stark contrast to Cornelia’s outpourings of grief, Shakespeare’s Brutus responds to Portia’s death with stoical indifference suggesting a gendered vision of constancy in grief in which women’s overemotional natures cause an overabundance of sorrow, whilst men are supposed to receive misfortune with indifference.[[52]](#footnote-52) Cornelia’s constancy is akin to Portia’s, therefore, in that it is admirable but tainted by the over-emotionality perceived to be typical of women: she must learn to follow her more manly, rational side. As Lipsius puts it, the ‘tender’ but ‘corrupt’ presence of the mother must be corrected by the ‘awe’ and ‘severity’ of the father.[[53]](#footnote-53)

II

All the women discussed so far have been private individuals in that they play little or no role in shaping political action, with the exception of Octavia to whom we shall return later. All the women, including Octavia, however, hold no official position. It is therefore important to analyse how authors presented the virtues of women who exercised power through legal office, namely queens. Since the Romans never had a regnant empress, all the queens in Elizabethan classical dramas are not actually Roman. The most prominent was Cleopatra who was the central character in two late Elizabethan plays, Mary Sidney’s translation of Robert Garnier’s *Antonius* (1592) and Samuel Daniel’s *Cleopatra* (1594), as well as Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* (c. 1605). She is also frequently referred to in Brandon’s *The Virtuous Octavia* (1598) and appears briefly in *Caesar’s Revenge* (c. 1607). The only other “historical” classical queen to appear in the dramatic literature of the period was Dido, who is the titular character in Christopher Marlowe’s *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (c.1586), and also presumably played a significant role in the lost *Dido and Aeneas*, recorded in Henslowe’s diary as having been performed in January 1598.[[54]](#footnote-54)

There are two elements which must be addressed before embarking on a closer analysis of these plays. Firstly, the fact that neither Cleopatra nor Dido was Roman meant that they were already imbued with a sense of otherness because of their exoticised African heritage.[[55]](#footnote-55) Secondly, Cleopatra and Dido’s love affairs were characterised by the absence of marriage, as both Antony and Aeneas had separate lawful wives. This makes the relationships between the lovers more ambiguous and suggests an already inherent sense of contrast between these African queens and virtuous Roman women.

These differences are particularly apparent in portrayals of Cleopatra, who was defined by her inconstancy. In Sidney’s *Antonius*, the first scene depicts Antony bewailing the disloyalty of women, epitomised in Cleopatra’s flight from Actium:

Justly complain I she disloyal is,

Nor constant is, even as I constant am…

But ah, by nature women wav’ring are,

Each moment changing and rechanging minds.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Similarly, in Brandon’s *The Virtuous Octavia*, although Cleopatra never appears onstage, her flight from Actium is presented as her having ‘betrayed’ Antony and she is further condemned as unvirtuous for the trick on Antony which prompts his suicide.[[57]](#footnote-57) In Samuel Daniel’s *Cleopatra*, her immorality is the focus of the play, with the Chorus decrying ‘her disordered lust’ which has caused their enslavement to Rome.[[58]](#footnote-58) Cleopatra is also blamed for Antony’s defeat, which she herself admits:

The world doth know

That my misfortune hath procured thine…[[59]](#footnote-59)

Moreover, doubt is cast over whether Cleopatra loved Antony in the first place:

Affliction makes me truly love thee

Which Anthony, (I must confesse my fault,)

I never did sincerely until now…[[60]](#footnote-60)

Shakespeare’s Cleopatra in part follows this version of a lustful, inconstant Cleopatra, whose love for Antony we cannot be assured of, through her continual toying with Antony which culminates again in the trick which causes his suicide.[[61]](#footnote-61) Her conversation with Charmian about how to keep a man is parodic of the virtuous constancy expected of and recommended to women:

CHARMIAN. In each thing give him way, cross him in nothing.

CLEOPATRA. Thou teachest like a fool- the way to lose him.[[62]](#footnote-62)

This is exactly the perspective taken by the ‘licentious woman’ Sylvia in *The Virtuous Octavia*, who similarly argues that the best way to retain a man’s affections is to be inconstant.[[63]](#footnote-63) In *Caesar’s Revenge*, Cleopatra bewitches men with her beauty, with Caesar comparing her to Circe and Antony’s ‘bonus genius’ to ‘that vaine inconstant Greekish dame’ Helen.[[64]](#footnote-64) Cleopatra’s first appearance is placed just after the goodbye between Cornelia and Pompey, contrasting the two women: Cornelia, who is willing to obey and sacrifice herself for her husband, and Cleopatra who has ‘tyrannizing eyes’ and whom Caesar proclaims shall ‘raigne in Caesar’s conquered thoughts.’[[65]](#footnote-65) Imagery of Cleopatra’s inconstancy was so pervasive that it probably influenced the portrayal of George Chapman’s fictional Egyptian Queen, Aegiale, in *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria*, who shares Cleopatra’s lustful inconstancy in pursuing extra-marital relations with Cleanthes.[[66]](#footnote-66)

However, although these consistent portrayals of Cleopatra’s inconstancy seem to suggest that the moral of these plays will be that she must learn womanly virtues or that the audience should be encouraged to pursue virtue by her immoral example, a closer reading of the texts reveals a more ambiguous authorial judgement about Cleopatra’s lack of womanly virtues, with interesting implications for female rule. Judgements about Cleopatra’s morality must reflect the fact that, unlike the virtuous Roman women, she is a queen and thus has different obligations to women like Cornelia and Portia. We can see this most clearly in the critical debate over Sidney’s *Antonius*. On the one hand, some critics read *Antonius* as an almost parabolic tale of how Cleopatra’s lack of womanly virtue has destroyed Egypt, her lover and herself.[[67]](#footnote-67) In contrast, other critics have read the play as being sympathetic towards Cleopatra, even seeing her as an idealised heroic figure of female virtue.[[68]](#footnote-68) Despite the fact that these two understandings of Sidney’s presentation of Cleopatra are seemingly incompatible, both have merit to them.

This is demonstrated in the debate within the play over whether Cleopatra should betray Antony to Octavian. Cleopatra is encouraged by Charmian to leave Antony to save herself from ‘the wrathful rage’ of Octavian on ‘both your realm and you.’[[69]](#footnote-69) Crucially, the betrayal of Antony is not just to be done to save Cleopatra’s life but to also save her ‘realm’ and subjects from the tyranny of Rome. That this message is at the heart of the debate is shown when Cleopatra’s secretary, Diomede, later bewails how Cleopatra

…should us safety from these ills procure,

Her crown to her, and to her race assure.[[70]](#footnote-70)

This sense of Egypt’s doom is emphasised by the Chorus, who repeatedly decry the destruction of Egypt and her people.[[71]](#footnote-71) There is a clear sense that if only Cleopatra would choose a different path she could save her kingdom.

Cleopatra, however, refuses to back down. The first lines Cleopatra speaks illustrate her devotion to Antony, in response to the questions over her constancy raised by him in the first act:

That I have thee betrayed, dear Antony,

My life, my soul, my sun? I had such a thought?[[72]](#footnote-72)

She follows this up by emphasising that Antony is more precious to her than anything in the world: ‘More dear than sceptre, children, freedom, light.’[[73]](#footnote-73) The inclusion of the royal ‘sceptre’ shows how Cleopatra values Antony’s love above her duties as ruler. Following Charmian’s attempt to persuade Cleopatra to save her life and crown, Cleopatra defends her love for Antony by arguing that if she were to abandon Antony now it would look like she only ever loved him for cynical reasons:

If that, when Antony great and glorious…

In that fair fortune had I him exchanged

For Caesar, then men should have counted me

Faithless, inconstant, light: but now the storm

And blust’ring tempest driving on his face,

Ready to drown, alas, what would they say?[[74]](#footnote-74)

If she were to betray him, following Charmian’s advice and thus saving her kingdom, Cleopatra knows that she would be remembered as

Not light, inconstant, faithless…

But vile, forsworn, of treach’rous cruelty.[[75]](#footnote-75)

This realisation leads Cleopatra to refuse rapprochement with Octavian, thus damning Egypt to Roman tyranny. This is in stark contrast to Plutarch’s description of how Cleopatra ‘was longer in talke’ with Octavian’s negotiator ‘then any man else’ and ‘did him great honor.’[[76]](#footnote-76) Sidney’s translation thus emphasises Cleopatra’s loyalty to Antony beyond the historical record.

What this debate over whether Cleopatra should betray Antony or not suggests is that both interpretations of Cleopatra’s role in *Antonius* that critics have taken in the past are correct. On the one hand, Cleopatra is criticised for the destruction of Egypt, caused by Cleopatra’s failure to act in line with her queenly responsibilities. This is her political failure. However, she is also praised for her constant devotion to Antony, who she refuses to betray. This is her private, womanly virtue. There are obvious similarities between Sidney’s Cleopatra and Kyd’s Cornelia: both are women who express constant devotion to their lovers. At the end of *Antonius*, Cleopatra even calls Antony her ‘husband’ and herself his ‘wife’, suggesting that their love is, at least to her mind, as rightful as Cornelia and Pompey’s.[[77]](#footnote-77) However, whilst Cornelia’s grief is only gently chastised for being typical of womanish over-emotionality, Cleopatra’s constancy, due to her role as a public figure, leads her into choosing a path which causes the destruction of her country. This suggests a fundamental incompatibility between female virtue and nature, and the duties of a ruler, in that virtuous female behaviour is characterised by leading a moral private and family life which may conflict with promoting the common good of a nation as its ruler.

This incompatibility of female virtue with power is further emphasised in *Antonius* by what Danielle Clarke calls the ‘conflation of female political power and sexuality.’[[78]](#footnote-78) Cleopatra is not just encouraged to desert Antony as a means of saving her kingdom, but is also asked by Diomede to use her ‘loving charms’ to ‘make a conquest of the conqueror.’[[79]](#footnote-79) This idea of female power being contained within her sexual desirability is further seen in Antony’s criticism of womanly charms:

Enchanting pleasure, Venus’ sweet delights,

Weaken our bodies, overcloud our sprites,

Trouble our reason from our hearts outchase,

All holy virtues lodging in their place.[[80]](#footnote-80)

Similar to comparisons of Cleopatra with Circe in *The Virtuous Octavia* and *Caesar’s Revenge*, female power is conceived in *Antonius* as being inherently sexual and bewitching in its operation.[[81]](#footnote-81) Cleopatra therefore not only proves her virtue in her constancy to Antony, but also in her reluctance to use her power, which is envisioned as being inherently sexual and therefore corrupting, to save her kingdom or herself. However, again we see that, although Cleopatra achieves private moral approbation for refusing to use her sexualised power, she also fails to save her country. This makes the paradox of female rule starkly apparent: if women exercise power, even for a good cause, they will unavoidably occur suspicions of immorality through the sexualisation of female power, based upon the opposition of traditional conceptions of female virtue to involvement in the public sphere.

This message had political implications. Mary Sidney’s Protestant faith, as well as the legacy of her brother Philip Sidney and her family background, meant that she associated with political circles which were devoted to defending Protestantism and pushing for greater commitment in the wars on the continent, against the wishes of Elizabeth herself.[[82]](#footnote-82) Sidney’s work, therefore, reflects an ambiguous political judgement of the queen. On the one hand, she frames Elizabeth as a providential Protestant monarch, seen in her two poems dedicated to Elizabeth, which praise her as ‘Astrea’ and for fighting ‘the foes of heav’n.’[[83]](#footnote-83) However, Sidney’s circle was increasingly frustrated by Elizabeth’s reluctance to strongly commit to continental conflict, especially following the withdrawal of support for Henri IV in 1592, the year *Antonius* was published.[[84]](#footnote-84) Sidney’s reflections on female rule in *Antonius*, therefore, portray Elizabeth’s queenship in a more troubled light. Instead of the providential monarch, female rule is seen as something inherently alien to women and *Antonius* casts doubt on the rhetoric which portrayed Elizabeth both as a virtuous woman and a good ruler. This is not to say that Cleopatra was intended as an allegorical stand-in for Elizabeth. However, by emphasising the questions surrounding female virtue and its relation to politics, Sidney cannot have been unaware of the political implications of the play, especially since Garnier was a self-proclaimed political playwright.[[85]](#footnote-85)

Dido in Marlowe’s *Dido, Queen of Carthage* faces a similar problem to Sidney’s Cleopatra, as she also falls in love with a Roman warrior, jeopardising her queenly duties:

Armies of foes resolv’d to win this town,

Or impious traitors vow’d to have my life,

Affright me not; only Aeneas’ frown

Is that which terrifies Dido’s heart.[[86]](#footnote-86)

In terms evocative of fears over the prospect of Elizabeth marrying which had dominated political discussion in the late 1570s, Dido crowns Aeneas and asks him to ‘Sway…the punic sceptre in my stead’.[[87]](#footnote-87) However, in contrast to Antony in *Antonius*, Aeneas does not let his relationship with Dido consume him, eventually leaving her to continue his divine mission to found Rome. He chooses to pursue ‘Fame’s immortal house’ rather than be made ‘effiminate’ by ‘courtly ease’ and ‘that ticing dame.’[[88]](#footnote-88) Aeneas does realise, however, that

To leave her [Dido] so, and not once say farewell,

Were to transgress against all laws of love.[[89]](#footnote-89)

This suggests that Aeneas is aware that his divine mission goes against what would be considered morally good within the private sphere of his relationship with Dido, yet he leaves her anyway to pursue his public duty. This contrasts with Cleopatra, who sacrifices her public duty to her private obligations to Antony. Dido, meanwhile, is sacrificed to Aeneas’ divine mission: she is made to fall in love with him by Venus only so that she will help repair Aeneas’ ships, enabling him to leave her.[[90]](#footnote-90) Dido shows some recognition of this, pleading with Aeneas to ‘in mine arms make thy Italy’ and declaring that her love makes her ‘not free.’[[91]](#footnote-91) In the end, of course, Aeneas does leave Dido to continue with his duty, whilst Dido commits suicide, mingling her love and despair with hatred as she curses Aeneas’ new land of Italy, prophesying the rise of Hannibal and the clash of their two nations.[[92]](#footnote-92) This clash of empires may reflect increasing worries throughout the 1580s about war with Spain and on the continent.

Contrasting *Dido* with *Antonius* highlights the differences between the public and private duties of men and women for whilst Aeneas never truly doubts where his duty lies and is praised for abandoning his lover in pursuit of the public good, Cleopatra in *Antonius* worries that if she abandons Antony, even to save Egypt, she will be scorned for inconstancy. Meanwhile, Dido’s love for Aeneas is painted as damaging to her kingdom, which she neglects, the wider world, which will be torn asunder by the Hannibalic War because of her curse, and causes her own death, as well as the deaths of her sister and her suitor Iarbas. Although the politics of the play are far more oblique than Sidney’s, it is clear that in considering female rule, Marlowe uses normative female virtues and expected behaviour to suggest an incompatibility with stable monarchy that challenges the very nature of female rule, whilst suggesting that male virtue is more inherently political. It is possible that Marlowe was motivated to criticise female rule from the opposite side of the political spectrum to Sidney: Dido’s bloody vision of the Hannibalic wars may suggest that Marlowe considered Elizabeth to be unnecessarily dragging England into conflict on the continent, although this would contradict the pro-protestant intervention message of his later play, *The Massacre at Paris* (c. 1593).[[93]](#footnote-93) However, all political motives must remain speculative, because so much of Marlowe’s life is either unknown or disputed, especially during his university days when *Dido* was written.[[94]](#footnote-94)

The idea that male virtue is inherently political is also voiced in *Antonius* when Antony highlights the expectation that male virtue is located in political success:

Sooner will men permit another should

Love her they love, than wear the crown they wear.[[95]](#footnote-95)

This contrasts starkly with Cleopatra’s refusal to betray Antony to save her crown in the previous scene. On top of this, Antony’s continued criticism of love and luxury is framed around the feminisation of his manly valour.[[96]](#footnote-96) He has become ‘a slave unto her feeble face’, his ‘virtue dead’ and his ‘martial deeds…gone in smoke’ yielding instead ‘to Venus’ myrtles.’[[97]](#footnote-97) Men are thus envisioned in *Antonius* as finding their virtue outside of love, in the public sphere of military or political achievement. If a man loses his public political and military virtue, this is then expressed in feminising terms. Women, in contrast, are expected to find virtue in the private sphere of their love for their husbands. For women, this means there is an incompatibility of virtue with ruling: Cleopatra and Dido’s traditionally virtuous love holds back their political ability, eventually resulting in the destruction of both their kingdoms.

This contradiction in the demands placed upon women by political necessity and private virtue can be seen to exercise its influence even over a virtuous woman like Octavia. Octavia is not a ruler, but she gets deeply entangled within politics through her role as a mediator between Antony and Octavian. In Brandon’s *The Virtuous Octavia*, Octavia’s constancy to Antony is praised as virtuous, but is also shown to lack political guile. Octavia attempts to prevent Octavian from declaring war on Antony in retribution for his faithlessness to her, attacking Octavian’s criticisms of Antony as based upon ‘foule suspition’ and ‘false report’ and accusing Octavian of wanting to attack Antony for his own honour, not due to Antony’s fault.[[98]](#footnote-98) Octavian, however, rejects Octavia’s pleas, saying that princes must be just, though he praises Octavia for her virtuous constancy to Antony.[[99]](#footnote-99) Although the audience is not at this stage certain as to whether Octavian is being honest about his demands for justice, it later emerges that he *is* being just, as he reveals that Antony has ordered Octavia to leave his house and all but declared war on Octavian.[[100]](#footnote-100) Following this, even Octavia agrees that war is inevitable ‘sith no wit can Antony reforme.’[[101]](#footnote-101) The impression given is that Octavia was being a virtuous woman in pleading for Antony as a wife should, but that this placed too much personal faith in Antony that Octavian, looking at things from a political angle, was not blinded by. On the other hand, had Octavia agreed with Octavian and encouraged his war of revenge against Antony straight away, she would have been criticised for inconstancy. Therefore, although Octavian turns out to have been *politically* correct, Octavia is still praised for her *private* virtue. Her virtuous side, therefore, is incompatible with being politically astute, in a similar way to Sidney’s Cleopatra.

On a political level, Brandon’s presentation of Octavia was probably self-consciously feeding into a wider discussion of female virtue. Although nothing is known about Brandon outside of *The Virtuous Octavia*, Andrew Hadfield has suggested that he had some contact with Edmund Spenser through the Touchet family who were acquiring land in Ireland in the late 1590s and whose daughter, Lucy, is the dedicatee of Brandon’s epistles at the end of the play.[[102]](#footnote-102) Hadfield further argues that Brandon may have even based his portrayal of Sylvia on Spenser’s as yet unpublished Mutabilitie Cantos.[[103]](#footnote-103) In this way, Brandon’s portrayal of Octavia may have been influenced by Spenserian reflections on politicised female virtue, with similarities to *The Faerie Queene* in the ambiguous line between praise and criticism of female involvement in politics and, therefore, of Elizabeth. Overall, Brandon’s portrayal of Octavia is clearly similar to Sidney’s Cleopatra and Marlowe’s Dido in his suggestion that female virtue is politically limiting, which raises questions about Elizabeth’s own ability to marry womanly virtue with ruling.

III

So far, we have examined authors who took for granted the set of traditional virtues assigned to women. The contradiction that women involved in politics faced between their private morality and the demands of political expediency was predicated on the prescriptive ideas about female virtue which were outlined at the beginning of this thesis. However, not all dramatists who were thinking about female virtue and its relation to politics accepted these notions of female morality without question. Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* demonstrates this in its nuanced portrayal of Octavia who is a case study in the limits of constancy, torn between her love for her husband and her brother:

A more unhappy lady,

If this division chance, ne’er stood between,

Praying for both parts.[[104]](#footnote-104)

However, whilst in Brandon’s play Octavia’s conduct is presented as unambiguously right and virtuous, with her unhappiness solely caused by Antony’s immoral liaisons with Cleopatra which themselves are suggested to be the product of sorcery through comparisons with Circe and the sirens,[[105]](#footnote-105) in Shakespeare’s play Octavia’s supposed virtue has limitations. Enobarbus predicts that the marriage between Octavia and Antony will drive the Triumvirs further apart because ‘Octavia is of a holy, cold, and still conversation.’ Menas replies: ‘Who would not have his wife so?’[[106]](#footnote-106) Menas here expresses the typical position espoused by late Elizabethan moralists about the virtues of a wife, but it is Enobarbus who is proved correct: Antony rejects Menas’ vision of the ideal wife and returns to Cleopatra, not because she is a sorceress, but because Octavia has all the traits of a woman who would traditionally be considered virtuous. In this way, Shakespeare presents Octavia’s virtue as something potentially unattractive. It is important to note that Shakespeare deviates from Plutarch, since in Plutarch’s *Antonius* Octavia is roundly praised:

Thereuppon everie man did set forward this marriage, hoping thereby that this Ladie Octavia, having an excellent grace, wisedom and honestie, joyned unto so rare a beawtie, that when she were with Antonius (he loving her as so worthy a Ladie deserveth) she should…keepe good love and amitie betwixt her brother and him.[[107]](#footnote-107)

Antony’s return to Cleopatra is not described in terms of Cleopatra’s merits or Octavia’s weaknesses, but is ascribed to Antony’s inability to suppress ‘the unreyned lust of concupiscence.’[[108]](#footnote-108) Shakespeare, therefore, presents a radical reassessment of Antony’s motivation, allowing the audience to understand his rejection of Octavia, and thus of normative female virtue, in more sympathetic terms than the ones found in either Brandon or Plutarch.

This has striking similarities with Marlowe’s Aeneas’ rejection of Dido. Aeneas, troubled by his personal obligations to Dido, is immediately repulsed by what he predicts will be Dido’s overbearing farewell:

Her silver arms will coll me round about,

And tears of pearl cry, ‘Stay, Aeneas, stay!’

Each word she says will then contain a crown,

And every speech be ended with a kiss:

I may not dure this female drudgery.[[109]](#footnote-109)

This goodbye that Aeneas envisions Dido giving him is exactly the kind envisioned by those writers on female virtue who emphasise a woman’s dedication to her husband and recalls the pleading goodbye of Cornelia to Pompey in *Caesar’s Revenge*.[[110]](#footnote-110) Aeneas’ disgust at the thought of the extravagant farewell Dido will give him is similar to Antony’s infidelity, therefore, in that they are both characterised by a male rejection of normative female virtuous conduct. The declarations of the Elizabethan moralists, whose advice about virtue was conceived of as being practically applicable, emphasised that by following their instructions a wife would keep her husband loyal to her.[[111]](#footnote-111) Octavia and Dido show that this was not necessarily perceived to be true.

That said, Marlowe’s questioning about the nature of female virtue only facilitates the progression of male public virtue in Aeneas’ destiny to become the father of Rome. In *Dido*, one is left with the sense that there is no obvious moral path for women in power since an alternative to constancy is not provided. This perhaps reflects the fatalistic inclinations of the play, with its emphasis on divine intervention. However, Shakespeare and, to a lesser degree, Samuel Daniel, in their plays about Cleopatra, suggest that there can be some virtue and dignity for women located outside of the usual private and personal conceptions of female morality.

Samuel Daniel’s Cleopatra starts out as if she may come to the same conclusion as Sidney’s, that she must commit suicide out of the obligation of constant devotion to Antony:

If I should now (our common faulte) survive,

Then all the world must hate me if I doe it.[[112]](#footnote-112)

However, the fact that Antony is already dead at the start of the play means that the possibility of Cleopatra’s betrayal loses any dramatic immediacy and, as the driving force behind her motivation, her children seem more important with the murder of ‘Cesario’ (Caesarion) featuring heavily, in contrast to Shakespeare and Sidney’s versions.[[113]](#footnote-113) This manifests itself in the impossible choice facing Daniel’s Cleopatra: if she wants to save her children’s lives, then she must agree to be led in triumph by Octavian. She says to her children

It is for you I temporize with Caesar

And live this while to procure your safety.[[114]](#footnote-114)

Cleopatra’s children are a symbol of her personal duty as a mother, but also of her public duties as queen in that they are her successors, a fact continually alluded to throughout. Much is also made of Cleopatra’s own descendance from the dynastic line of Ptolemies.[[115]](#footnote-115) The play ends with the chorus stating that Cleopatra’s suicide has ended

All th’ issue of all those,

That so long rule have hell’d…

The end of the Ptolemies causes the end of Egypt since this ‘make[s] us no more us’, marking the beginning of Roman tyranny.[[116]](#footnote-116) Unlike in Sidney’s play, therefore, Cleopatra is not faced with a choice between her personal obligations to her children and her political obligations to save her kingdom: in Daniel’s play these are the same. Cleopatra’s suicide is caused, therefore, by a different motivation, alien to Sidney’s Cleopatra, Marlowe’s Dido or Brandon’s Octavia. At the beginning of the play she asserts that

I must die free…

Blood, chlydren, nature all must pardon mee.

My soule yeelds honour up the victory,

And I must bee a Queene, forget a mother.[[117]](#footnote-117)

Cleopatra’s suicide seems therefore to be an assertion of her independence and her majesty in rule: in other words, her dignity as queen over her virtue as a woman, particularly as a mother. This is reflected in the fact that her chief worry is not the betrayal of Antony or the death of her children, but the humiliation of being led in Triumph, the symbolic representation of her subjection to Octavian:

That courage with my blood and birth innated…

Cannot by threates be vulgarly abated,

To be thy slave, that ruled as good as thou.[[118]](#footnote-118)

In Daniel’s play Cleopatra’s realisation of her faults does not drive her to repent her lack of female virtue.[[119]](#footnote-119) Instead it makes her resolve to be worthy of her majesty in death by becoming more than either man or woman. This idea is expressed by Octavian who believes that Cleopatra will not let herself be led in triumph since

Tis more honour for her to die free…

Princes respect their honour more than blood…

To be a Prince, is more then be a man.[[120]](#footnote-120)

In the end Cleopatra settles on suicide as the only alternative to being led in Triumph, pledging to ‘Dye like a Queene’.[[121]](#footnote-121) Daniel’s Cleopatra manages to locate a sense of virtue for herself outside of the traditional sphere of women’s morality, through the promotion of her majestic dignity as a ruler and member of an ancient dynasty. Whilst Sidney’s Cleopatra, Marlowe’s Dido and the idealised Roman women are judged against the standards of traditional female virtue, Daniel’s Cleopatra manages to use her status as a queen to escape these constraints.

However, although Daniel’s Cleopatra is not completely defined by normative gendered expectations of virtue, there remains an undercurrent of moral judgement running throughout the play, with it being repeatedly asserted that the current woes of Egypt are ‘a reward for [Cleopatra’s] lust.’[[122]](#footnote-122) The play does not end on a note of admiration for the majesty of Cleopatra’s suicide, but rather a choral diatribe on the destruction of Egypt.[[123]](#footnote-123) Despite Cleopatra’s heroic death, therefore, there is a pervasive sense of her immorality and the destruction which it has caused that undermines her redemption at the end. One is left with the sense that, no matter how glorious her death, it would have been better if she had followed the advice of the traditional moralists.

Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, in contrast, is the most radical acceptance of a female morality which stands outside the normative constraints of female virtue. The most crucial deviation in Shakespeare’s portrayal of Cleopatra is that, whilst he emphasises her inconstancy and the negative impact of her passions, he is the only author to also present these elements in a positive light. When Antony is disillusioned with Cleopatra, complaining of how ‘She is cunning past man’s thought’, Enobarbus rebukes him:

Alack, sir no- her passions are made of nothing but the finest part of pure love. We cannot call her winds and waters sighs and tears: they are greater storms and tempests than almanacs can report.[[124]](#footnote-124)

The imagery here suggests that Cleopatra’s passions and love are as ‘pure’ and natural as the sea, with its dangers of tempests and storms glorified as a result: the magnitude of Cleopatra’s love is embodied in her dangerous passions. Later in the play, Enobarbus describes Cleopatra’s first meeting with Antony, in which Cleopatra asserted her queenly dominance, enrapturing him even more as a result:

Upon her landing, Antony sent to her,

Invited her to supper. She replied,

It should be better he became her guest,

Which she entreated. Our courteous Anthony,

Whom ne’er the word of ‘no’ woman heard speak,

Being barbered ten times o’er, goes to the feast…[[125]](#footnote-125)

Cleopatra here makes herself even more desirable to Antony precisely because she refuses to play by the usual rules governing female etiquette, enabled and made even more alluring by the fact she is a queen. Perhaps most important for understanding Shakespeare’s characterisation of Cleopatra, however, is the short story Enobarbus tells just before this:

I saw her once

Hop forty paces through the public street;

And having lost her breath, she spoke, and panted,

That she did make defect perfection,

And breathless, power breathe forth.[[126]](#footnote-126)

This epitomises Shakespeare’s characterisation of Cleopatra: all of the ‘vilest things’ which Elizabethan moralists identified in women ‘become themselves in her’ and we as an audience cannot help but share in Antony and Enobarbus’ admiration of this.[[127]](#footnote-127) Her death, like that of Daniel’s Cleopatra, presents her at her best, clothed in her finest robes and wearing her crown, in an almost ritualistic act of personal defiance.[[128]](#footnote-128) Unlike Daniel, however, Shakespeare allows Cleopatra to stay true to herself in her final moments. Despite her own assertion that

…I have nothing

of woman in me- now from head to foot

I am marble constant…[[129]](#footnote-129)

her death is not characterised by this suggested new virtuous constancy, but rather by her usual stormy passions, mingling ‘sentiments of Roman nobility and Stoic resolution…with almost every other possible mood- pride, tenderness, vanity, jealousy, humour and mockery, “immortal longings”, love both ideal and sensual.’[[130]](#footnote-130) She turns from magisterial dignity, dressed in her queenly robes, to jealousy of Iras, to mocking Octavian, to imagining the asp is her baby.[[131]](#footnote-131) In contrast to the stoical death of Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, whose last lines are an immortalising couplet,[[132]](#footnote-132) Cleopatra’s last words are ambiguously cut short: ‘What should I stay-’[[133]](#footnote-133) There is a sense that Cleopatra is intensely aware of the performance of dying and that, unlike Brutus’ finalistic determination, Cleopatra wants to go on performing until the end.

However, although Shakespeare may admire Cleopatra, he also included a traditional moralising view alongside his radical reassessment of female virtue. For example, Cleopatra’s flight from Actium is portrayed as a product of Cleopatra’s inconstancy with Scarrus cursing how

Yon ribanded nag of Egypt-

…i’th’midst o’th’fight,

…Hoists sails and flies.[[134]](#footnote-134)

The shifting judgement of Cleopatra is voiced by Enobarbus, who previously had been one of Cleopatra’s most vocal admirers and encouraged Antony not to return to Rome.[[135]](#footnote-135) Following Actium, however, Enobarbus becomes sceptical, seeing that Antony’s judgement has been compromised by Cleopatra:

The itch of his affection should not then

Have nicked his captainship.[[136]](#footnote-136)

However, this reflects the fact that in Shakespeare’s play judgement is mostly made of Antony’s political failings rather than Cleopatra’s. Unlike in Sidney or Daniel’s plays, little is made of how Cleopatra’s rule has affected the people of Egypt, with no Egyptian citizens attacking her failings as a ruler. There is not even a discussion about how the loss at Actium will affect Egypt as a kingdom. Her inconstancy and passions are never portrayed as an abdication of her duties as ruler or as damaging to her subjects, only damaging to Antony.[[137]](#footnote-137) It is this tension that is the central one: is Antony corrupting himself in his love for Cleopatra? As we have seen, Shakespeare presents at least one very radical answer to this, but it does result in less focus on questions of female rule. Shakespeare’s play is thus more personal and less broadly political than the other plays featuring Cleopatra, in that it does not reflect upon Cleopatra’s duties as a ruler, with its political element being more focused upon male virtue. Female rule in *Antony and Cleopatra* is only relevant, therefore, in the way it allows Cleopatra to escape the constraints of traditional conceptions of female virtue through the dignity of majesty which gives her an attractive, sexual power, as well as its embodiment in the glory of her death. This may reflect the fact that the play was written following the failure of Essex’s rebellion in 1601, which made politicised portrayals of Cleopatra in theatre more dangerous, with Fulke Greville burning his own version of the story out of fear of censorship or worse.[[138]](#footnote-138) Moreover, after Elizabeth’s death in 1603, the immediacy of the problems surrounding female rule disappeared, which would have probably prompted a less obviously politicised portrayal of Cleopatra than the one’s found in Sidney and Daniel’s versions which were written during the heat of debates about female rule under Elizabeth.

IV

Except for Shakespeare’s more ambiguous message in *Antony and Cleopatra*, all of these presentations of classical women suggest, to a greater or lesser extent, that it was impossible to conceptualise a positive ideal of virtuous womanhood compatible with political life. For Sidney’s Cleopatra, Brandon’s Octavia and Marlowe’s Dido, their virtuosity and constancy impede their political judgement. In contrast, Marlowe’s Aeneas and, to a lesser extent, Sidney and Shakespeare’s Antony’s find their virtue within the public sphere of political and military action. This calls female rule into question since politics is made to seem the natural, virtuous province of men rather than women. Even when women obtain some virtue and dignity in the public sphere, as Daniel and Shakespeare’s Cleopatras do, this virtue is embodied in the form of personal dignity rather than good rule: whilst Shakespeare’s Cleopatra’s ability as a ruler is passed over, Daniel’s Cleopatra is lambasted for destroying Egypt. Even supposedly ideally virtuous women with no public role or little influence in political affairs like Cornelia and Portia are shown to be naturally weak and over-emotional. Crucially, this is seen as virtuous and right for a woman, if it has no impact on politics.

The historical question which we must then ask is why were women portrayed in this way and how “political” can we judge these portrayals to be? This is, to some degree, an unanswerable question. Ambiguity surrounding the lives of writers like Shakespeare, Marlowe and Brandon makes it difficult to deduce their possible political motives. Moreover, in a synoptic study such as this one, which considers authors from varying backgrounds working in differing forms of theatrical writing, any attempt to draw clear-cut generalisations must be approached with care. To some degree, portrayals of private figures such as Cornelia, Octavia and Portia were simply products of gendered expectations of women that had no explicit political purpose, fitting into an ongoing narrative about the relative merits of men and women.[[139]](#footnote-139) In this way, these plays are perhaps more concerned with wider moral and even philosophical themes than straightforwardly “political” concerns.

However, even though these plays may not have been intended as direct political commentary on female rule or women’s role in politics, they all contributed to a political culture in which the idealised woman of the sermons and guidebooks was seen to be practically realisable and desirable, yet politically problematic. The political implications of this are naturally made much clearer in women who were public figures. The incompatibility between aspirations to moral virtue and political agency in figures like Cleopatra and Dido seems to undermine their ability to adequately fulfil a public role. This has critical implications for female rule and thus Elizabeth, fitting into the divisive political culture of the 1590s in which theories promoting monarchical authority were challenged over numerous issues and in various ways, from criticising Elizabeth’s war policy, to factionalism at court, to questioning female rule. Regardless of authorial political intent in directly criticising Elizabeth, therefore, these plays were all inherently political in that they reflected upon the nature of female virtue. With a queen regnant, these reflections could never not be political; they mirrored and contributed to an ongoing discussion of morality from which no woman could escape, monarch or not.

It should be noted that Elizabeth had two rebuttals against the questioning of the compatibility of female rule and virtue expressed in these plays. Firstly, she had neither a husband nor children and therefore could not be torn between her realm and her duties as a private woman. Indeed, Elizabeth frequently used the language of womanly love to conceptualise her relationship with her subjects, theoretically uniting her public and personal obligations.[[140]](#footnote-140) Secondly, she often used and promoted language about herself which was designed to project an image of masculinity and thus counter accusations of female weakness, alongside providential justifications. Her famous Tilbury speech in 1588 emphasised her legitimacy in masculine terms in her assertion that ‘I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king…’ whilst the promotion of the cult of the Virgin Queen simultaneously emphasised her feminine independence and virtue.[[141]](#footnote-141)

However, despite these defences, there were still severe objections to female rule. In the first place, although Elizabeth attempted to present her femininity in masculine terms, it was clear that she faced significant practical limitations because of her gender, especially in war which dominated political discussion in the 1590s. We can see this within the Tilbury speech itself since Elizabeth had to surrender command of her forces to her Lieutenant General, Leicester.[[142]](#footnote-142) Difficulties with commanders in the field were a frequent occurrence, and their reluctance to listen to Elizabeth suggests a disregard for what they saw as womanly hesitancy and indecisiveness.[[143]](#footnote-143) The Earl of Essex was particularly notorious for arguing with the queen over military matters, being banished from court in July 1598 for quarrelling with Elizabeth over the Irish campaign. In letters to the queen he openly defined her rule ‘as effeminate and unpredictable, dependent on her emotions.’[[144]](#footnote-144) These acts of explicitly gendered defiance demonstrate that Elizabeth’s defences against accusations of typical female weakness did not impede attacks against her based upon her gender.

Secondly, although Elizabeth attempted to marry the language of political and personal obligations, as well as not having a husband or children to divide her loyalties, she was still open to the more fundamental criticism of female rule made in these plays which suggests that there is something unnatural about Elizabeth’s lack of the things that normally bestow virtue upon a woman. Daniel’s play is especially suggestive of criticism, since its focus on Cleopatra’s children and the succession of the Ptolemaic dynasty patently mirrors questions about the succession.[[145]](#footnote-145) The plays also emphasise womanly weakness generally, suggesting that this weakness is a natural part of womanhood and even of female virtue, as seen in Portia’s overhasty death and Cornelia’s hesitancy in adopting a stoical approach to grief. Elizabeth herself had to repeatedly recognise the supposed weakness which her sex bestowed upon her, with her declining at the closing of Parliament in March 1576 to take credit for ‘this hap and good success’ because ‘my sex permits it not.’[[146]](#footnote-146)

All these questions about female virtue, weakness and rule fit into a broader narrative which was being constructed in opposition to the regime throughout the long 1590s, chiefly but not entirely dominated by the Essex circle. This narrative was pro-war and wanted to emphasise the importance of figures other than the queen. These plays, and the portrayal of women within them, all fed into this narrative by portraying female virtue as politically dangerous and the antithesis of strong rule promoting the common good. The natural implication of this was of the need for the queen to have strong male advisors to counsel her which, in the 1590s, was an idea chiefly promoted by the Earl of Essex to promote his military ambitions, as well as the Sidney circle in its attempt to shape Philip Sidney’s chivalric legacy.[[147]](#footnote-147) It is no surprise, therefore, to find Sidney’s sister and the writer that she patronised, Samuel Daniel, translating and writing plays about a queen who, even whilst being sympathetic, is seen to be making the politically wrong choices with regards to the nation as a whole.[[148]](#footnote-148)

Overall, therefore, whilst it remains impossible to draw generalized conclusions about the political intentions behind every play, a consistent portrayal of female virtue and its interaction with politics emerges. Against the background of deep discontent with Elizabeth’s rule in the long 1590s, authors both reflected and helped to shape the debate through portrayals of female virtue which were obviously in conflict with how Elizabeth lived her life and, even more importantly, how the idea of monarchical rule was conceptualised. In the end, despite Shakespeare’s more radical portrayal of Cleopatra, it is perhaps unsurprisingly Sidney’s portrayal of her fellow woman which rings truest as the most understanding and insightful discussion of female rule: Cleopatra’s everlasting love, the most valued virtue a woman can have, in the end helps no-one and yet, without it, she would have been beyond redemption.

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