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Michelle Labbe

*University of Mary Washington*

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Michelle Labbé  
Dr. Mathur  
English 447M  
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The Politics of High Fidelity: Mary Sidney and *The Tragedy of Antonie*

Scholars of Renaissance literature know and appreciate Philip Sidney (1554-1586), author of the first English sonnet sequence, *Astrophel and Stella*, but few recognize that his sister was a writer as well. Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke (1561-1621), is best known for her role as a patroness of the arts and the preserver of her brother's legacy after his early death. However, her own creative work has historically received little attention or credit.

Indeed, early criticism on Sidney has had a tendency to undermine her ambitions. In G. F. Waller's 1979 study of Pembroke and her writings, he describes her "timidity," her "reluctance to publish," and her "total reliance upon her brother's inspiration" (106). His faint praise is especially damning because he simultaneously deplores the critical neglect of her literary career. But more recently, Pembroke has begun to come into her own in scholarly circles as critics like Mary Ellen Lamb and Patricia Demers are beginning to discuss her work and her closet drama, *The Tragedy of Antonie* (1595), in particular. Unlike Waller and those before him, feminist scholars treat Pembroke as a creative force in her own right. Newer criticism disproves much that has been supposed about the Countess's life and her writing; these assertions emphasize that she was not merely "dedicated to her brother's ideals," nor was she a figure of anything approaching timidity (Waller 108). On the contrary, she displayed an incredible "ability to negotiate the assumptions and proscriptions of her day about writing, publishing, and gender" (Rienstra 111). Her much-vaunted loyalty to her brother was also a means to an end for the Countess; it gave her an unprecedented freedom to display her own poetic talent. As a result, her supposed ambitions of writing to further her brother's literary ideals need to be re-examined.

Pembroke's *Tragedy of Antonie*, a translation of Robert Garnier's *Marc-Antoine*, offers a compelling glimpse of what the Countess was capable of. *Antonie*, a dramatic retelling of the story of Marc Antony and Cleopatra, which begins when Antony is defeated by Octavius Caesar at the Battle of Actium and ends just before Cleopatra's death, is distinctly female-oriented. The Cleopatra that Pembroke creates is thus quite distinct from the Cleopatra of the better-known Shakespeare play. Twenty years ago, Mary Ellen Lamb argued that *Antonie* deviated from similar neo-Senecan treatments of the subject by members of the Countess' literary circle and by her brother, and that the Countess was less interested in continuing her brother's poetic ideals than conventional wisdom suggested. Lamb asserts that conventional criticism of Pembroke's work over-emphasized Garnier's original play as a literary exemplar. The only dramatist Pembroke patronized who adhered to similar neo-Senecan conventions was Samuel Daniel, who produced a continuation of the Garnier and Pembroke plotline. Daniels wrote this play under the Countess's direction to "create a heroine whose bravery in the face of death was inspired by her own evident interest in *ars moriendi*," the art of dying ("Myth of the Countess" 196).

Furthermore, Lamb insists that "the works [Pembroke] inspired were as various as her relationships with her authors" ("Myth of the Countess" 197). If the idea that the Countess's literary circle was driven by an ambition to reform the stage was a myth, and if instead she directed a variety of works for a variety of reasons, the loyal-sister hypothesis does not hold. This is not to say that she was disloyal or that she was not invaluable in editing and preserving Philip Sidney's works, but that her motivation for writing and publishing her own work were multifold. Pembroke could not have written as she did if she did not have aspirations of her own.

But what were the Countess's own literary ambitions? It is clear that Pembroke had a definite interest in writing about women. Her characterization of Cleopatra in *The Tragedy of*

*Antonie* stands out among contemporary portrayals of the Egyptian queen; she is tragic and heroic, determined to prove her loyalty to Antony in death. First, however, it is necessary to address the question of translation, since the plot and the characters of *Antonie* are not the Countess's original creations. Nonetheless, while Garnier must have the credit for authoring a play that portrays Cleopatra as a sympathetic figure and highlights the tragic love relationship between her and Antony, Pembroke's choice of a female-centric play to translate is a significant one. Moreover, her translation, which Cerasano and Wynne-Davies describe as "remarkably free" in their introduction to the play, makes alterations that highlight Cleopatra's stoic heroism (15).

Pembroke's translation is precise and deliberate in its diction. Through her choice of words she molds Cleopatra into a more emphatic and determined heroine. A simple verb change from Garnier's text allows Cleopatra to admit an active component to her beauty when she says "My face too lovely caused my wretched case;" (II.194). In contrast, in Garnier's text, the Queen describes her beauty as an adversity in entirely passive terms (Demers 196). Moreover, Garnier's Cleopatra says she will "follow" Antony, using the verb *suivre*, but Pembroke's heroine declares instead that she is "with" him (Demers 197). Thus, she stands equal to him, not below or behind him. And even though both Garnier and Pembroke depict a Cleopatra who is far from the tragicomic harpy that Shakespeare produces in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the Egyptian Queen is a much stronger figure in Pembroke's narrative.

But what motivated the Countess to translate *this* play, to focus on Cleopatra as a figure that is both tragic and sympathetic? According to Mary Ellen Lamb, Pembroke's heroine is sympathetic because she personifies the author's application of Philippe Mornay's neo-Senecan philosophy to the female sphere. Mornay's treatise applied Stoic ideals to the lives of men,

arguing against the fear of death “along a peculiarly stoicized version of Christianity” (*Gender and Authorship* 119). With this theory comes the caveat that, although neo-Senecan philosophy was a subject that very much interested Philip Sidney, the Countess seems to have been motivated to extend its application for her own reasons. She must have been familiar with the theories through Sidney, but perhaps she was frustrated with its irrelevance to her own way of life. Her translation of *Antonie*, in part, allows a way for women to attain heroism in their own lives through the model of Cleopatra. Lamb’s case is strong; it is telling that *Antonie* and the Countess’s translation of Mornay’s *Discourse of Life and Death* were originally published in one volume (*Gender and Authorship* 129). Cleopatra emerges in this argument as a prominent Stoic figure through her determined loyalty to Antony, and her rejection of the possibility of living without him. Upon her entrance after her betrayal of Antony at Actium, she speaks resolutely of dying, refuses to “longer live in this ghost-haunted tomb” (V.22), ignores her handmaiden’s practical advice, and prays that her children will “fall not into this tyrant’s hands” after she is dead (V.56). Moreover, she asserts that she must die, because she can “no longer stay / From *Antonie*” (V. 113-114). Lamb argues that in dying so deliberately, Cleopatra provides a way for ordinary women to demonstrate their own heroism; her loyalty to Antony “heroizes the domestic virtue of a wife’s loyalty to her husband” in spite of misfortune (*Gender and Authorship* 131). In Pembroke’s text, the traditional dedication of a wife to her husband is transformed to something extraordinary.

But there is more to the Cleopatra of *Antonie* than her resolve to take her own life, and the Countess’s exaltation of that resolve. Cleopatra also gains strength through her resistance to the male gaze. As in other versions of the story, Antony characterizes himself as a slave to Cleopatra and her beauty, but strangely, he does so without objectifying the queen (Acheson par.

5). In Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Antony laments that Cleopatra has a "beck" that can "from the bidding of the gods command me" (III.xi.60-61), but Enobarbus argues that Antony "pays his heart / for what his eyes eat only" (II.ii.235-236). In contrast, in Pembroke's version, Antony is instead "given up to Cleopatra's eyes;" he is the one on display before her (I.78, qtd. in Acheson par. 5). He is the text's theatrical character, aware of the histrionics of his suicide, "swooning with anguish" amidst the "gushing fountain" of his blood (IV.265-268, qtd. in Acheson par. 6). Most importantly, he dies dramatically and passionately, in contrast to Cleopatra's deliberate resolve to end her life, her "heart...closed" (V.73). Consequently, Pembroke's Antony appears emasculated when his impotence is juxtaposed with Cleopatra's strength of character. He is neither the protagonist nor the hero of this narrative; instead, Cleopatra fills both roles with a stoicism that rivals the "noble Antony" who appears in popular retellings of the narrative.

While some scholars have argued for *Antonie* as a critique of "headstrong female passion" because Cleopatra chooses death as a "seemly conjugal virtue" rather than as an assertion of identity, Caesar's presence in the play makes Cleopatra's death about just such an assertion (Tomlinson 321). Loyalty is her stated reason for choosing death, and may indeed be the one foremost in her mind, but the victorious Caesar provides further motivation for her behavior. Caesar, in desiring to make Cleopatra his captive and a prize of war, attempts to objectify her as Antony does not. He imagines parading her through the streets of Rome, subjecting her to the gaze of thousands, so that the city "by her presence beautified may be" (IV.366). In this context, Cleopatra's death acts as a form of resistance to Caesar's triumph. The "face too lovely" that has caused her downfall, the beauty that has made Antony her captive, will become Caesar's prize if she does not end her life (II.194). Just as Caesar succeeds in getting one

of Antony's armies to "wholly ... yield" to him, he voices a similar certainty that Cleopatra will surrender her beauty to him (II.198). In committing suicide, Cleopatra foils Caesar's plans and asserts her psychological triumph over him.

However, death is not her only form of resistance. Cleopatra expresses the desire to rid herself of her beauty as well, and wishes her handmaids to do the same: "With violent hands tear off your hanging hair, / Outrage your face. Alas, why should we seek / (Since now we die) our beauties more to keep?" (V.196-198). The self-mutilation she asks them to undertake in this passage cannot be merely a plea to them to grieve. It is too severe, and besides, Charmion and Eras do not intend to die as she says. But as her handmaids, they may not be able to escape Caesar's conquest. Deprived of the pleasure of parading Cleopatra through the streets, he might inflict similar humiliations on them. The death Cleopatra desires for them seems to be a death of hope or spirit. Her emphasis on taking away their beauty, and perhaps her own through her use of "our," suggests a need for these women to remove themselves from the male gaze. When she advises them to "outrage" their faces—and hints that she desires to wreck her beauty as well—she is denying Caesar the victory of subjugating either her or her maids after their deaths. Cleopatra refuses to perform by his rules, and does not permit him to take the spoils he expects. By removing herself from the world she escapes Roman domination, and the self-defacement she espouses becomes a form of self-protection. Her corpse, if stripped of its beauty, cannot be paraded; she thereby robs Caesar of his trophy.

Because of her stoic approach to suicide, Pembroke's Cleopatra has been studied primarily in terms of her strength and dignity in death. In making Cleopatra a sympathetic figure, the Countess does much to reclaim heroism for women, but she accomplishes more than that. By looking at the figure of Cleopatra holistically, and investigating what occurs before she resolves

to die as well as the resolution itself, Pembroke explores and critiques conventional expectations for women in the Renaissance. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a woman was expected to be subject to her god, her king, and her husband respectively. Accordingly, a 1563 homily on marriage admonishes women to “obey thy husband...so shalt thou honor God” (qtd. in McDonald 285). While such precepts carefully outlined women’s social and spiritual commitments, they failed to consider what would happen should these obligations conflict. This conflict is precisely what happens in *Antonie*; Cleopatra has the choice of remaining faithful either to her country or to Antony, but not to both. But whereas her loyalty to her husband may render Cleopatra as a Stoic hero, her fidelity has disastrous consequences for her country. This aspect of the play takes on a particular significance because Pembroke lived and wrote during the reign of England’s long-reigning female monarch, Elizabeth I (1558-1603). Consequently, when fashioning her own version of a female ruler, the author had a living example before her eyes.

Pembroke certainly admired Elizabeth; she dedicated her poem “Even Now That Care” to the queen, and wrote another dedicatory verse, “A Dialogue between Two Shepherds,” for her entertainment on a visit to Pembroke’s estate (Sidney 15). “Even Now That Care” figures Elizabeth as England’s David, championing Protestantism over the predatory threat posed by Catholic Spain, while “A Dialogue between Two Shepherds” depicts shepherds competing to praise their queen in verse. Scholars such as Helen Hackett and Margaret Hannay have suggested that the poem subtly critiques the queen amidst its praise, but Pembroke’s poetry to the Queen does recognize her power (Clarke 358). In “Two Shepherds” the queen is described as “a manly Palme, a Maiden Bay,” (50) inverting the usual gender connotations of those two symbols, since the palm was traditionally “linked with the feminine graces and the bay with male virtue and poetry” (Clarke 359). In praising both qualities, the line invokes Elizabeth’s careful negotiation

between masculinity and femininity; Pembroke also represented her gender in deliberately non-traditional ways and tended to assume a gender-neutral authorial voice when doing so (Clarke xviii). She must have recognized both Elizabeth's facility at this negotiation and the need for a woman to do so in order to assume male privilege. If her paeans to Elizabeth deliver a layer of critique, they are inevitably testaments to and celebrations of the power the queen enjoyed as sole monarch of England.

In *Antonie*, however, Pembroke makes her greatest tribute to her ruler. Like Elizabeth I, Cleopatra is a sovereign queen. The difference, of course, is that Cleopatra also acts as a wife and mother, while Elizabeth glorified her unwed status. According to Carole Levin in *The Heart and Stomach of a King*, the Queen's ability to negotiate successfully between masculine and feminine roles is what enabled her to succeed as a female sovereign in a patriarchal society (121). Her avoidance of marriage, then, was the key to her success: her private and public roles did not conflict precisely because she only acted as a ruler. Nonetheless, when Elizabeth's reign began, her subjects had significant misgivings about her ability to rule without a male consort, for the simple reason that she was "a woman by birthe and nature" (Levin 121). But because she refused to marry and produce heirs, and because the country consequently lacked male leadership, Elizabeth fashioned herself as the king her people desired as well as their queen; as the monarch famously declared in her speech to the troops at Tilbury, she might possess "the body of a weak and feeble woman," but she had also been endowed with "the heart and stomach of a king" (qtd. in Levin 144).

Unlike Elizabeth I, Pembroke's Cleopatra never fashions herself as a king, but perhaps she should have done so. Instead of acting as both a male and female ruler, she puts her country at risk by taking the renegade Antony as her lover; her alliance with him places Egypt in danger

of being annexed by Rome should she and Antony lose their battle against Caesar. Cleopatra resolves to prove her loyalty to Antony, but she also allows that loyalty to supersede her obligations to Egypt. She has neither the freedom nor the talent to do as Elizabeth does; unable to handle her disparate roles, she finally chooses to abandon her duties as mother and ruler to embrace the role of a loyal wife.

The reason Cleopatra flees at Actium is never explicated in the play. Antony's defeat occurs only as part of the drama's backstory, and Cleopatra only ever addresses her regret at her betrayal. By fleeing, she has become, in Antony's eyes, a "cruel traitress, woman most unkind" (I.17). Cleopatra, for her part, professes her misery in betraying Antony, whom she calls "my life, my soul, my sun...my lord, my king" (II.100-101). Here, though she may not realize it, she has uncovered the root of the problem. Cleopatra is the sovereign ruler of Egypt; how, then, can she have a lord and king? How can a ruler be subject to another? Yet Cleopatra is a woman, subject to her husband, as all wives must be under the conventions of the time. Her obligations conflict; she cannot protect Egypt and be loyal to Antony. Perhaps she fled at Actium in a misguided attempt to protect Egyptian interests, suddenly afraid of Caesar's forces. But instead of justifying her flight on political grounds, Cleopatra articulates her regret for betraying Antony and chastises herself as the traitor he thinks her. Antony is all, his love "more dear than sceptre, children, freedom, light" (II.121). Over the course of the play, the Queen chooses to cast off all other responsibilities in order to fulfill the lone role of the loyal wife.

Although Cleopatra's handmaids try to make her consider her familial and social obligations, she refuses to listen. Charmion urges her to leave Antony and "save from wrathful rage / Of angry Caesar both your realm and you" (II.289-290). However, Cleopatra values Antony's love over her crown or kingdom, and she is determined to prove her loyalty at all costs.

Her concerns lie in being a good spouse rather than a good queen and she argues that “without this love I should be inhumane” (II.316). If she is a “hardhearted mother,” as Charmion brands her, she will at least be a “wife, kindhearted” (II.320). Cleopatra’s love humanizes her, and Pembroke’s portrayal is of a sympathetic, if single-minded, woman, whose chief mistake was to prioritize her relationship with Antony as her “only end, her only duty,” leaving Egypt—and her children—in turmoil after her suicide (II.406).

Cleopatra’s role as a mother is more problematic. Her children are little more than shadows of reality, automatons who wish their mother a detached “Madam, adieu” as they part from her (V.77). Cleopatra claims maternal feeling, saying their (solitary) voice kills her, but she lives to lament further before finally collapsing in tears on Antony’s tomb. Earlier conversations with her handmaids also belie her words. Charmion tells her to “live for your sons,” yet she remains determined to “for their father die” (II.319). Her maternal affections come second to her passionate love for Antony, as her wifely obligations demand that she be loyal to him above all even when she laments that “this realm I have to strangers subject made, / And robbed my children of their heritage,” such misfortunes are nothing “unto the price / Of you dear husband...whom I destroyed” (V.13-19). She may lose her crown and her children, but to the end she is a loyal wife, dying by his side as if he truly is her self, as if she literally cannot exist without him.

Although Pembroke reveals Cleopatra as an inept ruler, all too willing to hand her subjects over to a foreign power, she also suggests that the queen’s liaison with Antony is the foundation of her misfortunes. She cannot be queen, wife, and mother simultaneously; she cannot balance masculine power with feminine subjugation. By highlighting Cleopatra’s failure to act as both wife and queen, Pembroke implicitly supports Elizabeth’s construction of her

power and her right to rule as an unmarried woman. In this context, the play becomes a cautionary tale about female monarchs who must subordinate themselves to their male consorts when they marry. In contrast, Pembroke suggests that a ruler should place, or purport to place, the needs of the country over his or her private desires. Indeed, Elizabeth and her councilors frequently used this argument to defend her reluctance to marry. Even if her “body natural” desired a foreign prince, her “body politic saw all too clearly the dangers of...an unpopular marriage” (Levin 122). Marriage forces a female ruler into the paradoxical position of both subject and ruler. In marrying, Elizabeth would lose the power she fashioned for herself – the male “body politic” – that enabled her to rule. Like Cleopatra, she would possess only the “weak and feeble” body of a woman, a body that would cease to function when her husband died, without “the heart and stomach of a king” – the resolve and the power – which Elizabeth lay claim to.

In writing *Antonie*, Pembroke does much more than present unwavering loyalty as a mode for female heroism; she also critiques a system in which fidelity is the only way women can be valorized. She explores and critiques the options available to women and suggests that marriage is perhaps a less-than-ideal institution; moreover, she herself identified “as a woman of culture, and *not* as a wife and mother” (Sidney 13). Therefore, while her treatment of Cleopatra is sympathetic, Pembroke also uses Cleopatra as an example of an unsuccessful female ruler, whose failure serves to legitimize Elizabeth I’s own reign. Pembroke demonstrates through Cleopatra that marital fidelity, while heroic, ends in tragedy both for queens and for the countries they rule. The successful model for female rule, by implication, is one where the sovereign remains unmarried, where she is never forced to choose between fidelities, and where she is able to rule, like Elizabeth, as both king and queen.

As her drama of private love and public rule suggests, the Countess of Pembroke was neither her brother's shadow nor the blind follower of his ambitions. She was fully capable of articulating her own ideas, as evidenced by the multi-layered Cleopatra she produces in *The Tragedy of Antonie*. Through the model of Cleopatra, she puts forth ideas about female heroism, female resistance, and female power. She provides a way for women to be heroic, while also critiquing the scarcity of their options and the possible conflicts between the many obligations they were expected to fulfill. Pembroke wrote laudatory verses to Elizabeth, but in *Antonie*, she authenticated her monarch's ability to rule by attributing her success to her status as an unmarried queen. Pembroke herself must have been skilled at negotiating between multiple roles, as Elizabeth was; accordingly, while her literary career began as a way of preserving her brother's legacy, it is clear that she had ambitions of her own to pursue, and used her relationship to the much-lauded "Renaissance man," Philip Sidney, in order to do so. It is time, however, for literary criticism to look beyond the fidelity she claimed to her sibling and his works and to explore her own writing more thoroughly. If *Antonie* can address women's roles in such complex and multilayered ways, what might a re-evaluation of her other works reveal? It is clear that the Countess of Pembroke was much more than Philip Sidney's sister; she challenged traditional gender roles at a time when women were confined and constricted at every turn, using her own freedom to construct, through her writing, models for female heroism and for female rule.

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