Cavafy's Historical Poetics in Context: "Caesarion" as Palimpsest

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Abstract

This article explores the multiple genealogies of C. P. Cavafy's "Caesarion" (1918), a poem often claimed as a key to our understanding of his historical poetics, by tracing its European cultural and literary context. Despite his perception as an obsolete and marginal historical figure, Caesarion was highly recognizable in the poet's time and was often portrayed in various contexts, from scholarly studies to various forms of popular culture. The article examines the unexpected ways in which Cavafy absorbed and transformed elements from his main historical source, J. P. Mahaffy's The Empire of the Ptolemies *(1895), and surveys the unknown series of Caesarion's literary depictions by several European authors before the composition of Cavafy's poem. As this discussion demonstrates, Caesarion's composite portrait is marked with insinuations of effeminacy, which may result from his enfoldment in the legend of Cleopatra and explain this ancient historical figure's transformation into an object of homoerotic desire in Cavafy's poetry. The article concludes with speculations connecting Cavafy's poem to the historical Caesarion's treatment in early 20th-century cinematic renderings of the story of Antony and Cleopatra.*

Keywords

C. P. Cavafy; Caesarion; literary palimpsest; cultural genealogy; historical poetics

Caesarion[1]

In part to examine an era,
and in part to while away the time,
last night I picked up to read
a collection of Ptolemaic inscriptions.
The copious praises and the flatteries
befit them all. All are illustrious,
glorious, mighty, beneficent;
their every endeavour most wise.
As for the females of that line, those too,
all the Berenices and the Cleopatras are admirable.

When I'd managed to examine the era,
I would have put the book away, were it not
for a small, insignificant mention of King Caesarion
which at once attracted my attention …

And there you appeared with your indefinable
allure. In History only
a few lines are dedicated to you,
and thus I could form you more freely in my mind.
I made you beautiful and sentimental.
My art bestows upon your face
a dreamlike, genial grace.
And so fully I envisaged you
that late last night, as my lamp
died out --I deliberately let it die out--
I imagined that you entered my room;
it seemed to me that you stood right before me;
pale and weary, as you would have been
in vanquished Alexandria, ideally beautiful in your sorrow,
still hoping they would show you mercy,
the villains who were whispering: 'Too Many Caesars!'

I. The Poet and the Historian

"Caesarion" (1918) has long held an emblematic status as "virtually a key to our whole understanding of Cavafy's work."[2] The poem's title refers to one of the names used for Ptolemy XV Philopator Philometor—son of the seventh and most famous Cleopatra and, allegedly, Julius Caesar, and nominally the last monarch of the Lagid dynasty in Egypt. He was born in 47 BC and put to death by

1 C.P. Cavafy, *The Collected Poems*, trans. E. Sachperoglou, ed. Anthony Hirst and P. Mackridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 85, 87.

2 Christopher Robinson, *C.P. Cavafy* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1988), 86.

Octavian seventeen years later, shortly after the suicides of Antony and his mother.[3]

The poem begins with a reading of Ptolemaic inscriptions and ends with the word "*Πολυκαισαρίη*" ("Too Many Caesars"). According to Plutarch, this word was coined as a pun on a line from Homer's *Iliad* by an advisor to Octavian, Areius Didymus, as a warning against letting the boy live—and it has often been quoted in modern historical and literary treatments as a code-word that signaled Caesarion's cruel destiny. Cavafy's appropriation of the ancient word in the Modern Greek text probably serves to invest the poem with an aura of subliminal authenticity and also to enhance his own pose as a scholar-poet who is conversing directly with ancient sources to unearth lost treasures from historical oblivion. But, despite its almost unanimous critical validation, this was indeed a pose. Cavafy was a brilliant artist and surely a modernist, if only for the shrewd interplay with scholarly and other texts he carries off in his work, but he was certainly not a historian or a scholar.[4]

"Caesarion" has been discussed mainly on the basis of two premises which have long been accepted as truisms by many critics and readers. The first of these is the assumption that Caesarion was an essentially obsolete historical figure, a marginalized and almost anonymous personage lost in the depths of antiquity, until he was discovered by Cavafy, in a manner similar to that related in the poem.[5] This notion is sometimes embellished into a philological romance of sorts, with poetry arriving to save the prince from "historical amnesia."[6] Yet Caesarion's disappearance from collective memory is a purely fictional construction. Caesarion is a historical figure about whom scarce information exists, due to the lack of dependable primary sources (which is largely true for all the Ptolemies, including the famous Cleopatra);[7] but this does not make him "barely known" or "forgotten."[8] Contrary to popular belief, the young Ptolemy Caesar was familiar to large 19th-century audiences and enjoyed a wide circulation in European letters, both as historical and as literary character, long before Cavafy's interest in him became manifest.

The second critical truism about "Caesarion" is the belief that the poem discloses an episode from

3 For a detailed historical portrait of Caesarion, see Michael Gray-Fow, "What to Do with Caesarion," *Greece & Rome* 61, (2014): 38-67.

4 Cavafy's portrayal as a quasi-historian was initiated by the poet's own remarks but also validated by early commentators; for one example originally printed in 1944, see J. A. Sareyannis, "What Was Most Precious - His Form," trans. Diana Haas, *Grand Street* 2, no. 3 (1983): 112-113. On other aspects of Cavafy's modernist poetics see my essay "Εγώ είμαι ποιητής ιστορικός: Ο Καβάφης και ο μοντερνισμός," *Poiisi* 12 (1998), 77-119.

5 For example, Gregory Jusdanis, *The Poetics of Cavafy. Textualism, Eroticism, History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), 107, 110, refers to Caesarion as a "marginalized figure" and even places him among "the mediocrities of the world". Robinson, *Cavafy*, 83, refers to "History's failure to notice the boy" and considers Caesarion "almost untouched by History."

6 As Jusdanis also claims: "For while history pitilessly abandons Caesarion to oblivion, poetry not only rescues him but also recreates him for modern times." Gregory Jusdanis, "Why Is Cavafy so Popular?" *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 48, no. 2 (2015): 116.

7 As Duane W. Roller notes: "The iconography of Cleopatra VII is elusive, although the subject of much scholarship…. As with the biographical details of the queen's life, the information is frustratingly limited." Roller, *Cleopatra: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 173.

8 Jusdanis, *Poetics*, 107, 108.

Cavafy's personal experience or even a private habit of the poet; that is, the notion that Cavafy himself spent many a night perusing books of inscriptions and other similar scholarly works; that in these books he came across rare references to all-but-forgotten historical figures; and that he later fantasized about these in his bedroom, presumably engaging in some form of sexual self-gratification.[9] Through this literal reading, the puzzling mechanism of Cavafy's historical poetics is conveniently explained away as pure reverie while, at the same time, his homosexuality is cleansed of any conjecture of physicality and is turned into a matter of fantasy. Cavafy, however, was not a confessional late-Romantic, and these common fallacies dissolve into thin air when we probe into the poem's cultural substratum.

Caesarions Everywhere

In 1914, when Cavafy wrote the first draft of "Caesarion" (entitled "Of Ptolemy Caesar"),[10] Egypt's already long-established appeal to the European colonial imagination had gathered new force through the growth of academic disciplines such as numismatics, epigraphy, papyrology, and of course Egyptology, as well as through the impact of new museological trends and practices. These were the high times of Egyptomania, when Imperial determination to amass, organize, and classify ancient material objects blended with the public's thirst for mystery and romance to produce a yearning for popularized scholarship and a taste for all things Egyptian.[11] In this cultural context, no one could afford to ignore the story of an Alexandrian "ephebe" who was both the presumed offspring of one of the most famous pairings in ancient history and, at the same time, the last Ptolemy and last

9 There are several examples which illustrate the consistency of this interpretation of "Caesarion" across time. As far back as 1932, C. Th. Dimaras claimed "'Caesarion" shows "how, and with what persistence, the poet's eroticism had been crystallizing for years around the same fantasy.… it really is a lyrical confession, a description of the way in which the poet draws sensual pleasure from history." C. Th. Dimaras, "Cavafy's Technique of Inspiration" (1932), trans. Diana Haas, *Grand Street* 2, no. 3 (1983): 154. More recently, J. Phillipson remarked:

> Surely the point has been already made that Cavafy's reference to 'a set of Ptolemaic inscriptions' is no idle claim, but a simple description of what actually happened in this and in many other similar occasions.... For this is how he spent many a lonely night during his later years, reading the verbose inscriptionese declaring 'the most of this' and 'the highest of the other,' chuckling at the 'lovely barbarisms' of the ancient stones…. Until perhaps, if he were lucky, a minor mention or some detail about a character or another captured his fancy, and thus tired but wistful, he let his lamp wane, put away the book, and turned in for a bit of more amiable companionship.

J. Phillipson, *C. P. Cavafy: Historical Poems: A Verse Translation with Commentaries* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2013), 447. For another example, see Bruce W. Frier, "Making History Personal: Constantine Cavafy and the Rise of Rome" (paper presented at the Cavafy Forum, University of Michigan Department of Modern Greek, 2010), 1-2. https://lsa.umich.edu/content/dam/modgreek-assets/modgreek-docs/CPC_Frier_Makinghistorypersonal.pdf.

10 Renata Lavagnini, "Από το «Πτολεμαίου Καίσαρος» στο «Καισαρίων». Στάδια δημιουργίας ενός ποιήματος," *Kondyloforos* 15, (2017): 123-148. Lavagnini edited the originally unpublished first version of "Caesarion" (1914).

11 Among recent books on nineteenth-century Egyptology and Egyptomania, see: Donald M. Reid, *Whose Pharaohs?: Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Lynn Parramore, *Reading the Sphinx: Ancient Egypt in Nineteenth-Century Literary Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Elliott Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Bob Brier, *Egyptomania: Our Three Thousand Year Obsession with the Land of the Pharaohs* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

Pharaoh of Egypt, whose assassination signaled the end of the Hellenistic era. Consequently, Caesarion was depicted often and in various manners, ranging from scholarly studies and reference works to popular culture.

Cavafy did not have to consult ancient sources in order to retrieve historical information on Caesarion; all he had to do was open his copy of William Smith's *Dictionary*, which is still shelved in his Library, to find out most of what we know about the boy from Dio Cassius, Suetonius, and Plutarch.[12] The poet did not have to go to Plutarch even for the word "Πολυκαισαρίη" which, as we saw, was coined and used exclusively on this single historical occasion. The term "polukaisarie" features as an entry in the *Greek Lexicon* by E. A. Sophocles, which also survives in the poet's library.[13] Caesarion was also discussed in many scholarly and popular books of the time, such as Douglas Sladen's *Queer Things About Egypt* and the various biographies of Cleopatra written by Henry Houssaye, Philip W. Sergeant, and Arthur Weigall.[14] Among scholarly works, Cavafy may have read Auguste Bouché-Leclercq, who discusses Caesarion's story and the circumstances of his death in the second volume of his *Histoire des Lagides* (which some commentators have erroneously claimed is the poem's main source).[15] He was certainly familiar with J. P. Mahaffy's *The Empire of the Ptolemies* (1895), which he owned and used in composing the poem.[16] More material on Caesarion was available in Modern Greek. As the novelist Stratis Tsirkas suggested many years ago, Cavafy was surely familiar with the *Alexandrinos Diakosmos*, an extensive compendium featuring biographies "of Greeks and Hellenists who flourished in ancient Alexandria" over the span of almost a millennium, from 331 BC to 645 AD. This work was compiled by the medical doctor and journalist Dionysios Oikonomopoulos and published in Alexandria, in 1889.[17] In it, Cavafy could have found most of what we know about Caesarion from ancient sources and also the assurance that "his name is not mentioned in any Greek inscription, nor has a coin been found carrying his image."[18]

Clearly, then, Caesarion's historical status in Cavafy's time was neither marginal nor null, as we have been conditioned to believe. On the contrary, he was a highly recognizable figure—especially

12 M. Karabini-Iatrou, ed., *Η Βιβλιοθήκη Κ.Π. Καβάφη* (Athens: Hermis, 2003), 121; William Smith, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, vol. 1 (London: J. Murray, 1880), 556.

13 E. A. Sophocles, *Greek Lexicon of the Roman and Byzantine Periods (from B.C. 146 to A.D. 1100)* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1870), 905; Karabini-Iatrou, *Η Βιβλιοθήκη,* 119.

14 Douglas Sladen, *Queer Things About Egypt* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1910); Henry Houssaye, *Cleopatra, a Study* (New York, Duprat & Co, 1890); Philip W. Sergeant, *Cleopatra of Egypt: Antiquity's Queen of Romance* (London: Hutchinson, 1909); Arthur Weigall, *The Life and Times of Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1914).

15 Timos Malanos, *Ο ποιητής Κ. Π. Καβάφης. Ο άνθρωπος και το έργο του* (Athens: Difros, 1957), 327. Malanos has pointed to Bouché-Leclercq's work as Cavafy's main source for "Caesarion," a point subsequently refuted by Stratis Tsirkas, *Ο πολιτικός Καβάφης*, 4th ed. (Athens: Kedros, 1982), 111-112. See also K. Ntelopoulos, *Καβάφη ιστορικά και άλλα πρόσωπα*, 2nd ed. (Athens: E.L.I.A., 1978), 78; and Yiannis Dallas, *Σπουδές στον Καβάφη* (Athens: Ermis, 1987), 76.

16 J. P. Mahaffy, *The Empire of the Ptolemies* (London-New York: Macmillan, 1895). Karabini-Iatrou, *Η Βιβλιοθήκη*, 67.

17 Tsirkas, *Ο πολιτικός Καβάφης*, 112.

18 Dionysios I. Oikonomopoulos, *Αλεξανδρινός διάκοσμος: ήτοι πίνακες των εν Αλεξανδρεία ακμασάντων Ελλήνων και Ελληνιστών από της κτίσεως (331 π.Χ.) μέχρι της αλώσεως αυτής (645 μ.Χ.) υπό των Αράβων*, vol. A', book B' (Εν Αλεξανδρεία: Τύποις της ελληνικής εφημερίδος *Τηλεγράφου*, 1889), 241-242. See also, Tsirkas, *Ο πολιτικός Καβάφης*, 112.

through his association with the increasingly widespread myth of Cleopatra, whose name had become "a signifier for Egypt itself"[19]—and one that often sprung up in both high- and low-culture contexts. In 1866, for example (the same year in which the French philosopher and historian Ernest Renan hailed Caesarion as the "national Messiah" of Hellenistic Egypt[20]) fans of London's musical theatre could see him on stage as a seven year old boy in F. C. Burnand's exotic burlesque *Antony and Cleopatra; or, His-tory and Her-story in a Modern Nilo-metre*.[21] A few years later Caesarion's name would even be given to a horse which ran at the newly-built race course of Kempton Park, in Surrey.[22] Surely, Cavafy could not have been unaware of this heavy circulation of his hero's name and story when he ventured to portray his own "discovery" of Caesarion, first in 1914 and then again in 1918.

The poem's interpretation as a literal account of personal experience has tempted many researchers to look for the book of inscriptions in which Cavafy could have found that "insignificant mention" of Caesarion. To this end, F. M. Pontani examined collections of inscriptions by Letronne (1842-48), Strack (1897), and Dittenberger (1903);[23] other researchers have also checked Boeckh's collection (1853) and Breccia's catalogue (1911).[24] Yet all these efforts were to no avail, as the poem clearly sets up a fictional reading of a made-up book. Cavafy's reading of inscriptions is indeed convincing (and has convinced generations of readers and critics) because he did not improvise it, as poets often do. Instead, he appropriated and transformed a true expert's reading of Ptolemaic inscriptions from a historical study, whose author he also used as an autobiographical narrative persona in the poem's first part. This ingenious handling of a historical source invested the poem with a truer-than-life quality and led many critics to read it as an autobiographical account.

Cavafy Reads Mahaffy

The book Cavafy used as a blueprint to compose his "Caesarion" is, beyond the shadow of a doubt, *The Empire of the Ptolemies* (1895), an important work by the legendary Irish classicist, papyrologist and professor of ancient history at Trinity College, Dublin, John Pentland Mahaffy. Cavafy owned

19 See M. Wyke and D. Montserrat, "Glamour Girls: Cleomania in Mass Culture," in *Cleopatra: A Sphinx Revisited*, ed. Margaret M. Miles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 173.

20 Ernest Renan, *Les Apôtres* (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1866), 284.

21 F. C. Burnand, *A Grand New and Original Burlesque Entitled Antony and Cleopatra; or, His-tory and Her-story in a Modern Nilo-metre* (London: Strand, 1866). On this play's performance and Caesarion's role in it, see Wyke and Montserrat, "Glamour Girls," 176-177.

22 "Sport," *Figaro: journal non politique* (Paris), October 5, 1878.

23 Filippo Maria Pontani, *Επτά δοκίμια και μελετήματα για τον Καβάφη 1936-1974* (Athens: MIET, 1991), 61. Pontani refers to the following publications: M. Letronne, *Recueil des inscriptions grecques et latines de l'Égypte: étudiées dans leur rapport avec l'histoire politique, l'administration intérieure, les institutions civiles et religieuses de ce pays depuis la conquête d'Alexandre jusqu'à celle des Arabes* (Paris: L'Imprimerie royal, 1842-1848); M. L. Strack, *Die Dynastie der Ptolemäer* (Berlin: W. Hertz, 1897); and W. Dittenberger, *Orientis graeci inscriptiones selectae: supplementum sylloges inscriptionum graecarum* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1903). For a further reference to Strack, see also, Frier, "Making History," 28. For more on Dittenberger, see Phillipson, *C. P. Cavafy*, 446.

24 See C. P. Cavafy, *Άπαντα τα δημοσιευμένα ποιήματα*, eds. R., H., and S. Apostolidis (Athens: Ta Nea Ellinika, 2006), 173-174 for references to A. Boeckh, *Corpus inscriptionum graecarum*, v. 3 (Berlin, 1853) and E. Breccia, *Iscrizioni greche e latine* (Le Caire: Impr. de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1911).

this book and his copy is still housed in his library.[25] Mahaffy was an eccentric and ebullient polymath, and also a protestant clergyman, Unionist Tory and fervent supporter of the British Empire.[26] He was famous for many things, including his snobbism, his wit, and as his influence on his student Oscar Wilde, whom he brought to Greece, in April 1877, in the hope of counteracting the allure of Catholicism. Mahaffy was a frequent visitor to Egypt, and in 1892 he delivered a lecture at the "Athenaeum" Club (a short-lived precursor to the Archaeological Society of Alexandria). As Tsirkas noted nearly forty years ago, Cavafy probably attended this lecture, was impressed by Mahaffy and so obtained his book on the Ptolemies as soon as it was published.[27] However, Tsirkas's suggestion that Mahaffy's book is "the most probable source" for the composition of "Caesarion" went unheeded by later critics.[28]

Reading marks on the poet's copy show that Cavafy read Mahaffy's book very carefully and probably also used it for other poems. However, at least in the case of "Caesarion," he did not treat it as a source of historical information, but rather as a storehouse of narrative patterns, tropes and motifs, which he appropriated, mimicked and revised in the poem's two initial stanzas. This bold and inspired reworking of a scholarly historical narrative reveals an important aspect of Cavafy's writing method about which we actually know very little.

A brief passage from Mahaffy's book may have originally stimulated Cavafy's interest in Caesarion and ultimately entered the poem as "a small, insignificant mention." In it, the historian refers to the lack of evidence regarding Caesarion's looks, character, and life in an almost elegiac tone:

> Caesarion is one of those figures about whom we should gladly learn more, but about whom history preserves an obstinate silence…. He had reached an age when several of his dynasty had not only sat upon the throne, but led armies, begotten children, and engaged in councils of state. Yet not one word of his appearance, of his habits, of his betrothal in marriage to any princess, is recorded.[29]

This passage makes clear that a major trope used in the poem, the paradoxical figuration of Caesarion as a fascinating character because of all that *we don't* know about him, was already formulated in Mahaffy's narrative. We may also note that Mahaffy's comment on History's "obstinate silence" refers to the lack of archaeological and textual evidence on Caesarion, whereas Cavafy's variation of this phrase ("In History only / a few lines are dedicated to you")[30] seems to attribute Caesarion's supposed vanishing to modern scholars rather than to the dearth of ancient sources.

There is more evidence to suggest that the poem's collection of inscriptions is in fact Mahaffy's book

25 Karabini-Iatrou, *Η Βιβλιοθήκη*, 67.

26 For more on Mahaffy, see, W. B. Stanford and R. B. McDowell, *Mahaffy: A Biography of an Anglo-Irishman* (London: Routledge, 1971).

27 Tsirkas, *Ο πολιτικός Καβάφης*, 112-113.

28 Ibid., 81.

29 Mahaffy, *Empire*, 481.

30 Cavafy, "Caesarion," lines 16-17.

in disguise. The dating of Ptolemaic inscriptions is a challenge even for experts, so it is improbable that anyone familiar with this kind of material would go to a collection of inscriptions to check on a date. However, Mahaffy's book is an excellent source of such information, as it contains a very useful chronology of events from 322 to 30 BC which we may safely assume Cavafy consulted whenever he actually needed to check a date on the Ptolemies.[31] Consequently, we may infer that the poem's fictional book of inscriptions stands in for Mahaffy's historical study, in which Cavafy did find a "small, insignificant mention" of Caesarion and which he would also casually consult for chronological data. This conjecture is supported by evidence of a more intrinsic nature, which we will now turn to.

As stated in the preface to his book, Mahaffy wrote his history of the Ptolemies mainly on the basis of then newly discovered inscriptions and papyri which, as he noted, "[were] finding their way into our museums every year" as "a vast body of isolated facts" which had to be put in order, deciphered and explained.[32] As he also stated: "Instead of stuffing my pages full of isolated references to classical and post-classical authors… I have rather striven to cite in full such evidence as is not easily accessible; hence the extant Ptolemaic inscriptions, which are important, will be found textually in this volume."[33] This was certainly not common academic practice at the time. As George Goodspeed, a professor of ancient history at the University of Chicago wrote in a review in 1896:

> Mahaffy has a peculiar method of writing history. He is discursive, garrulous, and at the same time does not hesitate to insert in the body of his text original documents, snatches of philological and paleographic lore. The combination makes somewhat difficult reading, especially when the subject is intrinsically complex.[34]

Mahaffy frequently interrupts his proper historical narrative to insert extracts from inscriptions and to present his own inferences or to counter the assumptions of previous commentators, or even to make humorous or sarcastic remarks. As a result of this, the historian's text resembles an epigrapher's field journal, which amply illustrates both the difficulty of reading inscriptions and the precarious nature of their interpretation. Although this somewhat erratic style may have annoyed some of his colleagues, it was very useful to Cavafy because it exemplified, in a manner that the poet could comprehend and imitate, the way in which inscriptions were casually processed by experts. Cavafy made use of these insights in several occasions, which probably include the poem "In the Month of Athyr," in which he staged a reading of an early Egypto-Christian inscription supposedly *in situ*.

Mahaffy does not read inscriptions as a dispassionate scholar; sometimes he reacts to the exorbitant flattery of these texts and to their general tendency to attribute identical values to different rulers. Referring to an Arsinoe, for example, he will proclaim: "I give no credit to the epigrams of flatterers declaring her beauty to be incomparable"; and on another occasion he will scoff at "the habit of the

31 Mahaffy, *Empire*, xvii-xxv.

32 Ibid., 3.

33 Ibid., vii-viii.

34 George S. Goodspeed, Review of *The Empire of the Ptolemies* by J.P. Mahaffy, *The Biblical World* 8, no. 6 (1896): 519-520.

flatterers of the second king [Ptolemy], who loved to ascribe to him all the great founder's ideas."[35] This attitude is absorbed in Cavafy's poem, especially in the 1914 version "Of Ptolemy Caesar," with its ironic line "all their campaigns and their victories are great / and everything they built magnificent," which seems to reflect the inscriptions' subject matter more closely than its counterpart in the final text: "their every endeavour most wise."[36]

There is, however, a major difference between Mahaffy and the speaker in Cavafy's poem. In contrast to the latter, who seems to reject flattering inscriptions on aesthetic and moral grounds, Mahaffy's exasperation is caused by entirely practical concerns. The recurring clichés impede the historian's efforts to extract information from his sources, and so he tries to decipher formulas of flattering stereotypes and to discern their mutations in time in order to turn them into useful material. He notes, for example, that "we now have further evidence… that it was the year 27, in which the earlier formula: 'In the reign of Ptolemy, son of Ptolemy, and of his son Ptolemy,' was exchanged for: 'In the reign of Ptolemy, son of Ptolemy Soter.'"[37] Also, Mahaffy does not present Caesarion as "denied the platitudinous epithets" of the other Ptolemies;[38] this honorary exception is a fictional effect of the poem and (as Cavafy probably knew) is not supported by the historical evidence.[39]

Mahaffy is also frustrated by the common names given to many kings and especially queens (including four Arsinoes, another four Berenices, and seven Cleopatras), as these interfere with his task of dating inscriptions and identifying the person each of them refers to. As he writes, for example, with reference to the first Cleopatra: "unfortunately she brought by her name another confusion into the annals of the Lagidae. Old historians, and we too, are puzzled enough with the recurring Arsinoes and Berenikes. Now come the Cleopatras, who add to the older names a new confusion of their own."[40] In another instance he complains:

> Our difficulties have been increased by the absurd habit of repeating the same names. Cleopatra, the wife of Epiphanes, in other respects a sane, and perhaps able woman, thought fit to call her two sons Ptolemy and her daughter Cleopatra, so that we have to distinguish Ptolemies and Cleopatras, without the obvious mark of a distinct name. It is no wonder that we hear of the habit of giving nicknames as very prevalent in Alexandria. The smart wits of the people are not so obvious a cause as the necessities of life.[41]

35 Mahaffy, *The Empire*, 141, 75.

36 Lavagnini, "Από το «Πτολεμαίου Καίσαρος» στο «Καισαρίων»," 127 (my translation); Cavafy, "Caesarion," line 8.

37 Mahaffy, *Empire*, 322, 155.

38 Roderick Beaton, "The History Man," *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 10, no. 1-2 (1983): 34.

39 As Oikonomopoulos noted, Caesarion's own "pompous titles" included: "Ptolemy Caesar, The Perennial, The Beloved of Ptah and Isis, Lord of the Universe, Son of the Sun, Lord of Diadems: God Philopator." *Αλεξανδρινός διάκοσμος*, 241.

40 Mahaffy, *Empire*, 307.

41 Ibid., 330. Cavafy refers to the nicknames which the people of Alexandria used to give to the Ptolemies in his unfinished poem "The Dynasty"; C. P. Cavafy, *Complete Poems*, trans. Daniel Mendelsohn (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 367.

Clearly in line 10 of the poem Cavafy borrows from Mahaffy the use of the plural and the tone of disdain, but he invests his own "Berenices and Cleopatras" with entirely different meaning. In contrast to Mahaffy, who protests over a practical issue (he simply finds it hard to tell which queen each inscription refers to), the poet considers the identically named and praised queens as signs of a prevalent ethos of cliché and indistinguishable adulation.

In effect, Cavafy reworks Mahaffy's comments to present the flattering rhetoric of inscriptions as evidence of the shallowness and mediocrity of the Ptolemies themselves (or at the very least, their grammarians),[42] and to contrast this pompous and murky crowd with the unique individuality of Caesarion and the moving effect of his humble mention. Cavafy appears to read Ptolemaic inscriptions as a decadent genre, as if their faults reflected the decline of the dynasty they purported to praise. Mahaffy did not and could not share such a view; after all, these were laudatory inscriptions and flattery was their purpose. But Cavafy's point is once again based on the historian's book, albeit a different section of it.

The poem's speaker appears to browse through Ptolemaic inscriptions as a historical connoisseur who looks for original expressions of true feeling (and of course cannot find any in these texts). The speaker clearly reads inscriptions thinking about poems; in fact, he reads inscriptions through the lens of Mahaffy's reading of Ptolemaic court poetry. These poets, Mahaffy wrote, produced "court effusions" and "lying flatteries which gave the sovran every imaginable virtue."[43] To them, "the favour of the king [was] far more vital than the favour of the muse"; and so, "to base arguments upon the veracity of a court poet is… absurd."[44] Cavafy clearly transfers Mahaffy's contempt of Ptolemaic court poetry to laudatory inscriptions, which he reads as bad poems.

As these examples demonstrate, Cavafy appropriates various elements from Mahaffy's text and radically revises them, transmuting the historian's comments into a discontented reading of a fictional "collection" of inscriptions. But the poet also adopts Mahaffy as a narrative persona. As many critics have noted on the grounds of textual evidence (and without making the connection to Mahaffy), in the poem's initial stanzas Cavafy seems to mimic somebody else's (specifically, a historian's) voice. According to Christopher Robinson, the speaker's language here is "stilted";[45] Roderick Beaton comments that these verses introduce "(impeccably) the language of the historian" and also describe an activity which "belongs to the academic historian; it is not part of everyday experience for most of us";[46] and Margaret Alexiou writes: "What other poet could begin by casting himself in the role of pedantic nitpicker (checking a date) or idle antiquarian (passing the time), introduced by the

42 Margaret Alexiou, "C. P. Cavafy's 'Dangerous' Drugs: Poetry, Eros and the Dissemination of Images," in *The Text and Its Margins. Post-structuralist Approaches to Twentieth-Century Literature*, ed. M. Alexiou and Vassilis Lambropoulos (New York: Pella, 1985), 184. Alexiou suggests that "in the first stanza, the self-image of past rulers is subverted." In contrast, Diana Haas thinks the poem's sarcasm is directed at the scribblers of inscriptions. Haas, "Cavafy's Reading Notes on Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*," *Folia Neohellenica* 4 (1982): 33n32.

43 Mahaffy, *Empire*, 169.

44 Ibid., 169, 489.

45 Robinson, *Cavafy*, 83.

46 Beaton, "The History Man," 33.

formal –almost academic– adverbial phrase "*en merei…en merei…*"?[47] This language, and this activity, is actually Cavafy's caricature of the Irish historian's style. Mahaffy is just the type of person one might envisage as the poem's narrator: an expert antiquarian, who would keep at home collections of Ptolemaic inscriptions and who might actually leaf through them in the evening "to while away the time." But more importantly, Cavafy mimics Mahaffy's idiosyncratic style, in which the voice of an expert handler of primary sources alternates with that of an old curmudgeon, who is quite capable of complaining about the ancients or cracking a joke at their habits.

Cavafy's reworking of Mahaffy in "Caesarion" was complex and extensive; links to the historian may certainly be found in more of Cavafy's poems, and probably to Mahaffy's other books too. But Mahaffy's shadow may have been at times too overbearing for the poet, tempting him to impress his visitors by showing off as a better reader of ancient sources. According to a testimony, Cavafy would bring out one of Mahaffy's books from his library to amuse his guests by exhibiting "a number of mistakes the English historian had made, owing to an imperfect knowledge of the language and a poor translation of the texts."[48]

II. Literary Caesarions

Caesarion's presence in European literature can be traced back to Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606), where the hero is briefly mentioned twice. His story is more extensively presented in other dramatic works, including the 1607 edition of Samuel Daniel's *The Tragedy of Cleopatra*[49] (where he "appears from the start as one of the primary concerns of the play")[50] and Jean-François Marmontel's *Cléopâtre* (1750). But Caesarion is also treated in several more recent texts, which were published a few decades, or even just a few years, before the composition of Cavafy's poem. These texts may be viewed as a literary palimpsest, on which Cavafy's own depiction of Caesarion was originally inscribed; and, as is usually the case with palimpsests, the older writings have effectively vanished under the potency of the new work. I will present several examples of texts which exhibit different traits but also share key elements in their portrayals of the famously elusive son of Cleopatra.

Landor

The English poet Walter Savage Landor (1775–1864) may be forgotten in our day but in his time was well known and influential. One of Landor's more popular works was a series of over one hundred dramatic dialogues featuring mainly literary men and statesmen, which he called *Imaginary Conversation*s. These texts were among Walter Pater's favorites (and may have inspired his own

47 Alexiou, "Cavafy's 'Dangerous' Drugs," 183.

48 Sareyannis, "What Was Most Precious," 113.

49 Samuel Daniel, *The Tragedy of Cleopatra*. Ed. Lucy Knight. South Yorkshire: Sheffield Hallam University, 2011. http://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/iemls/renplays/cleopatra.html; On the differences between the 1594 and 1607 editions of the play see Martin Wiggins and Catherine Richardson, *British Drama 1533-1642: A Catalogue: Volume III: 1590-1597* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 216-219.

50 Sarah Hatchuel, *Shakespeare and the Cleopatra/Caesar Intertext: Sequel, Conflation, Remake* (Lanham, MD: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011), 86.

Imaginary Portraits)[51] and later found a following among modern writers, including W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and E. M. Forster.[52] Cavafy owned a selection of 33 *Imaginary Conversations*, in an 1886 edition.[53] Caesarion does not make an appearance in these texts, but is a main character in a similar dramatic work (which in fact was to be Landor's last), entitled *Antony and Octavius: Scenes for the Study*, which was published in 1856 and may also have been known to Cavafy.[54]

Landor depicts Caesarion as a particularly handsome boy, with "hair in hue like cinnamon"; as a mirror image of his father in his youth; and also as courteous and brave in spirit (though "not strong enough for sword and shield").[55] Above all, Landor's young prince is innocent, totally uninvolved in political affairs, and particularly naive (to the extent that he imagines his humiliating procession in Octavius's triumph through the streets of Rome as an honorary event, with the crowds cheering him on).[56] The boy's death scene comes off as pure melodrama, as the young victim's purity of heart and his repeated declarations of love for his paid assassin lead the latter to insanity.[57]

Furthermore, as has been observed, Landor's text is tinted with homoerotic suggestions. Sarah Hatchuel has noticed the implicit "homoerotic tension" between Antony and Octavius in Landor's text and commented on Caesarion as "embodying the physical bond that existed between Caesar and Cleopatra" and "almost as an intermediary in their love-making."[58] In fact, the feminine overtones of Caesarion's portrayal were tactfully noted already in 1869 by Landor's biographer, John Forster. "The lad has never left the side of Cleopatra and her women," Forster wrote, noticing that Caesarion expresses "all the feminine enjoyment of a nature which is nothing without something it can trust to and love." Thus, Forster concluded, "the scene where the boy, betrayed and murdered, yet trusts and loves to the last the man who murders him, is as pathetic as anything ever written by Landor."[59]

In 1875, another English poet whose work exerted a strong influence on Cavafy,[60] Algernon Charles

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51 Gerald Monsman, *Pater's Portraits; Mythic Pattern in the Fiction of Walter Pater* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967), 36; Martina Lauster, "The Critic's Critic: Rudolf Borchardt's Centenary Essay 'Walter Pater' (1939)," in Stephen Bann, ed., *The Reception of Walter Pater in Europe* (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005), 182.

52 Neil Roberts, ed., *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 13, 27; Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos and Stephen J. Adams, eds., *The Ezra Pound Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2005), 102, 110, 124, 160. As Forster wrote in *Howards End*, "The only thing that made life worth living was the thought of Walter Savage Landor, from whose *Imaginary Conversations* she had promised to read at frequent intervals during the day." E. M. Forster, *Howards End* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921), 11. See also, E. M. Forster, *Pharos and Pharilon* (Richmond, Surrey: Hogarth Press, 1923), 26.

53 Karabini-Iatrou, *Η Βιβλιοθήκη*, 65.

54 Walter Savage Landor, *Antony and Octavius: Scenes for the Study* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1856).

55 Ibid., 45, 66, 69, 70.

56 Ibid., 67.

57 Ibid., 81-82.

58 Hatchuel, *Shakespeare and the Cleopatra/Caesar Intertext*, 88.

59 John Forster, *Walter Savage Landor: A Biography*, vol. 2 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1869), 506-507.

60 Peter Jeffreys, *Reframing Decadence: C. P. Cavafy's Imaginary Portraits* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015), 7-11. See also, Diana Haas, *Le problème religieux dans l'oeuvre de Cavafy. Les Années de formation (1882-1905)*

Swinburne (1837-1909), wrote a "Song for the Centenary of Walter Savage Landor." One of this poem's 50 stanzas focuses on "that high Roman boy," showing that Caesarion's depiction stood out from the great multitude of historical figures treated in Landor's work:

> Toward Spenser or toward Bacon proud or kind
> He bared the heart of Essex, twain and one,
> For the base heart that soiled the starry mind
> Stern, for the father in his child undone
> Soft as his own toward children, stamped and signed
> With their sweet image visibly set on
> As by God's hand, clear as his own designed
> The likeness radiant out of ages gone
> That none may now destroy
> Of that high Roman boy
> Whom Julius and Cleopatra saw their son
> True-born of sovereign seed,
> Foredoomed even thence to bleed,
> The stately grace of bright Caesarion,
> The head unbent, the heart unbowed,
> That not the shadow of death could make less clear and proud.[61]

On a different occasion in the same year, Swinburne expressed his admiration for Landor's Caesarion, writing that "perhaps the most nearly faultless in finish and proportion of perfect nature… is Landor's portrait of the imperial and right Roman child of Caesar and Cleopatra. I know not but this may be found in the judgment of men to come wellnigh the most pathetic and heroic figure bequeathed us after more than eighty years of a glorious life…."[62]

Ebers

Caesarion's next literary incarnation takes us to Germany, more specifically to the University of Leipzig and its distinguished professor of Egyptology, Georg Moritz Ebers (1837-1898). In addition to his important academic work, Ebers published a string of historical novels which are perfect examples of the intersection between Egyptology and Egyptomania.[63] These currently forgotten novels were immediately translated into English and other languages (including Greek)[64] and were "wildly popular" with Victorian readers.[65] His first novel, *An Egyptian Princess* (1864), was published eight-

(Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1996), 260.

61 Algernon Charles Swinburne, "Song for the Centenary of Walter Savage Landor," in *Studies in Song* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1880), 57-58.

62 Algernon Charles Swinburne, *A Study of Shakespeare* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1880), 76.

63 Reid, *Whose Pharaohs*, 12.

64 *An Egyptian Princess* was published in Greek translation in Athens, in 1875, and *Serapis* in Cairo, in 1890.

65 Wolfgang Beutin et al., *A History of German Literature from the Beginnings to the Present Day* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 277; Parramore, *Reading the Sphinx*, 127.

een times in thirty-five years and was translated into fourteen languages.[66] These novels surely owed a lot to Ebers's academic background, which set them apart from most Egypt-inspired fiction of the times. In the words of Simon Goldhill, "for Ebers, Egypt was not the lascivious, corrupt, and dangerous East but a complex sophisticated civilization, with a rich material and intellectual culture."[67] Also, much like Cavafy's poetry, Ebers's historical novels treat ancient Egypt as distinctly multicultural; in his prose, Egyptian characters mingle with Greeks and Jews—sometimes also with Syrians and others[68]—and many of his novels focus on the intricacies resulting from the mix of pagan and Christian elements.[69]

Ebers's novel *Cleopatra* (1892), which was published in English in 1894,[70] captures Caesarion and Cleopatra during the last months of their lives and is considered the most accurate fictional rendering of the legendary Queen produced in the Victorian period.[71] Caesarion's facial features are once again presented as identical to his father's (a detail that Ebers, like Landor before him, drew from Suetonius, *Caesar* 32). However, the young prince is also introduced as a "weakling" who "never appeared in the Palaestra" and "had not understood how to win the favour of the Ephebi."[72] Caesarion was apparently just as weak politically as he was physically, since, despite having been proclaimed King of Kings, "he was permitted neither to rule nor even to issue orders, for his mother kept him aloof from affairs of state, and he himself had no desire to hold the scepter."[73]

Ebers's Caesarion is a romantic figure, pale, silent and with dreamy eyes; he wears a melancholic smile and exhibits a numb conscience. His frustrated love for a frivolous female singer drains his emotions, causes the "total loss of his dignity," and brings him close to suicide.[74] "The fruit of every tree I planted degenerated and decayed," says Cleopatra as she contemplates her son's pathetic nature. "Caesarion is withering in the flower of his youth."[75] Shortly before his assassination, this naïve and love-consumed Caesarion fantasizes that Octavian will soon bestow on him an estate in Rome where he will live as a private citizen, devoting his time to fishing and his books, with a wife of humble origin at his side.[76] Arius's famous condemnation—"polukaisarie"—is quoted in the conclusion of the

66 Suzanne Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire. Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 204.

67 Simon Goldhill, *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity: Art, Opera, Fiction, and the Proclamation of Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 232.

68 See Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 204.

69 Suzanne Marchand, "Popularizing the Orient in Fin De Siècle Germany," *Intellectual History Review* 17, no. 2 (2007): 183. Also see Goldhill, *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity*, 232.

70 Georg Ebers, *Cleopatra*, trans. Mary J. Safford, 2 vols. (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Co., 1894).

71 Wyke and Montserrat, "Glamour Girls," 173-174.

72 Ebers, *Cleopatra*, vol. 2, 18.

73 Ebers, *Cleopatra*, vol. 1, 2.

74 Ebers, *Cleopatra*, vol. 2, 115.

75 Ibid., 154.

76 Ibid., 140.

novel, as in most other literary and historical depictions of Caesarion.[77]

Ebers depicts Caesarion through a range of feminine clichés and at the same time as madly in love with a woman; but representations of homosexuality through heteronormative emplotments are not unusual in nineteenth-century fiction. In a different novel, for example, Ebers would interpret one of the most famous Western myths of homosexuality, the Emperor Hadrian's love for the young Antinous, as an instance of fatherly affection and have the latter man kill himself in the Nile over his unrequited love for a Christian woman.[78] In this sense, the feminine stereotypes Ebers attributes to Caesarion (as Landor also did before him) may well be read as tacit hints at homosexuality, which of course could not be depicted or discussed openly at the time by these authors.

Ebers's portrayal of Caesarion as a feeble boy, totally uninterested in politics and with a fondness for fishing, may also have inspired his depiction in Vincent P. Sullivan's dramatic work *The Siren and the Roman (Cleopatra and Anthonius) or Luxury, Love and the Lost* (1911). In this text, Caesarion appears "tired as usual"; he "abhors everything pertaining to government," considers ambition a mortal disease, and worries Cleopatra, who sees the "prospect of having him one day acknowledged Julius Caesar's rightful heir, grow remote and ridiculous." Sullivan's Caesarion enters the stage with "a Nubian who carries his fishing rods" and ponders:

> What should I do with a kingdom? Can I fish with it? No! Give me mine angle, ha! Set me by the Nile where my bait is beloved, ah! Let none trouble me, and I'll not give you my smallest catch for your whole Roman Empire.[79]

Frederick and Friends

Another version of Caesarion, this time completely divorced from the figure's historical and cultural setting, was originally composed in the mid-18th century but was only unearthed and brought to the attention of a wider public 150 years later. Caesarion was portrayed as a symbol of homoerotic desire in a series of French poems that Frederick II (or the Great) of Prussia (1712-1786) printed privately in 1750 at his palace of Sans Souci, in Potsdam. Some of these poems are addressed to Frederick's friend, attendant, and assumed lover Dietrich von Keyserlingk (1698–1745), whom he affectionately called Caesarion.[80]

Frederick's poems to Caesarion were publicly revealed in the year 1900 by the Baltic German artist Elisar von Kupffer (1872-1942), who included some of them in the first (and subsequently famous) anthology of homoerotic literature from antiquity to the 20th century, which he edited under the title *Lieblingminne und Freundesliebe in der Weltliteratur* (roughly: *Love of Favourites and Love between*

77 Ibid., 254.

78 Goldhill, *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity*, 233.

79 Lucyl [Vincent P. Sullivan], *The Siren and the Roman (Cleopatra and Anthonius) or Luxury, Love and The Lost. A New Tragedy in Five Acts* (Brooklyn: n.p., 1911), 17, 15.

80 David Fraser, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia* (New York: Fromm, 2001), 44. See also Richard von Meerheimb, "Keyserling, Dietrich," in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* 15, (1882): 701-702.

Friends in World Literature).[81] This book was published in Berlin as a reaction to the sexological theories of Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Magnus Hirschfeld, and perhaps also as a protest against Oscar Wilde's imprisonment in England.[82] "And Frederick the Great, that unique man?" wrote von Kupffer in his introduction, "Truly he is no symptom of decadence, he who created the foundation of today's German Empire against a world of enemies. No, he is the manliest man of action, although he loved a Caesarion and did not feel obliged to be a mistress of the state."[83] At the same time, von Kupffer assumed himself the pseudonym *Elisarion*.[84]

Some years later, and inspired by von Kupffer, the English socialist poet and homosexual activist Edward Carpenter (1844-1929) compiled his own popular *Anthology of Friendship*, which he tellingly called *Ioläus* after Hercules's mythical nephew, companion, and lover. In the book's second edition, published in 1906, Carpenter included two of Frederick's poems for Caesarion, which he took from von Kupffer's anthology but translated into English:[85]

1.

Cesarion, let us keep unspoiled
Our faith, and be true friends,
And pair our lives like noble Greeks,
And to like noble ends!
That friend from friend may never hide
A fault through weakness or thro' pride,
Or sentiment that cloys
Thus gold in fire the brighter glows,
And far more rare and precious grows,
Refined from all alloys.

2.

O God! how hard the word of Fate!
Cesarion dead! His happy days
Death to the grave has consecrate.
His charm I mourn and gentle grace.

81 On von Kupffer, see Robert Aldrich and Garry Wotherspoon, *Who's Who in Gay and Lesbian History, from Antiquity to World War II* (London: Routledge, 2001), 294-295. See also, James Smalls, *Homosexuality in Art* (New York: Parkstone Press, 2003), 41-45.

82 Elisar von Kupffer, *Lieblingminne und Freundesliebe in der Weltliteratur* (Berlin-Neurahnsdorf: Adolf Brand's Verlag, 1900). The book's second edition, published in 1903, was initially confiscated and circulated after an appeal by Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff; cf. Robert Deam Tobin, *Peripheral Desires: The German Discovery of Sex* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 55-56.

83 Elisarion von Kupffer, "The Ethical-Political Significance of Lieblingminne," *Journal of Homosexuality* 22, no. 1-2 (1991): 38.

84 Robert Aldrich, *The Seduction of the Mediterranean: Writing, Art and Homosexual Fantasy* (London: Routledge, 1993), 112.

85 Edward Carpenter, ed., *Ioläus: An Anthology of Friendship*, 2nd ed. (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1906).

He's dead – my tender, faithful mate!
A thousand daggers pierce my heart:
It trembles, torn with grief and pain.
He's gone! the dawn comes not again!
Thy grave's the goal of my heart's strife;
Holy shall thy remembrance be;
To thee I poured out love in life;
And love in death I vow to thee. [86]

Well beyond the feminine insinuations of Landor and Ebers, Caesarion's name had clearly assumed distinct homosexual connotations (and an exemplary status in early histories of homoerotic desire) long before Cavafy's poem was composed. Carpenter "was the only English writer before World War I who publicly and openly defended homosexuality and the homosexual's rightful place in society," and his anthology was often reprinted and became famous among British homosexuals in the early twentieth century (so much so that second-hand booksellers referred to it as "The Bugger's Bible").[87] Moreover, Cavafy's friend E. M. Forster had been personally acquainted with Carpenter since 1913 and admired him greatly,[88] so it is unlikely that Carpenter's anthology could have escaped Cavafy's attention—even if it was obviously not one of the books he would have openly displayed in his library.

Michaud d'Humiac

The last and most extensive transformation of Caesarion before the composition of Cavafy's poem can be found in *Caesarion*, a melodrama in three acts by the French dramatist Léon Michaud d'Humiac (1865?-1913) which was published in Paris in 1913.[89] The play focuses on Caesarion's final days and presents the hero's affair with Nadia, the daughter of a priest of Isis, in whose temple he is hiding when the play begins and to which he returns and is killed at the end. As in Cavafy's poem, but contrary to his other "historical" portrayals, Caesarion is presented by Michaud d'Humiac on his own, cut off from Cleopatra, Antony, and Octavian. Mahaffy's brief reference to Caesarion which, as we saw earlier, played an important role in the shaping of Cavafy's poem, is also quoted here, in the author's preface.[90]

In Michaud d'Humiac's version, Caesarion is once again portrayed as polite and generous, sensitive but brave, thoughtful and melancholic—and is also seen by the Egyptian people as "Our Supreme Hope" (probably an allusion to Renan's "national Messiah").[91] He denounces the dark aspects of

86 As Carpenter notes, the second text is a short extract from the "long and beautiful ode 'To the shades of Cesarion.'" Carpenter, *Ioläus*, 207-208.

87 Aldrich and Wotherspoon, *Who's Who in Gay and Lesbian History*, 105.

88 On Carpenter's significant influence on Forster's prose see David Bradshaw, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to E. M. Forster* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), passim p. 13-14, 113, 149 n19.

89 Léon Michaud d'Humiac, *Caesarion* (Paris: E. Figuière, 1913).

90 Ibid., 3-4.

91 Ibid., 16.

the Ptolemaic dynasty, specifically emphasizing Cleopatra and Antony's moral degradation.[92] According to Michaud d'Humiac, the fifteen-year old Caesarion "observed, with shame and fear, the unbridled lechery of the Roman Emperor and his mother."[93] Sad and pale throughout the play, this Caesarion repeatedly defines himself as a *victim* and a *phantom* ("Caesarion! hélas! c'est le nom d'un fantôme…"), which strongly recalls his portrayal in Cavafy's final text.[94]

The author's portrayal of Caesarion as a hybrid in which Caesar's and Cleopatra's qualities are merged leads, once again, to intimations of effeminacy. In the author's preface Caesarion is declared to represent "the exciting contrast of a great and strong soul in a body full of attractive grace, feminine."[95] This hint is highlighted in the play's final scene, in which the hero takes the stage disguised as a girl in order to hide from the soldiers who have invaded the temple. When Caesarion is forced to reveal his identity (and while still dressed as a woman), the Roman officer Lucius kills him with his sword, shouting: "He dies in a woman's clothes, the effeminate youngster!"[96] Caesarion's double portrayal, first as a man in a feminine body and then as a female impersonator, is quite obviously a codified reference to homosexuality. Furthermore, in this case effeminacy is connected to public humiliation and victimization, which seems to relate Caesarion's story to the highly topical issue of the persecution of homosexual men in the early twentieth century.[97]

One might think that a play on Caesarion by a minor writer of Parisian melodramas, about whom very little information is available today, would have had few chances to be known to Cavafy, but this is clearly not so. Michaud d'Humiac published in France but lived in Egypt, at least from 1904 onwards: in that year the French journal *Nouvelle Revue d'Égypte*, which was published in Alexandria, included him in the list of its main local contributors.[98] In ensuing years he also contributed to other French-Egyptian journals,[99] and in 1911 he published in Paris a play in four acts, set in ancient Egypt.[100] Additionally, an obituary in a French newspaper announced Michaud d'Humiac's death, which occurred in April 1913 in Ismailia, about 100 kilometers from Cairo, where he had worked for the Suez company. As mentioned in the same note, the author had just completed a new drama,

92 Ibid., 17.

93 Ibid., 2.

94 Ibid., 24.

95 Ibid., 1.

96 Ibid., 94.

97 In 1885, the British Government passed a law, known as the Labouchère Amendment or the "Blackmailer's Charter," which broadened existing anti-sodomy legislation and made all forms of homosexual activity illegal as acts of 'gross indecency' and punishable by up to two years imprisonment, with or without hard labor. Oscar Wilde's prosecution in 1885 was based on this law, which was not repealed until 1967. A new law passed in 1898, the Vagrancy Law Amendment Act, penalized men who "in any public space persistently solicit or importune for immoral purposes". See Matt Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885-1914* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), esp. 42-55.

98 "Principaux Collaborateurs," *Nouvelle Revue d'Égypte*, no. 2, February, 1904.

99 For example, a short story by d'Humiac entitled "Connais-Toi Toi-Même!" was published in *La Revue Internationale d'Egypte* 1, no. 4 (Aug. 1905): 409-417.

100 Léon Michaud d'Humiac, *La coeur de Se-Hor* (Paris: E. Figuière, 1911).

Caesarion.[101] Although we may never find out whether Cavafy had met the French writer personally, the latter's book on Caesarion is certainly likely to have attracted his attention.

Summing up this presentation of Caesarion's literary palimpsest, we may conclude that Cavafy's version, the "beautiful and sentimental" youth with the "indefinable allure" and the "dreamlike, genial grace," "pale and weary" and "ideally beautiful in [his] sorrow," who has been critically recognized as a "beautiful but passive victim"[102] and as imbued "with a decadent melancholia and almost metaphysical sadness"[103] is a composite portrait whose main elements were in circulation long before the poem's composition. As we saw earlier, in most of his previous renderings Caesarion tends to be portrayed as politically uninvolved and naive, an innocent victim of circumstance, sentimental, pale and melancholic; in one instance he is even identified as a phantom. His personality is always defined in retrospect, via his tragic death, and he is never linked to conventional masculine stereotypes. On the contrary, a significant, consistent feature of the various portrayals of Caesarion was the insinuation or direct attribution of effeminacy, which may reflect Caesarion's enfoldment in the legend of Cleopatra (which was manifest, among other ways, in his frequent portrayal as a winged Cupid in the lap of, or hovering over, Cleopatra, depicted as Venus).[104]

Caesarion, then, seems to have been traditionally perceived, in some respects, as Cleopatra's male equivalent, and thus to have absorbed a measure of the quintessential feminine qualities that his mother embodied in the Western public imagination. But at the same time, the young man's supreme dignity and purity contrasts sharply with his mother's common depiction "as a seducer and manipulator, first by Graeco-Roman historians and later by literary writers,"[105] thus making him a perfect candidate for idealized homoerotic contemplation. This powerful and complex mirroring may explain why Caesarion is the only historical figure from antiquity in Cavafy's poetry to be explicitly treated as an object of homoerotic desire (and personally acknowledged as such by the poem's narrator). Caesarion's privileged treatment as an ancient lover is boldly manifest in the poem's first version, with its lines: "you who every so often fascinate me"; "I love you"; and the perhaps suggestive phrasing in the verse, "My poetry you have already entered twice."[106]

Cavafy Goes to the Movies

As we have previously discussed, in Cavafy's time Caesarion was frequently portrayed by academic historians, popular scribblers, and literary authors alike; his name was distinctly familiar and intimately connected to one of the most famous love affairs in history. But if this is so, we may wonder: How was Cavafy's urge to save him from "historical amnesia" justified? Where did the very idea of

101 Les Treize [pseud.], "Silhouettes," La Bolte aux Lettres, *L'Intransigeant*, April 24, 1913, 2.

102 Alexiou, "Cavafy's 'Dangerous' Drugs," 184.

103 Jeffreys, *Reframing Decadence*, 17.

104 See Roller, *Cleopatra*, 107, 116, 216n17.

105 Molly Youngkin, *British Women Writers and the Reception of Ancient Egypt, 1840-1910. Imperialist Representations of Egyptian Women* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 19-20.

106 Lavagnini, "Από το «Πτολεμαίου Καίσαρος» στο «Καισαρίων»," 131-132.

Caesarion's erasure from the historical register come from, since the boy was in such wide circulation at the time Cavafy wrote his poem? A possible answer to these questions may follow from the recognition that "Caesarion" was composed just at the time when public history began to assume new force and social impact as a result of its association with new media. Cavafy's poem appeared at the moment when the broader public's historical consciousness was being massively reshaped through motion pictures. In this process, the much-discussed and familiar figure of Caesarion, as crafted in the book culture, began to fall into oblivion, and so Cavafy's poem may be read as an attempt to re-instate both the figure and the culture's fading allure.

The fascinating vanishing of Caesarion from history was enacted by cinematic renderings of the story of Antony and Cleopatra and was due to a double pressure. On the one hand, Cleopatra's powerful screen image as a symbol of demonic sexuality and manipulative craftiness could not be easily reconciled with the role of a mother, which led to the gradual shrinking of that aspect in her presentations on film. On the other hand, it was impossible for cinematic accounts of Cleopatra's fall which strongly reflect the viewpoint of Imperial Rome to show the young and innocent son of Julius Caesar being "butchered without compunction" on Octavian's order.[107]

In 1913, the Roman production house Cines, "the most prestigious film company of the time in Italy,"[108] distributed a particularly successful silent film, called "Marcantonio e Cleopatra," which starred the diva Gianna Terribili-Gonzales and was directed by Enrico Guazzoni (who had recently completed his influential blockbuster "Quo Vadis?"). This film has often been studied in recent years because of the two-fold colonial perspective it embraces. On the one hand Cleopatra, through her demonic schemes (and also through the eroticism emanating from the cinematic exposure of her body) is refigured "within a nineteenth-century 'colonialist imaginary'… as an Orient inviting penetration":[109]

> Appropriated for orientalism, Cleopatra authorizes the articulation of the Orient as Woman, as separate from and subservient to the Occident. Feminized, the Orient can take on, under a gendered western gaze, a feminine allure and penetrability. The colonialist project is provided with an ancient and successful precedent, and geographical conquest of a land is naturalized as sexual possession of a woman's body.[110]

On the other hand, the film presents "a pro-Roman reading of the classical story" and ultimately celebrates the conquering of Egypt as "a triumph of civilization"; that is, in the terms routinely used by modern imperialist propaganda. These choices betray the workings of a powerful subtext, which is the rise of Italian nationalism, with its claims to the inheritance of the Roman Empire and its dreams for new conquests, on the eve of the Great War.[111] Released shortly after the Italian annexation of

107 Peter Green, "The Last of the Ptolemies," *Grand Street* 4, no. 3 (1985): 167.

108 M. Wyke, *Projecting the Past. Ancient Rome, Cinema, and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 142. For more on Cines, see also, M. Wyke, *The Roman Mistress: Ancient and Modern Representations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 244-266.

109 Wyke, *Projecting the Past*, 146-147.

110 Ibid., 147.

111 Marta García Morcillo, "Seduced, Defeated, and Forever Damned: Mark Antony in Post-Classical Imagination," in

Libya, Guazzoni's historical film was "a uniquely appropriate vehicle for both the legitimation and the celebration of Italy as once again mistress of the Mediterranean" and was described by a contemporary critic as "equivalent to waving the Italian above the Egyptian flag, quite slowly for two hours."[112] In this context, and as a result of such pressures, Caesarion was excised from the story of Antony and Cleopatra and thus gradually erased from the imagination of a public whose historical repertoire was becoming heavily influenced by cinematic constructions.

Readers accustomed to the image of Cavafy as an old-school antiquarian, who hardly ever left his room and spent his nights leafing through arcane scholarship, will find it hard to believe that "Caesarion" may actually have been the poet's response to Italian historical revisionism as manifest in a silent film. But the poet's portrait as a hermit is blatantly inaccurate; Cavafy was probably interested in the cinema and is likely to have frequented movie houses in Alexandria.[113] Prominent among these was the Greek movie house *Iris*, which was established in Alexandria in October 1912 and lasted for fifteen years, mainly showing the films of the Cines company. It attracted aristocrats and socialites and was famous for its full orchestra and for the quality of its equipment, having introduced three-colored films to Egypt. *Iris* occupied number 13 on Rosette Street, just a few steps from number 17, where Cavafy and his brother Paul had lived a few years earlier. As the Egypt-based journalist Iraklis Lahanokardis testifies, the Italian film "*Mark Antonios kai Cleopatra*" had an extremely successful run at this cinema; it played for a consecutive ten weeks, which apparently was a record for the time.[114] This was shortly before Cavafy wrote his first version of "Caesarion."

In this reading, "Caesarion" may be Cavafy's response to a disappearance which may not have been evident in book culture but was very conspicuously and tangibly enacted on the screen. If this is so, Cavafy's response to Caesarion's gradual fall into oblivion may be discerned on three levels. On the first level, his poem emphatically embraces and promotes traditional antiquarianism over contemporary mass culture as a means of coming into direct contact with the past (we may consider what the act of opening a "collection of Ptolemaic inscriptions" may have signified at a time when practically everyone was running to see a half-naked Cleopatra in the movies). On a second level, to the extent that "Caesarion" enacts the drama of an honest "child of an exhausted dynasty of the Greeks" persecuted by "vile" Roman conquerors, the poem seems to defy colonial historical revisionism, as expressed in recent filmic accounts, and to re-claim a Hellenic stake in Egypt. This plot thickens and becomes more topical once we consider that at the time of the poem's writing Italian imperialism had resulted in the occupation of not only parts of North Africa, but also the Dodecanese. This development could easily have been perceived as a new "Roman" conquest of a part of the Greek world, parallel to the one that brought about the end of the Ptolemaic dynasty in ancient Egypt and

Seduction and Power: Antiquity in the Visual and Performing Arts, ed. Silke Knippschild and Marta Garcia Morcillo (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 202.

112 Wyke, *The Roman Mistress*, 254, 263.

113 For evidence suggesting Cavafy's interest in cinema, see M. Karabini-Iatrou, "Πήγε ο Καβάφης σινεμά;" http://milanode.cloudmin.gr/%CE%AC%CF%81%CE%B8%CF%81%CE%B1/35/

114 Iraklis Lahanokardis, *Παλαιά και Νέα Αλεξάνδρεια. Σύντομος ιστορική ανασκόπησις του Αλεξανδρινού ελληνισμού κατά τα τελευταία 50 έτη* (Alexandria: n.p., 1927), 155-157.

the murder of its last king.[115] Lastly, on a third level, Cavafy's final version of the poem offers Caesarion's persecuted and melancholic figure as a powerful homoerotic symbol that conveys innocence, purity and a flair of aristocratic dignity—a symbol which certainly triggers an emotionally charged response, in full contrast to the vulgar sexuality and the conniving traits commonly attributed to the major heteronormative idol of the time: his mother.

115 I wish to thank the anonymous reviewer of my paper for bringing this connection to my attention.

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