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THE CONFLICT RECONSIDERED: CLEOPATRA AND THE CIVIL WAR IN THE EARLY IMPERIAL EPIC

ELINA PYY

In this paper I study the representations of the battle of Actium and Cleopatra VII in the epic poetry of the early Principate. My aim is to scrutinize how the conceptions of Actium and the character of the Ptolemaic queen contributed to the interpretation of the Civil War in the literary discourse of the Principate. I will focus on war-centred, historical epics; because of the particular role that the genre had in relating and reconstructing the Roman past, it held a prominent position when the value base of the new regime was formed. The primary source for my study is Virgil's *Aeneid*; as a point of comparison I will study Lucan's *Pharsalia*. The Civil War theme is of central importance in both of these works, and when studied comparatively, they will provide one with an understanding of how the approach towards the subject changed during the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Another source of importance is the little-studied hexameter poem found in the Villa of Papyri in Herculaneum, the so-called *Carmen de bello Actiaco* by an unknown author. It is difficult to draw conclusions based primarily on this fragmentary and poorly preserved work; nevertheless, due to its' dating to the first decades of the Principate, it is of primary importance for my study and will be used as a comparative source.

The fall of Egypt in the sources of the Augustan Era – the Civil War concealed

On the 2nd of September in 31 B.C., a naval battle was fought on the Ionian Sea, near the city of Actium by the Ambracian Gulf. Fighting parties consisted, on one side, of Caesar Octavian's Roman forces, and, on the other, of Mark Antony with the backing of Ptolemaic Egypt. The battle ended in a victory of the party of Octavian; Cleopatra and Antony fled to Alexandria, where both committed a suicide a year later. Octavian conquered Egypt and secured his position as the sole ruler

of Rome; the victory was celebrated in a fabulous three-day triumph, while the monarchy was carefully concealed in the guise of a newborn Republic.

The battle of Actium and its significance for the Augustan propaganda¹ have roused continuous interest among scholars. Despite different viewpoints, most studies are built on the conception that in order to legitimise his actions, Octavian strove to be depicted as the representative of the Roman order as a whole. In his *Res gestae divi Augusti* Augustus himself attests that *iuravit in mea verba tota Italia sponte sua, et me belli quo vici ad Actium ducem depoposcit*.² Even though a considerable portion of the Roman nobility, including hundreds of senators and both consuls of the year 32 had fled to Antony's side,³ Actium was presented as a crusade of united Italy against the barbarian East.

It has been considered that the purpose of such a representation was to minimise Actium's nature as a battle of the Civil War.⁴ By emphasising his role as a representative of *tota Italia*, Augustus strove to conceal that he had been wag-

¹ Despite its anachronistic connotations, propaganda is the word most commonly applied when referring to the creation of the Augustan administration's public image. It is, however, worthwhile to further expose its meaning in this particular context. For lack of a more suitable word, I use the term referring to the attempts of the imperial administration to reconstruct recent history. The expressions of the Augustan conception of history are considered to have been expressed through various forms; literature, architecture, numismatic evidence and public celebrations (such as triumphal processions and the *ludi saeculares*). It is, however, highly problematic to observe these different sources as expressions of one unified message. Considering the vast divergences of topics and viewpoints within the source groups, it seems questionable that the Augustan administration had a single, well-formed conception of the recent past, and even more questionable how deliberately it was transmitted through different medias. The whole conception of the Augustan propaganda should therefore be approached critically and being aware that the modern meaning of the term might distort the interpretations. Defining propaganda as 'political' causes further trouble. In Roman society the concepts of political, social, cultic and military overlapped greatly, and it is necessary to define the meaning of these ideas in every discussion concerning them. In this particular paper, when referring to political or social activity or propaganda, I place them mainly in the context of public participation and warfare. The pursuit of legitimised power and participation in military activity are the main attributes defining political agency in this discussion.

² *RG* 25,2.

³ Dio 50,2,6.

⁴ See, e.g., L. Hughes-Hallett, *Cleopatra. Histories, Dreams and Distortions*, New York 1990, chapter 2, "The Story According to Octavius", 36–68; C. Pelling, "Anything truth can do, we can do better: the Cleopatra legend", in S. Walker – P. Higgs, *Cleopatra of Egypt. From history to myth*, Princeton 2001, 292–3; O. De Bruyn – A. Delcourt, "La bataille d'Actium, mythe fondateur d'un nouveau régime", in L. van Ypersele (ed.), *Imaginaires de guerre. L'histoire entre mythe et réalité*, Louvain-la-Neuve 2003, 269–392, see 372–5.

ing war against another Roman commander. The idea of the unanimous backing of Italy legitimised both the war and the social base of Augustus' autocracy. It has been suggested that it was also an attempt to fade out the painful memory of the Social Wars, and of the fierce conflicts of the Civil Wars in the preceding decades.⁵ It is a widespread conception that in Augustan propaganda, Actium became a mystified Roman crusade, a founding myth of a new order, and Cleopatra, in turn, a personification of everything that had been conquered – the dangerous and effeminate East, treacherous Egypt, and fearsome foreignness.

In past years, however, the question has been raised whether Actium and Cleopatra actually played such a considerable role in Augustan propaganda as has been suggested. Scholars such as M. Wyke and R. Gurval have rightly remarked that their role is not clearly emphasised, for example, in the visual evidence of the Augustan era. In the coinage circulated in the beginning of the Principate, the battle is only indirectly referred to, while considerably more emphasis is put on the final capture of the Orient, for instance.⁶ Neither is the battle explicitly portrayed in any piece of monumental architecture of the age of Augustus.⁷ The imperialistic ideology and the conquering of new areas seem to have been issues of greater importance to the Augustan administration.

Neither is Cleopatra the principal issue in the evidence of the Augustan era. It is surprisingly difficult to find representations of the Egyptian queen in any visual material dating to the end of the 1st century B.C.⁸ The minor role of the

⁵ D. Quint, *Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton*, Princeton 1993, 26–7. See also P. Marchetti, "Dans le sillage d'Actium: quelques réflexions sur la construction idéologique du Principat", in van Ypersele (above n. 4) 393–407, see 394–5, 406–7.

⁶ M. Wyke, "Augustan Cleopatras: Female Power and Poetic Authority", in A. Powell, *Roman Poetry and Propaganda in the Age of Augustus*, London 1992, 86–129, see 117–21; R. A. Gurval, *Actium and Augustus. The politics and emotions of civil war*, Michigan 1995, 4–6.

⁷ P. Zanker has noted that since the Civil War was such a delicate subject during the period, the victory at Actium could not be celebrated with clear references to the defeated enemy or even to the battle itself. Instead, abstract symbols of victory were used in the decorations of public buildings – marine creatures, dolphins, and parts of ships (*rostra*) can be found as nonspecific allusions to the battle of Actium. According to Zanker, these symbols of the maritime battle were a starting point of the new imperial imagery that developed further during the Augustan era. P. Zanker, *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder*, München 1987, 85–90. For some further analysis on the imagery and the symbolism concerning Actium in the decoration of the temple of Apollo on the Palatine, see O. De Bruyn – A. Delcourt (above n. 4) 380–6.

⁸ Wyke (above n. 6) 116–21. See also Zanker (above n. 7) 67–70. On Cleopatra's representation in her own Ptolemaic propaganda, M. Wyke, *The Roman Mistress: Ancient and Modern Representations*, Oxford – New York 2002, 200–4. For other extensive studies on visual

defeated queen in the public media, and her absence in Augustus' own memoirs indeed question the conception of her crucial role in Augustan propaganda. J. Williams has perceptively noted that unlike often assumed, the foundation of the new order seems to have been based more on the conquest of Egypt as a whole than on the specific Actian defeat of Cleopatra.⁹

Based on this evidence it appears that contemporary Augustan literary research has been influenced by the powerful rhetoric of the later Roman historiography. In the works of Appian, Plutarch and Dio Cassius, Cleopatra indeed appears as a serious threat to Rome and as the major agent in corrupting Antony.¹⁰ Even though these depictions doubtlessly tell a lot about the lasting interest in Actium and Cleopatra, and of the gradual development of ideas concerning them, it is highly questionable to allow them to influence the reading of earlier sources. The intellectual and cultural atmosphere of the second (and in Dio's case, the early third) century A.D. and the literary taste of the Greek-speaking audience presumably influenced deeply the historians' interpretations of the Roman past. In most of their representations of the Ptolemaic queen, a strong romantic and moralistic tendency can be perceived.

Among the sources of the Augustan era, there is however one group in which the importance of Actium indeed appears to be emphasised. In the poetry of the early Principate the great naval battle is a concurrent theme – Horace, Propertius and Virgil all discuss the matter in their own personal styles, all still managing to represent the battle as a turning point of Roman history and as a starting point of the Augustan era of peace. The influence of the Augustan administration on these representations has been widely studied, and the independence of the poets has generally been somewhat questioned. It has been considered that through his friend and councillor, Gaius Maecenas, Augustus selected the most talented of the Roman poets to sing the praise of the new order and, particularly, to celebrate his Actian victory.¹¹

representations of Cleopatra, see e.g. Walker – Higgs (above n. 4).

⁹ J. H. C. Williams, "'Spoiling the Egyptians': Octavian and Cleopatra", in Walker – Higgs (above n. 4) 190–9, see 197–8; also Gurval (above n. 6) 4–5.

¹⁰ See, e.g., App. *BC* 1, 8–11; Plut. *Ant.* 25; 28,1–2; 29,1–2; 36; 50,4; 51; 53,3–6; 54,3–6; 56; Dio 48,24,2–3; 49,41,1–4; 50,3,3–50,5,4; 50,24,6–50,27,2.

¹¹ See K. Quinn, *Virgil's Aeneid: A critical description*, London 1968, 26, 293–9; J. Griffin, "Augustus and the Poets: *Caesar qui cogere posset*", in F. Millar – E. Segal, *Caesar Augustus: seven aspects*, Gloucestershire 1984, 198; F. Léon-Marcien, "L'interprétation de la bataille d'Actium par les poètes latins de l'époque augustéenne", *LEC* 24 (1956) 330. This conception has, nevertheless, also been questioned. W. Johnson, for instance, has perceived in the works

The close relationship between the imperial ideology and the Augustan poets has strongly influenced the reading of their works – not the least when discussing Actium's reputation as a foreign conflict. The unity of Italy and the Roman conquest over the world have often been considered concurrent themes in Horace's, Propertius' and Virgil's depictions of the battle. Augustan poets have been accused of deliberately ignoring the Civil War issue, representing Actium primarily as a chapter in the Roman history of dominating foreign peoples.¹²

This idea seems justifiable as far as it concerns the representations of Actium in the lyric and the elegiac poetry. In the works of Horace and Propertius, the horrors of the Orient and the battle against the foreign queen are, indeed, obviously expressed, and any references to the Civil War are difficult to find. Horace, for instance, relates of Actium that

*dum Capitolio / regina dementes ruina, / funus et imperio parabat
/ contaminato cum grege turpium / morbo virorum, / - - sed minuit
furorem / vix una sospes navis ab ignibus, / mentemque lymphatam
Mareotico / redegit in verso timores / Caesar, ab Italia volentem /
remis adurgens.*¹³

In a very similar manner, Propertius states that

*scilicet incesti meretrix regina Canopi, / una Philippeo sanguine adus-
ta nota, / ausa Iovi nostro latrantem opponere Anubim, / et Tiberim
Nili cogere ferre minas, / Romanamque tubam crepitanti pellere sistro
/ - - septem urbs alta iugis, toto quae praesidet orbi, / femineas timuit
terrata Marte minas. / - - cape, Roma, triumphum / et longum Augusto
salva precare diem! / fugisti tamen in timidi vaga flumina Nili.*¹⁴

of the Augustan poets concealed criticism towards their own society and scepticism towards the common clichés. He states that in Horace's representations of Cleopatra, for example, there is noticeable irony and disdain towards usual lies spread about the queen. W. R. Johnson, "A Queen, a great Queen? Cleopatra and the politics of misrepresentation", *Arion* 6 (1967) 387–40: 399. Gurval, too, has considered depictions of Actium more as "distinctive and dissimilar objectives of individual poets, far from any constant and uniform intention to applaud (or bemoan) the outcome at Actium". Gurval bases his interpretation on the conception that Actium wielded little importance for the Augustan propaganda: therefore it is credible that the poetic myth of the battle is formed more by the individual poets' outlook than by the instructions of the Augustan administration. Gurval (above n. 6) 10, 16–17.

¹² Williams (above n. 9) 198, see also Quint (above n. 5).

¹³ Hor. *carm.* 1,37,6–10, 12–17.

¹⁴ Prop. 3,11,39–43, 57–8, 49–51.

Apparently, the continuous juxtaposition between the characteristics of the Roman civilisation and those of the alien culture is a prominent feature in these literary versions of the battle. The foreign threat is personified in the character of Cleopatra, while Augustus is represented as the saviour of the people, single-handedly driving away the peril. The Civil War and the Roman enemy is nowhere to be found.

However, the situation appears to be quite different when it comes to the epic narratives of the early Principate. Both in the *Aeneid* of Virgil and in the *Pharsalia* of Lucan the civil conflicts' significance to the development of the state actually appears as a rather recurring theme, notably expressed when discussing Actium. This is a matter that has received surprisingly little attention. I will now attempt to dig a little deeper in these epic representations in order to clarify the role of Actium in the Roman epic, and, subsequently, the role of Cleopatra in Actium.

The end of history? – Actium in the continuum of the civil struggles

It is somewhat peculiar that in the extensive epic masterpieces of both Virgil and Lucan, the poets only briefly mention the battle of Actium. The theme of the *Pharsalia* – the Civil War between Caesar and Pompey – certainly offers an opportunity for a more extensive treatment of the subject than the total of two lines Lucan gives it.¹⁵ As for Virgil, the brief description of the great battle is even more confusing. In the *Georgica*, the poet reveals his plans to subsequently write a magnificent imperial epic about Caesar's fiery fights.¹⁶ However, the outcome appears quite different than planned. In the massive twelve-book narrative about the wanderings of Aeneas the battle of Actium is only referred to in 43 lines in the end of book VIII, where the scene is presented in the centrepiece of Aeneas' shield, surrounded by episodes from earlier Roman history and tradition.¹⁷

It is worthwhile to summarise here briefly the passage concerning the shield, in order to provide a framework for Virgil's discussion of Actium. This passage seems to be a confusing mixture of mythology, legendary past, and the political history of Rome. The poet has selected seemingly scrappy and discon-

¹⁵ Luc. *Phar.* 10,66–67: *Leucadioque fuit dubius sub gurgite casus, / An mundum ne nostra quidem matrona teneret.*

¹⁶ Verg. *georg.* 3,46–7: *ardentis ... pugnas Caesaris*; the whole passage 3,16–48.

¹⁷ Verg. *Aen.* 8,626–728; the battle of Actium in particular 8,671–713.

nected stories, seeking to describe the turning points of history from the founding of Rome until the age of Augustus. The task is certainly challenging – what Livy spends over a hundred books narrating, Virgil attempts to wrap up in 102 lines. The poet describes first the image of Romulus and Remus in the affectionate care of the she-wolf. The next motif is the war between the Romans and the Sabines, brought about by the rape of the Sabine women. Next to these episodes Virgil places the torturing of Mettius, the Alban torn into pieces for violating the alliance with the Romans. Subsequently follow the war against Clusium and the attack of Gauls in 390 B.C. At this point, the style of the shield appears to change and the poet moves on from the legendary imagery to describe personages of more recent history. He relates the sufferings of Catiline in the underworld, and places Cato in the peaceful dwelling-place of the pious. Finally, the story of the shield achieves its climax in the centrepiece, representing the battle of Actium and the flight of Cleopatra. The scene is completed by a representation of the triple triumph in 30 B.C.

Interpretations concerning the passage have been varied. It has been considered particularly difficult to locate the description of Actium in the overall atmosphere of the *Aeneid*. The optimistic celebration of the Roman glory seems indeed a rather disconnected episode in the middle of the gloomy world of the epos. Some scholars have studied it as Virgil's reluctant attempt to include political propaganda in his work; others have considered the passage a genuine expression of patriotic pride.¹⁸ In either case, to most scholars the representation of Actium has seemed an uneasy passage that does not fit in the *Aeneid* as a whole.

The way I see it, this uneasiness is to some extent due to the efforts to read the *Aeneid* as a story of the Roman conquest and world dominion. It appears that to understand the connection between the shield and the entity, one must let go of this idea, and study the passage in the context of Rome's internal development and the Civil Wars. Instead of considering the episodes depicted in the shield as "*exempla* of Roman character" or as a "presentation of Roman virtues", as has been proposed¹⁹, they could rather be studied as historical stages of Rome's development through conflicts with their neighbouring allies. After all, Virgil himself defines the subject of the shield as *res Italas Romanorumque triumphos*.²⁰ He claims to represent there *genus omne futurae / stirpis ab Ascanio pugnataque in*

¹⁸ See e.g. Gurval (above n. 6) 12, 212; Quinn (above n. 11) 195–8.

¹⁹ R.D. Williams (ed.), *The Aeneid of Vergil*, London 1972–73, 265–6.

²⁰ Verg. *Aen.* 8,626.

*ordine bella.*²¹

The theme of the Civil War is thus strikingly present in the Virgilian version of Roman history. Apart from the attack of the Gauls, in every episode the enemies of the *Romulidae*²² are either those of their own or those of their later allies – the Sabines, the Etruscans, the Albans. The teleological nature of the continuum of conflicts is made apparent: through destructive wars the *victi* are assimilated into the Roman society and the unity of *tota Italia* is achieved. The battle of Actium is represented as the outcome and the culmination of this development: as a worthy descendant of the *Romulidae*, Augustus Caesar leads a united Italy into the final battle that will end the internal turmoil and bring about long-expected peace:

*hinc Augustus agens Italos in proelia Caesar / cum patribus popu-
loque, penatibus et magnis dis, / stans celsa in puppi, geminas cui
tempora flammis / laeta vomunt patriumque aperitur vertice sidus.*²³

Gurval has considered it ironic that Virgil represents Augustus commanding the united troops of the Italians, the very people Aeneas is fighting from behind his shield.²⁴ This is certainly a point worthy of attention, but to me it seems a deliberate detail that links the story of Aeneas with contemporary Roman history of its time. With the united troops of Augustus, the history of civil struggles has achieved its fulfilment.

The only thing standing in the way of this final unity is, of course, Mark Antony. It is noteworthy that, unlike most authors who seem to blame Cleopatra, Virgil explicitly mentions Antony in his representation of Actium. Moreover, he is mentioned first, and his Egyptian consort is only afterwards referred to.²⁵ This single detail characterises the battle as a civil war, and it has consequently often been neglected in studies that tend to stress the imperialistic nature of the Virgilian epic. But when examined against the background of Aeneas' shield, the

²¹ Verg. *Aen.* 8,628–29.

²² Virgil uses the terms *Romulidae* (8,638) and *Aeneadae* (8,648) to distinguish the *gens* of Aeneas, considered to be the original Romans, from their Italian allies and opponents.

²³ Verg. *Aen.* 8,678–81. Moreover, in order to further emphasise the unity of Italy brought about by Octavian, Virgil represents the winner in his triumph as sacrificing to the Italian gods that had ensured his victory: *dis Italis votum immortale sacrabat* (8,715).

²⁴ Gurval (above n. 6) 234.

²⁵ Verg. *Aen.* 8,685, 688.

detail no longer seems contradictory and disconnected. Instead, it very logically makes Actium the final stage in the succession of Rome's internal conflicts, the final victory of the *Romulidae* over rebellious friends and allies.

It is intriguing to compare Virgil's viewpoint with another epic narrative, written eight decades later in a different political atmosphere. In Lucan's *Pharsalia*, the subtle allusions that Virgil reaches in his poetry are strikingly absent. In his poem, Lucan speaks of the Civil War more explicitly and harshly than any Roman poet before or after. The judgemental tone should be studied against the poet's personal history.²⁶ The last books of the *Pharsalia* were most likely written when Lucan's relationship with the imperial court had already been broken, which naturally might have influenced his pessimistic representation of the Roman history and politics.

Generally Lucan expresses a highly judgemental attitude towards *bellum civile*. The phenomenon is represented as an unnatural tragedy provoked by the individual commanders' greed and ambition. Virgilian echoes are present as Lucan emphasises the war as a struggle of friends and family members: he highlights the familial relationship between Caesar and Pompey by recurrently referring to them as father- and son-in-law.²⁷ Differences to Virgil are, however, as apparent as similarities. In Lucan's narrative, the disgust felt towards the Civil War evolves into rather open admiration of the Republican system. Lucan recurrently depicts Caesar as a bloodthirsty and unemotional tyrant; his awaiting death is described as the revenge of the Senate, and the punishment for the Civil War that the great men of the Republic had long been praying for.²⁸

²⁶ In the beginning of his literary career, Lucan enjoyed the friendship and tutelage of the imperial house. However, while working with his extensive history of the Civil War, the poet, drifted into a feud with Nero. The reason for the dispute is not clear, but the young poet seems to have adopted a rather hateful outlook towards the emperor. He was condemned in 65 A.D. for participation in the Pisonian conspiracy and was forced to commit a suicide at the age of 25. See e.g. Tac. *Ann.* 15,48–70; J. Masters, "Deceiving the Reader: The Political Mission of Lucan's *Bellum Civile*", in J. Elsner – J. Masters (eds.), *Reflections of Nero: Culture, History, and Representation*, Chapel Hill 1994, 151–77.

²⁷ See, e.g., Luc. *Phar.* 10,348; 10,417. In Virgil's representation, the same kind of an association between the war and the family feud is implied in the passage concerning the sack of the Sabine virgins.

²⁸ Luc. *Phar.* 10,343; 10,397–98. The passage concerning Caesar's death: *Dignatur viles isto quoque sanguine dextras, / quo Fortuna parat victos perfundere patres, / poenaque civilis belli, vindicta senatus, / paena data est famulo*, (10,138–141). Lucan also emphasises Caesar's lust for power and riches and compares him to certain Republican leaders, clearly expressing the nobler spirit of the latter (*Phar.* 10,149–54).

Nevertheless, considering the poet's hateful outlook towards civil conflicts in general, I find it probable that his principal message is not the condemnation of the imperial regime altogether. The harsh judgement of Caesar and the other warmongering commanders of the *populares* might as well be mostly due to their reputation as provokers of the civil strife and *discordia*. This assumption is supported by the passionate tone with which Lucan seems to sympathise with the *infelicia fata* of a Rome torn by concurrent internal conflicts. Indeed, his desperate exclamation *ubi non civilia bella / invenit imperii fatum miserabile nostri?* echoes the same gloom and frustration with which Virgil dealt with the subject in the *Aeneid*.²⁹

Quint has suggested that Lucan represents his *Pharsalia* as an allegorical version of the battle of Actium. He has considered crucial that the battle of Pharsalus, too, is depicted as a victory of the united western troops over the unorganised legions of the eastern peoples, and that this miscellaneous party, alike, is commanded by the Roman general, which adds a significant touch of civil war to the patriotic struggle.³⁰ The comparison could be made to the Virgilian interpretation of Actium, where the clash of cultures was spiced up with an explicit mention of Mark Antony as the enemy. Altogether, both epic poets studied here seem to disapprove of the conception of Actium as merely a crisis of foreign policy. Implicitly, through the previous conflicts in Roman history they emphasize the Civil War lurking behind the imperialistic endeavours of Rome.³¹ Actium is represented both as a part of the series of the civil struggles, and as a culminating point that might finally end them and bring about the unity of the state. The first is a viewpoint highly emphasised in the pessimistic and gloomy narrative of Lucan, while the latter is what Virgil's fatalistic representation of Actium could be considered as built on.

²⁹ Luc. *Phar.* 10,410–11. Other passages concerning the subject see e.g. 10,416–17; 10,402–10.

³⁰ Luc. *Phar.* 7,360–68; 7,269–74; 7,252–44; Quint (above n. 5) 35–6.

³¹ By their choice of words as well, both poets condemn the civil war as unnatural and unjust by nature. Lucan characterises Caesar's actions as impious warfare, *nefando Marte*. Virgil describes the sack of Sabine maidens as an act *sine more* and the resulting conflict as *novum bellum*. Gurval has rightly explained that *novum* as an attribute of war refers to something unexpected or unforeseen in a negative sense. The struggle between supposed allies is considered a shocking turn of events and definitely a disapproved one. The same kind of allusion is made in the representation of Actium, when Virgil describes raging battle as *nova caede*. Expressions such as these can be considered as both emphasising the nature of conflict as a civil war and expressing the disapproval of the authors towards that kind of a war. Luc. *Phar.* 10,147–50; Verg. *Aen.* 8,635; 8,637; 8,695; Gurval (above n. 6) 220.

***Ne nostra quidem matrona* – Epic Cleopatra's failure in the female role**

The role of Cleopatra, then, should be studied against this background. In the narratives of Virgil and Lucan the foreign queen is, indeed, strongly defined by her association with the internal conflict of Rome. Conversely to what has often been observed, it seems that epic Cleopatra is, after all, not merely a foreign threat. Rather, she is one component in the internal crisis of Rome, and the real peril is her successful meddling with the political affairs of the Empire.

Lucan, in particular, puts great emphasis on Cleopatra's endeavours to increase her power through the Roman Civil War. He states that *nam Latio iam nupta duci est, interque maritos / discurrens Aegypton habet Romamque meretur*, explicitly expressing the danger the seductive queen forms to the Empire.³² Cleopatra's political interests are stressed also when the poet mentions that she was *nec sceptris contenta suis nec fratre marito* – therefore, she was pursuing the Roman general as her lover and Rome herself as her dominion.³³

Although the meddling of foreigners in Rome's internal affairs is generally condemned, the case of Cleopatra is made worse by the fact that she is, besides a foreigner, also a woman. Her interest in the business of Rome and in the business of men is a violation of both Roman ethnic hierarchy and its gender dynamics.³⁴ In fact, Cleopatra's gender is so highly stressed by both epic poets that it appears, actually, as a stronger defining characteristic than her status as an Egyptian.

This is not a common viewpoint in the studies concerning Cleopatra. The queen's foreignness, rather than her gender, has been stressed as her defining attribute by most scholars. Being an Egyptian has been considered her most severe vice in the Roman authors' depictions. Her decadence and immorality have been studied as representatives of foreign and Eastern in general, and sometimes she has been considered merely a symbol of "effeminate and conquered Asia".³⁵ Nevertheless, keeping in mind the crucial theme of the Civil War, I propose that other perspectives besides ethnicity should be more seriously taken under examination. The foreignness of the Egyptian queen is naturally an important characteristic of her nature, but it alone does not suffice to explain the resentment aroused by her

³² Luc. *Phar.* 10,358–59.

³³ Luc. *Phar.* 10,138.

³⁴ Lucan judges harshly the meddling of foreigners in the internal strife of Rome also when he describes the attempt of the Egyptians to attack Caesar and deprive the Roman senate of the honour of killing the tyrant, *Phar.* 10,338–44.

³⁵ Wyke (above n. 6) 105, 116–7; Williams (above n. 9) 194–5.

intervention in Rome's political affairs. Moreover, it should be considered a supplementary vice to her dangerous femininity, the issue that seems to be of primary interest in the epic poetry of the early Principate.³⁶

This conception is supported by Lucan's explicit reference to the battle of Actium. In the *Pharsalia*, the poet states that *Leucadioque fuit dubius sub gurgite casus, / an mundum ne nostra quidem matrona teneret*.³⁷ Here, the attributes of Cleopatra – her femininity and her foreignness – are harmoniously melted together, while the emphasis is still on the gender perspective.³⁸ It is noteworthy that Lucan has chosen not to call Cleopatra the Egyptian queen, but, intriguingly, *ne nostra quidem matrona*. The choice of words stresses the abnormality of Cleopatra's behaviour. It emphasises her status as a woman – the role she has, according to the Roman standards, failed to fulfil. The statement is also an accusation towards the Egyptian culture that produced the woman so different from 'our' moderate matrons. The claim is further highlighted when Lucan presents Cleopatra as *dedecus Aegypti, Latii feralis Erinys, / Romano non casta malo*.³⁹ The emphasis put on the queen's promiscuity as a source of her political power characterises her principally as female, despite all her *potestas*. Her behaviour is subsequently considered shameful for a woman, even for an Egyptian one. Stressing the gender roles that are considered universal, Lucan judges foreign society based on his contemporary Roman value system.

³⁶ Johnson has questioned altogether the Roman poets' eagerness to highlight Cleopatra's character as a barbarous Egyptian queen. He has rightly stated the importance of the Alexandrian culture to the Roman poets – nourished by Alexandrian art and civilisation they might have felt uncomfortable characterizing the Alexandrian queen as barbarous. This theory is well worth considering when we study the Cleopatra-representations in different genres of Roman literature. Johnson (above n. 11) 399.

³⁷ Luc. *Phar.* 10,66–7.

³⁸ Other characteristics connected with Cleopatra's character, such as *luxuria* and the greed were also, in the Roman elite culture, considered weaknesses typical for the female sex. Hughes-Hallett has stated that all attributes characteristic to Cleopatra's foreign status (cowardice, duplicity, animality, administrative incompetence) belonged also to her gender. Thus, in Virgil's representation of Actium she flees, "true to her nature as a woman and an Egyptian". According to Hughes-Hallett, these kinds of stereotypic ideas that were considered representative of the universal truth about women and Egyptians, increased the authority and credibility of Cleopatra-narratives, when recurring repeatedly. Hughes-Hallett (above n. 4) 44, 49; see also Quint (above n. 5) 28. On *luxuria* attributed to the character of Cleopatra, see Hughes-Hallett 64–7.

³⁹ Luc. *Phar.* 10,59–60.

The female queen is thus a particularly threatening and an unnatural creature, for she has adopted a social role that violates the universal dynamics of gender. This is a basic message about Cleopatra, a message that Virgil and Lucan repeat utilising never-ending possibilities for literary allusions that the epic genre provides. I have, above, raised the question why Virgil depicts Cleopatra so briefly in his description of Actium. The reason might well be that he had already described her vividly and in detail through some other characters. Similarities between Cleopatra and Dido are obvious, and have been carefully studied before.⁴⁰ The Dido-episodes in books I and IV of the *Aeneid* can be considered a prelude to the introduction of Cleopatra in book VIII.

Lucan, too, makes clear that he wants the reader to see Virgilian Dido behind Cleopatra. His characterisation of her as *Latii feralis Erinys*⁴¹ is an obvious allusion to Dido, who, on her deathbed, furiously swears to haunt Aeneas' people forevermore.⁴² Moreover, the scene where Cleopatra feasts with Caesar is strikingly similar to the banquet given by Dido to Aeneas. The choice of words when describing the splendour of the feast and the appearance of the queen efficiently recalls the Virgilian narrative.⁴³ The allusion is made obvious when Cleopatra is represented as clothed in the fabric of Sidon.⁴⁴ The association with Dido is eminent, since *Sidonia* is an attribute that Virgil connects to the Carthaginian queen throughout his narrative.⁴⁵

Even though Dido is clearly the most obvious epic parallel for Cleopatra, she is not the only one. The way I see it, the poets link Actian Cleopatra with a larger group of tragic and destructive women in the Roman legendary imagery and tradition. The furious and warmongering Latin queen Amata in book VII of the *Aeneid* belongs to this category, as well as Helen, represented in book II as the cause of the Trojan War and in book VI as the active agitator of the hostilities.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Studies discussing the subject, see, e.g., J. M. Benario, "Dido and Cleopatra", *Vergilius* 16 (1970) 2–6; N. Horsfall, "Dido in the light of history", *Proceedings of the Virgil Society* 13 (1973–74) 1–13; J. D. Reed, *Virgil's Gaze: nation and poetry in the Aeneid*, Princeton 2007.

⁴¹ Luc. *Phar.* 10,59.

⁴² Verg. *Aen.* 4,384–87; 4,621–29.

⁴³ Luc. *Phar.* 10,107–71; Verg. *Aen.* 1,637–42; 1,697–708.

⁴⁴ Luc. *Phar.* 10,141: *Candida Sidonio perlucent pectora flo.*

⁴⁵ Verg. *Aen.* 1,446, 4,137, the parallel passage where Dido is depicted as dressed in Sidonian fabric, see 4,682.

⁴⁶ Verg. *Aen.* 2,567–87; 6,509–29. Comparison made between Amata and Dido, for example, see J. W. Zarker, "Amata: Vergil's other tragic queen", *Vergilius* 15 (1969) 2–24.

Lucan, too, compares his Cleopatra to Helen, attesting that *quantum inpulit Argos / Iliacasque domos facie Spartana nocenti, / Hesperios auxit tantum Cleopatra furores*.⁴⁷ In book VII of the *Aeneid*, the brief reference to the dangerous and seductive witch-queen Circe could, as well, be read as a prelude for the perilous Egyptian temptress.⁴⁸

The Egyptian queen is thus placed in the long succession of *reginae* threatening to the Roman forefathers. In the epic tradition, this kind of an association brings with it a wide web of meanings. It should be noted that in the Roman historical epic, from Virgil onwards there was a strong tradition of representing Juno, the divine queen, as hostile towards the Roman people and as continuously working against their imperial mission.⁴⁹ In both the *Aeneid* and the *Pharsalia* she is represented as responsible for the misfortunes of the Romans, provoking wars and civil discord. The relentless rage of Juno is usually depicted working through flesh-and-blood women. These mortal queens could in a sense be considered as alter egos of the divine queen. The purpose of their existence is to hinder the great mission of Rome's world-dominion. As Lucan calls Cleopatra *Latii feralis Erinys*, he thus instantly brings to mind Juno and her epic *reginae*, one of which the Egyptian queen had by then become.

It is noteworthy that these kinds of allusions work to emphasise the third defining characteristic of Cleopatra; besides foreign and female, she is a *queen*, and as such an indisputable object of fear and contempt for the Romans. The suspicion and hatred felt towards monarchy was such an essential characteristic of the Republican worldview that Cleopatra's identification as a Hellenistic queen indeed could alone have been enough to make her an untrustworthy ally for many. The matter is made worse by the active political role of the queen. Instead of being merely a passive and nominal ruler, in the epic of the early Principate she is an independent agent who actively provokes her unwarlike people to war.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Luc. *Phar.* 10,60–62.

⁴⁸ Verg. *Aen.* 7,10–20.

⁴⁹ The convention is based on a thought typical of classical mythology that most gods kept favourites among peoples and cities. Juno was thought of as being particularly fond of the Greek cities Samos, Argos, and Sparta, and, especially, of the Phoenician Carthage. See, e.g., Verg. *Aen.* 1,15–18, Stat. *Theb.* 1,250–82, Sil. *Pun.* 1,26–28. The goddess is represented as especially worried about Rome overcoming Carthage as the head of the world, see Verg. *Aen.* 1,19–24; Sil. *Pun.* 1,29–33. Additional to this worry was the old grudge Juno bore against Troy; the Romans, as the descendants of the Trojans, generally fell out of her favour as well, see Verg. *Aen.* 1,25–28.

⁵⁰ The unwarlike nature of the Egyptians and their culture is referred to by Lucan various

The threatening *dux femina*

The character of Cleopatra in the epic of Virgil and Lucan is thus closely connected to the rhetoric concerning a dangerous *dux femina*. This is an expression applied in Latin literature to refer to a political or a military leadership of a woman. A perverted male role of a woman is an expression of the decadence of the society, and the blood-thirsty and unstable nature often associated with the role is considered a threat to the rationalised, male order.

The horror aroused by a female leader in general and Cleopatra in particular is clearly expressed in the Roman poetry. Wyke has observed that the "poetic narratives of Actium construct an anomalous female despotism by which the *libertas* of the Roman male is dangerously imperilled".⁵¹ The threat that the Egyptian queen forms to Rome is apparent in the lyric versions of Actium. In his *Ode* 1,37, Horace accuses Cleopatra of intentions to entirely ruin the Roman state.⁵² Propertius, too, in his *Elegiae*, stirs up fear brought about by female warfare.⁵³

In the epic poetry, as well, Cleopatra's role as a threatening military leader is highlighted. This is a matter worth further attention. Military leadership of a woman was in the Roman mentality entirely unthinkable. The role of a military commander was a public and political role reserved for upper-class men only. One should remember that mere political power wielded by women, though often considered suspicious and objectionable, was not a phenomenon completely alien to the Roman society. Through their families, elite matrons had obtained a considerable role in the political life of the state from the late Republic onwards. This power, however, was of strictly unofficial nature, and it was gained and used in the private sphere of the society. In the role of a military leader, instead, a woman's *potestas* was rolled out in the public and officially confirmed. This could easily be considered a violation of gender structures that held the society together. By showing off her public role in the battle of Actium, Cleopatra, thus, is represented as crossing the line concerning the public and political position of women.

The presence of the queen in the battle is stressed by every poet who deals with the topic of Actium. In the *Aeneid*, Cleopatra is the only person explicitly

times; see, e.g., *inbellis populi* (10,54); *inbelli signa Canopo* (10,64).

⁵¹ Wyke (above n. 6) 108.

⁵² Hor. *carm.* 1,37,5–8: *Capitolio / regina dementis ruinas / funus et imperio parabat.*

⁵³ Prop. 3,11,58: *femineo marte*; see also 3,11,39–46.

named among the forces of Antony, mentioned right after the chief himself and thus paralleled to Agrippas's role as the co-commander on the other side.⁵⁴ This all appears to be a deliberate attempt to emphasise her role as a fatal *femina dux*. Highlighting Cleopatra's unnatural military status, the poets also address an accusation to Antony: by accepting a woman as his companion in war, he threatens to bring this model of behaviour to Rome as well. What if Antony's side had been victorious? Would the Eastern effeminacy and the leadership of women have penetrated the Roman patriarchal system? Through these kinds of provocative questions the poets lay stress on the peril brought about by Cleopatra's meddling with the Roman Civil Wars. She is not only a military threat but also a prospective destroyer of the traditional gender structures and the moral foundation of Rome.

Another characteristic typical for a *dux femina* is her exercise of power through immoral sexual relationships. Here, again, emphasis is put on the distinction between lawfully wedded matrons and promiscuous female rulers. Involvement in a shameful affair is a matter that aggravates a woman's failure in a respectable female role. In his description of Actium, Virgil expresses the shameful nature of Antony and Cleopatra's so-called marriage: *sequiturque (nefas) Aegyptia coniunx*.⁵⁵ The affair of the Roman general with the Egyptian queen is stigmatised as unpleasing to the divine law. Echoes of this judgement are apparent in Lucan's narrative as he defines Caesar's relationship with Cleopatra as an unlawful wedlock with illegitimate offspring.⁵⁶

As a background for Antony and Cleopatra's shameful affair, the unofficial nature of Aeneas' relationship with Dido is similarly stressed in book IV of the *Aeneid*.⁵⁷ But Virgil is able to take the succession of the immoral queens even further back. In her glorious banquet Dido is represented as dressed in a golden veil brought by Helen to Troy when entering her fatal marriage.⁵⁸ The passage foreshadows the subsequent affairs of Dido and Aeneas and of Antony and Cleopatra. In his representation of Actium, Virgil reminds the reader of the shameful affairs of the former epic queens, and by a single word, *nefas*, he is able to associate Cleopatra's unlawful wedlock with these preceding scandals and their disastrous consequences. One cannot but wonder at the subtlety with which the poet directs

⁵⁴ Verg. *Aen.* 8,678–88.

⁵⁵ Verg. *Aen.* 8,688.

⁵⁶ Luc. *Phar.* 10,75–76: *miscuit armis / inlicitosque toros et non ex coniuge partus*.

⁵⁷ Verg. *Aen.* 4,170–72.

⁵⁸ Verg. *Aen.* 1,647–52: *inconcessosque hymenaeos*.

his readers' reactions and attitudes.

The most severe peril in the affair between the foreign *dux femina* and the man of power is the political union between the two. Besides a lover, Dido wishes Aeneas to be a co-ruler of her kingdom and an instrument through which the Punic glory would reach its heights.⁵⁹ Lucan, likewise, blames Caesar for donating Egypt to Cleopatra rather than conquering it for himself.⁶⁰ In these episodes, the foreign woman seeks to benefit from her shameful affair, and the man, blinded by his love, compromises the interests of his own country in an attempt to please the queen. The passages direct the reader's attention to the possible consequences of Antony and Cleopatra's union. One of the most efficient theses of the propaganda against Antony was an accusation that he was planning to move the seat of power from Rome to Alexandria. This argument, confirmed by Antony's testament, was the ultimate reason that ensured Octavian the support of the Senate and enabled him to sail against Antony in Actium.⁶¹ Recurring poetic allusions to the foreign mistress' attempts to increase their power through their lovers can thus be considered reflections of the fear that Rome would be suppressed in an alliance with the foreign power. The natural hierarchy, the dominion of the male over the female and the Romans over the other peoples is altogether called in question by the fatal allure of the *dux femina*.

The gender issue is especially apparent when the epic poets discuss the ways in which the *dux femina* corrupts the man who falls for her charms. The degrading effects of the affair on the man are explained in order to release him from the responsibility. He is represented as bewitched, not able to control his actions once fallen in love with the queen. Like Circe, who seduced men and turned them into beasts, the lethal charms of the *regina* rob the man of his social consciousness, of his manliness and humanity.⁶² Therefore he cannot be held responsible for his actions, and the blame is addressed on the temptress. The perversion of the gender dynamics is complete as the woman adopts a public, male role and suppresses the man in a depoliticised, female part.

⁵⁹ Verg. *Aen.* 4,47–49.

⁶⁰ Luc. *Phar.* 10,78–81.

⁶¹ On these accusations, see Suet. *Aug.* 17,1; Plut. *Ant.* 58,3–8; Dio 50,3,2–5. According to Williams, Antony was considered "more conquered by, than conqueror of, the Orient". He was not seen as a victor who made Egypt a part of the Roman Empire, but as a mere tool in Cleopatra's pursuits for the dominion of the world. Williams (above n. 9) 195–6.

⁶² This is a recurrent theme in the Roman literature. For some discussion of the topic, see, e.g., Hughes-Hallett (above n. 4) 52–6; Williams (above n. 9) 194.

The worst effect of this decline is that the man becomes forgetful of his country and his quest. *Nunc hiemem inter se luxu, quam longa, fovere / regnorum immemores turpique cupidine captos*, Virgil states on Dido and Aeneas.⁶³ Likewise, he depicts Mercury blaming the hero for his thoughtlessness: *tu nunc Karthaginis altae / fundamenta locas pulchramque uxorius urbem exstruis? heu, regni rerumque oblite tuarum!*⁶⁴ Allusions to Antony promoting Egypt's interest on Rome's expense are obvious.

In the Roman epic, the allure of the *dux femina* represents a threat not only to Rome's stability, but also to its imperialistic endeavours. Jupiter himself disapproves of Aeneas who, rather than linger in the foreign city, should claim his role as a conquerer *qui gravidam imperiis belloque frementem / Italiam regeret, genus alto a sanguine Teucris / proderet, ac totum sub leges mitteret orbem*.⁶⁵ Ultimately, Aeneas is capable of resisting the temptation and adopting his patriotic quest. By this allusion Virgil seems to remind the reader that Antony, on the contrary, was not. Conquered by his lust, he was not a fit leader for Rome, not able to expand the borders of the Empire – in short, not able to complete the historical process represented in Aeneas' shield. Therefore the autocracy of Augustus, the worthy descendant of the *Romulidae*, is legitimised by an unbreakable linkage between Dido and Cleopatra. The theme of the Civil War is connected with Rome's imperialistic quest by the linkage that the dangerous female leader provides.

Epic Cleopatra and the foreshadowing of doom

Cleopatra's status as the prominent ally of Antony and the enemy of Octavian obliges the Roman poets to represent her as a dangerous opponent and a serious threat. From the viewpoint of the Roman gender structures, the issue, however, seems to be somewhat problematic. If the woman is a dangerous adversary of mighty Rome, does that not imply that she is a competent ruler of her own country? And conversely, if she is by nature a bad politician, how can she so successfully meddle with Rome's internal conflicts and drive the great Octavian to such troubles?

⁶³ Verg. *Aen.* 4,193–94.

⁶⁴ Verg. *Aen.* 4,265–67.

⁶⁵ Verg. *Aen.* 4,229–31.

The epic poets solve this problem by stressing the woman's nature prone to weakness. The woman can, indeed, be a threatening and powerful ruler, but she is an unreliable one: on the background lurks always the possibility that her feminine weakness takes over and ruins the whole state. Before falling in love with Aeneas, Dido is represented as a good and responsible leader. Virgil attests that *iura dabat legesque viris, operumque laborem / partibus aequabat iustis aut sorte trahebat*.⁶⁶ She is also an empathetic queen, who pities the exiles and receives them in her care.⁶⁷ Politically skilled Dido in fact becomes furious Cleopatra only in the very end of her story, when the feminine vulnerability takes over her social conscience. Then, she is enslaved by her lust and neglects her city:

*non coeptae adsurgunt turres, non arma iuventus / exercet portusue
aut propugnacula bello / tuta parant: pendent opera interrupta mi-
naeque / murorum ingentes aequataque machina caelo.*⁶⁸

Her well-balanced mind, necessary for a ruler, has been conquered by irrational despair; she is *furens* and *accensa*, incapable to take care of herself, let alone of an Empire.⁶⁹ The peaceful queen has been transformed into a careless *dira*, prepared to drive her own people to perdition in order to avenge her wounded heart.⁷⁰

L. Hughes-Hallett has perceptively observed that the concurrent theme in the Dido-episode is the suppression of personal needs and feelings for the well-being of a larger social group.⁷¹ Aeneas is able to do this; Dido is not. Virgil actually appears to think that no woman is, and thus he strips the *dux femina* of her supposed political competence. The message is clear enough: though a woman might be an accomplished leader, her nature will not allow her to remain so for long. She plays a dangerous game resisting the natural order of things, and will ultimately drive to destruction not just herself but her people as well. Therefore her meddling with the Roman affairs is even more reprehensible, for she will drag along to perish all her allies.

This seems to be the message expressed in the character of Cleopatra. As a female ruler, she has already degraded the men of her own court. She has done

⁶⁶ Verg. *Aen.* 1,507–8.

⁶⁷ Verg. *Aen.* 1,628–30.

⁶⁸ Verg. *Aen.* 4,86–89.

⁶⁹ Verg. *Aen.* 4,364; 4,376; 4,465.

⁷⁰ Verg. *Aen.* 4,590–94; 4,600–06; 4,621–29.

⁷¹ Hughes-Hallett (above n. 4) 62.

the same to Antony by stripping him of his sense of responsibility. Let her mess with Rome and she will drive the whole Empire to devastation; the funerary pyre of Dido becomes the flaming city of Rome in the Virgilian allusions of the female leader. This exact idea is the background of Lucan's Civil War depiction as well. The severe judgement he sets on Cleopatra's affair with Caesar is analogue to her later relationship with Antony. The meddling of the queen who is destined to perish brings the foreshadowing of doom also on her lovers and their Empire.

One of the most recurring characteristics that define the epic *dux femina* is indeed her approaching doom. Throughout her story Dido is attributed as *infelix* and *moritura*. The same expressions are applied by Virgil in the context of two Latin *reginae*, who meddle with the political sphere, Amata and Camilla.⁷² As for Cleopatra, in the short passage concerning her, Virgil has considered it important to stress her approaching death: *regina in mediis patrio vocat agmina sistro, / necdum etiam geminos a tergo respicit anguis*.⁷³ The association between the two queens is made explicit by the rhetoric of death: Cleopatra in Actium is described as *pallentem morte futura*, while Dido in book IV is *pallida morte futura*.⁷⁴ Even Lucan, who represents Cleopatra nearly two decades before her death, considered it worthwhile to imply her doom: he depicts the queens' own courtiers conniving the murder of their mistress.⁷⁵

Despite the centrality of the approaching death in the depictions of Cleopatra, neither Virgil nor Lucan attempted to explicitly describe her death. Of course, the death scene would not fit in the entity of either the *Aeneid* or the *Pharsalia*. It is difficult to characterise it important enough to be represented in Aeneas' shield, whereas in the *Pharsalia* the attempt would require a time leap of nearly fifteen years. However, it would be extremely interesting to read an epic representation of the death of Cleopatra, in order to perceive how closely it would be associated with the end of the Roman Civil Wars. A text, in fact, has been pre-

⁷² In the *Aeneid*, Dido is at least four times referred to as *infelix*, Verg. *Aen.* 1,712; 1,749; 4,529; 4,596. She is also *miserrima* (4,117), *certa mori* (4,564), *moriens* (4,674) and *moritura* (4,308). The approaching death of the queen is implied the first time in 4,68–73, when Dido, hit by the arrow of Cupid, is depicted as wandering through the city like a deer that has been lethally wounded. On Amata and Camilla, Verg. *Aen.* 7,376; 11,563; 11,587–89; 11,816.

⁷³ Verg. *Aen.* 8,696–97.

⁷⁴ Verg. *Aen.* 8,709, 4,644.

⁷⁵ Luc. *Phar.* 10,374–75. Once again, Dido is alluded to: the courtiers plan to murder their cruel mistress "in her very bed, be her bedfellow who he may" (*crudelemque toris dominam mactemus in ipsis / cum quocumque viro*). The reader is deliberately reminded of Dido, who intentionally killed herself in the bed she had shared with Aeneas.

served that might have included that kind of a depiction – the *Carmen de bello Actiaco* mentioned earlier.⁷⁶ Less than 70 lines survive of the poem, but among them the role of Cleopatra is highly emphasised. The queen is depicted as comparing different ways of suicide, using involuntary slaves and criminals as her guineapigs.⁷⁷ The existence of this kind of a scene implies that the death of the queen might have been represented as well. Unfortunately, the end of the poem has not been preserved. We might never know what an epic representation of the *regina moriens* would have been like, but based on the tradition represented by Virgil and Lucan, one is tempted to imagine it as immensely tragic, slightly moralistic and loaded with political overtones.

Sympathising the enemy – a humane epic outlook or a propagandistic tool?

I have above recurrently stressed the moralistic tone present in the epic depictions of Cleopatra. The queen is rigorously evaluated and often severely judged by the Roman poets – she has to be, since she represents a threat to the Augustan autocracy and a violation of the social hierarchy that formed the basis of the Roman society. In the course of years, the monstrous image of Cleopatra was even further highlighted by historians such as Dio, Appian and Plutarch. From this basis, Hughes-Hallett has gone as far as to state that every author belonging to the Roman literary tradition, poets and historians alike, depicted the Egyptian queen as conniving and treacherous, incapable of genuine feelings.⁷⁸ I feel obliged to question this statement, for there is at least one who, despite his principled disapproval of what Cleopatra stands for, manages to treat her very empathetically and compassionately on a humane level.

⁷⁶ In his article "Il 'Bellum Actiacum' e Lucano", Cozzolino has intriguingly discussed the similarities in the style of the *Carmen de bello Actiaco* and the *Pharsalia*. He indicates the relation between these epic works, suggesting that Lucan was familiar with *Carmen de bello Actiaco* and utilised it in his work. A. Cozzolino, *Cron. Erc.* 5 (1975) 81–6. More discussion on the poem and its dating, see H. W. Benario, "The 'Carmen de Bello Actiaco' and Early Imperial Epic", *ANRW* II 3.3 (1983) 1656–62; R. Immarco Bonavolontà, "Per una nuova edizione del *PHerc.* 817", in *Atti del XVII Congresso Internazionale di Papirologia, Napoli, 19–26 maggio 1983* (1984), 583–90 and "La col. VI del *Carmen De bello Actiaco* (*PHerc.* 817)", *Pap.Lup.* 1 (1992) 241–8; G. Zecchini, *Il Carmen de bello Actiaco. Storiografia e lotta politica in età augustea*, Stuttgart 1987.

⁷⁷ Col. 5–6.

⁷⁸ Hughes-Hallett (above n. 4) 46–7.

I am, of course, referring to Virgil. True to his psychological sensitivity throughout the *Aeneid*, and his great compassion towards the *victi*, Virgil refuses to depict his epic queens merely as abstract representations of vices and weaknesses. The tragic deaths of Camilla, Amata and Dido, sensitively and movingly described, challenge the reader to reconsider the downfall of the Egyptian queen as well. In the middle of his political narrative of war, Virgil calls for a more humane point of view, claiming sensitiveness to the human suffering and the personal loss.

The idea of Virgil expressing compassion towards Cleopatra through his other tragic queens can naturally be easily questioned. Literary allusions between characters are a vague subject – it is impossible to indicate when Dido is just Dido, and when she might be Cleopatra. However, if the poet was willing to sympathise with the Egyptian queen, concealed allusions would be the way to do it. In the political climate of the Augustan era, Virgil could not have straightforwardly included Cleopatra's point of view in his version of Actium. But could he have included it elsewhere?

In my opinion, he did. In the end of book IV, when Aeneas is fleeing from Carthage and Dido is about to face her death, she gives a speech that summarises her outlook on the tragedy:

'urbem praeclaram statui, mea moenia vidi, / ulta virum poenas inimico a fratre recepi, / felix, heu nimium felix, si litora tantum / numquam Dardaniae tetigissent nostra carinae.' - - *'moriemur inultae, / sed moriamur'* ait. *'sic, sic iuvat ire sub umbras. / hauriat hunc oculis ignem crudelis ab alto / Dardanus, et nostrae secum ferat omina mortis.'*⁷⁹

Associations with the battle of Actium are inevitable. The queen has been conquered, and, realising that nothing can be done, she foresees her approaching death. The victor, on the other hand, sails triumphantly towards his country, towards the new era he is about to establish. It is established through the blood of the foreign queen, and the flames of her destruction colour the waves as the hero sails away.

In her speech Dido recalls her accomplishments as a queen and proclaims that, had she been able to rule in peace, without ever meeting the Trojan exiles, both her own fate and that of her country would have been happier. This is presumably what Cleopatra might have pondered upon on the eve of her death.

⁷⁹ Verg. *Aen.* 4,655–57; 4,660–62.

The Romans ruined her life, there is no question; since the moment Caesar laid his feet on Egyptian soil the destiny of the Ptolemaian princess was altered for good. This is at least what Lucan seems to think. Even though his description of Cleopatra is a whole lot less sympathetic than Virgil's, he strikingly puts the blame of her actions on the Romans who dragged her into the political mess of the last century B.C. *Hoc animi nox illa dedit, quae prima cubili / miscuit incestam ducibus Ptolemaida nostris*, the poet states.⁸⁰ Caesar, not Cleopatra, is made the scapegoat of the Civil Wars all the way to Actium: he is the one who first meddled with the foreign queen, and now the queen is meddling with the conflicts of Rome. Therefore, in Actium, the Romans are really cleaning up their own mess.

What survives of *Carmen de bello Actiaco* represents the defeated queen with rather compassionate tone as well. The unknown poet goes even further than Virgil in giving voice to Cleopatra herself. Among the lines preserved there are six consisting of Cleopatra's speech, and there have been more, since these speeches do not seem to have been preserved in their entirety. In these passages Cleopatra laments her miserable fate (*Saepe eg[ro] quae ve[st]ris cup[id]e [se]rmonibus haus]i. / Qua[s] igitur segnis [e]t[ia]nnunc quaerere causas / ex s[angu]is[que] moras vitae libet?*) and her abandonment by Antony (*Atq[ue] alia inc[ipiens] miseram me linquit] a[man]te[m]*).⁸¹ There are six additional lines depicting Cleopatra's mournful state of mind, and one passage, where an unknown companion seeks to console the miserable queen.⁸²

Rather surprisingly, of all genres of Roman literature, the imperial epic thus seems to be the one that most distinctively gives a voice to the Egyptian queen (or, more accurately, to the literary character representing her), and does so in a compassionate and an empathetic tone. Virgil achieves this through subtle allusions and literary parallels, while the author of the *Carmen de bello Actiaco* applies a more straightforward approach. How is this kind of an attitude possible? Why would the poets of the early Principate sympathise with the enemy of the state, and describe her in a nearly admiring way? Were they not influenced by the ideas of the imperial propaganda after all?

They most likely were, but the compassionate descriptions of the defeated queen are, in fact, not in contradiction with this matter. One should not pass by the possibility that representing Cleopatra as a great and a tragic queen might not

⁸⁰ Luc. *Phar.* 10,68–69.

⁸¹ Col. 4,2–4 (cited from Blänsdorf, *Fr. Poet. Lat.* [2011] 46e); 7,1 (cf. Blänsdorf fr. 46g: *atq[ue] alia inc[ipiens] ...]ra[...]*tes).

⁸² Col. 4,7–8; 7,2–5; 3,1–8.

have been merely a personal choice of the poets – it could have been part of the imperial propaganda. It is crucial to recall that when the *Aeneid* was published after Virgil's death in 19 B.C., the battle of Actium had been won a long time ago, and the Augustan regime had already established itself. The purpose of Virgil's epic was not, therefore, to elevate the war morale of the Romans. There was no longer an absolute need to dehumanise the enemy – on the contrary, a less hypocritical narrative might even increase the artistic valour of the poem and subsequently its popularity and distribution.⁸³ A mere political pamphlet of the ultimate victory of Augustus would never have achieved the kind of bi-millennial popularity that the *Aeneid* did. The political message spreads more widely and is preserved better when it is wrapped in a fascinating and a humane narrative. This is a fact the leader of the Empire was doubtlessly very well aware of.

In addition, one should recall that the winner himself paid attention to honouring his defeated allies. In civil war, a certain etiquette must be followed. Mark Antony as a Roman general, and Cleopatra as his ally, no matter how severely vilified during the war, deserved to be sent to the underworld respectfully by the winning side. Suetonius tells that Octavian had a mighty tomb built for Antony and Cleopatra in Alexandria – exactly the way Antony had wanted it.⁸⁴ The ruler of the Empire aimed to appear the pious Roman who respected the *maiorum mores*. The sympathetic epic representations of the defeated queen are not in contradiction with this pursuit. On the contrary, they work as a means of transmitting the message that the winner understood the cost of the great victory and grieved the bloodshed of the Civil War.

Conclusion

Epic representations of Actium and Cleopatra seem to form a rather unique group in Roman literature. It can be considered hazardous to draw any generalizations based on two works set apart by eight decades, and one fragmentary source the dating of which is uncertain. Nevertheless, in this scrappy evidence there appear many characteristics that set the epic narratives apart from other literary sources.

⁸³ Pelling has further studied the compassionate tone towards Cleopatra in Horace's *Ode* 1,37. He, too, has ended up in stressing the significance of the temporal distance between the poem and the battle of Actium. Pelling emphasises that sympathy felt towards the losing side usually increases in time, and, according to him, Horace's nearly admiring representation of *non humilis mulier* is a good example of this phenomenon. Pelling (above n. 4) 294–5.

⁸⁴ Suet. *Aug.* 17,4–5.

One of these is the apparent theme of the Civil War, perceivable in the representations of Actium and Cleopatra throughout. This little studied matter challenges the reader to reconsider the content of the imperial propaganda as a whole. I conclude that in contrast to what has often been argued the Civil War was far from being a taboo in the Augustan era. If it had been so, in the years preceding Actium, it certainly was not ten years later when Virgil composed his *Aeneid*, or thirty years later when Augustus wrote his *Res gestae*. Time leaps of a few decades may seem short and insignificant when studied from a distance of two millennia, but in the early Principate, a few decades certainly could have an enormous influence on the political ambiance. When the battle of Actium had ceased to be reality and become an episode of recent history, it was not anymore regarded as unsuitable to discuss it as part of the Civil Wars, as long as the necessity of the war and its beneficial outcome were explicitly expressed. This is exactly what the epic does. Through the representations of the internal conflicts – the rape of the Sabine virgins, the war against the Tarquinius, the struggle of Caesar and Pompey – the epic poets of the early Principate refer to the battle of Actium both as a part of the recurring civil conflicts, and as their final endpoint.

The character of the Egyptian queen, too, should be studied against this background. In the works of Virgil and Lucan Cleopatra appears as tightly associated with the Civil War. Here the differences between the epic and other literary genres are the most eminent. Unlike in Roman lyric or historiography, the epic Cleopatra is not represented as the *casus belli* or the principal enemy in the war, but rather as the foreign *regina* meddling with the Roman internal conflicts. She is associated with other dangerous queens of the literary tradition and, thus, characterised as a stereotypical *dux femina*, the woman who perverts the natural gender structures by adopting a public, political male role. In contrast to the common conception, not her foreignness but rather her status as a female leader is represented in the epic as her most defining vice. The queen who fails to fulfil her role as a woman is acting against her nature, and is therefore destined to perish. She will drag to perdition both her country and her allies – if she is let meddle with Rome, she will take the Empire with her as well. Cleopatra of Virgil and Lucan is the incarnation of this danger. It is at the same time a female peril brought about by the male weakness and an Eastern peril brought about by the Roman internal disorder. The role of Actium is to restore the universal order that has been shattered by the Civil Wars and by the threatening power of the *dux femina*. The only thing that legitimises the one more horrifying battle of the Civil War is the optimistic idea that this war, finally, would be the one to put an end to Roman internal conflicts and restore the natural balance of things.

The poets emphasise that it is not only Augustus' grand gesture to wage this ultimate war – it is, indeed, his obligation. The chaotic situation is, according to the epic poets, blamed on the Romans themselves, who have driven the state to the internal struggles, and dragged the foreign queen into them. The mess brought about by the previous generations must be cleaned up by the Romans themselves, and Augustus as the heir of Caesar is the natural choice for the one to do it. In *Actium*, he claims his stand as the worthy descendant of the *Romulidae* and brings to the end the curse of the Civil Wars. By delivering this message the imperial epic does exactly what it is set out to do, without compromising the poets' artistic visions. In a subtle and elegant way, the epic poets legitimise Augustus' attack on Antony and Cleopatra, still managing to do it without glorifying the war itself, and retaining a humane compassion towards the conquered. The epic poetry of the early Principate forms, indeed, a more magnificent funerary monument of Antony and Cleopatra than the mighty tomb in Alexandria. In a more permanent way, it carries out the same purpose: to emphasise the tragedy of the Civil Wars, to celebrate their ultimate end, and to express the high-mindedness of the hero regretting those he was obliged to conquer.

University of Helsinki