

# Expensive Egypt

David Read

**Abstract** In this essay I explore the question of the kind and degree of interest in Egyptian antiquities that may have existed in England during the first decade of the seventeenth century. Would at least some members of the audience for Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* at the time of its initial production have known (or thought that they knew) something about ancient Egypt other than what could be gleaned from North's translation of Plutarch, and would Shakespeare have been able to assume that this knowledge existed so that he could invoke and play upon it? I am not arguing that Shakespeare either knew or cared about Hermetism or the related Neoplatonic esoterica floating around in Humanist circles in the period, much of it associated (mistakenly) with ancient Egypt. I am more interested in the relatively mundane question of whether or not there was an intellectual, and even a practical, commerce in the "stuff" of ancient Egypt—pyramids, mummies, burial goods, hieroglyphics—during Shakespeare's later career. Could and would such "stuff" be represented on the English stage? Since *Antony and Cleopatra* itself yields little explicit direction on these questions, the answers are circumstantial and involve some contextual bracketing of the play, using evidence available in reasonably close chronological proximity, whether before or after, to the play's putative first production date of 1606–07. But I think a good case can be made that the prevalent English attitude toward the monuments and practices of ancient Egypt emphasized a notion of inordinate expense in the service of mysterious ends, and that Shakespeare made use of this notion in creating Cleopatra's Alexandrian milieu.

**Key words** ancient Egypt; Herodotus; pyramids; mummies; hieroglyphics; expense

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In his excellent study of the intense fascination with ancient Egypt among scholars, artists, and patrons in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, Brian Curran directly puts the question that, with an important regional adjustment, will also concern me in this paper: "What did Renaissance people—or, more specifically, those educated persons with an interest or stake in the subject—know about ancient Egypt? The answer is that they knew—or thought they knew—very much indeed."<sup>1</sup> Curran's answer is framed in terms of the high Italian Renaissance, with its rich banquet of neoplatonists, antiquarians, erudite artists, and wealthy lovers of esoterica, all of whom benefited from access to the Egyptian artifacts, both large and small, that had accu-

mulated on the peninsula during the height of the Roman Empire. The answer for England during the same period would be different; the English knew something about ancient Egypt—not a great deal, but something. As was true in many other theaters of knowledge where Renaissance tastes were made, they were latecomers to the spectacle of Egypt. That being said, it still seems to me worthwhile to try to trace the incipient stages of a traffic that would eventually lead to a variety of influential Egyptian “revivals” within English culture, and to make whatever sense we can of the hints of this traffic in the most famous representation of an Egyptian setting in the English Renaissance, Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*.<sup>2</sup> Roman though the play may be in its general contours—and despite the fact that Cleopatra was part of the Greek dynasty of the Ptolemies that ruled over Egypt from the time of the Alexandrian conquest, and thus in no way connected with the ancient kingdoms—it still offers an intriguing glimpse of the ways that the matter of ancient Egypt found expression in England in an era before archeology, epigraphy, and other forms of scientific inquiry made that matter less mysterious, if not less compelling.

The most helpful point of departure on this topic is John Michael Archer’s essay “Antiquity and Degeneration: The Representation of Egypt and Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*,” first published in *Genre* in 1994 and appearing in several iterations since then.<sup>3</sup> Archer offers what is probably the fullest account of the likely textual sources of Shakespeare’s representation of Egypt, and has much of interest to say about the potential influence of Elizabethan translations of Herodotus, Pliny, and Leo Africanus on the representation of Egypt in the early seventeenth century.<sup>4</sup> The essay becomes a complex meditation on the troubled and troubling notions of race and gender in *Antony and Cleopatra* as those notions are figured in the play’s rendering of the Egyptian scene, and his article is framed by references to the work of Martin Bernal, Judith Butler, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Edward Said. I want to take a considerably more minimalist and less theoretical approach and consider a fairly simple question: what did the audience for *Antony and Cleopatra* expect when they encountered the idea of Egypt in dramatized form, and how did Shakespeare meet their expectations? That is, what kind of conceptual markers does Shakespeare provide to fill out for his audience an at least partly pre-existing mental picture of Egypt? Archer’s essay argues that Shakespeare depicts a distinctive version of the monumental. This theme is broached in reference to Cleopatra’s lines in Act 5 scene 2 just before the Clown enters with his basket: “now from head to foot / I am marble constant” (239–40). Archer observes that “Cleopatra’s reduction of herself to a statue. . . has something Egyptian in it—she is preparing herself for entombment in terms that evoke the hermetic association of Egypt with the afterlife.”<sup>5</sup> Later in the essay he addresses the play’s allusions to actual Egyptian monuments, especially to the pyramids as archetypal features of the Egyptian landscape, and ingeniously links them to Cleopatra via Enobarbus’s remark to a freshly chastened Antony in Act 1 scene 2, comparing Cleopatra to “a wonderful piece of work” that it would be a shame to have “left unseen” (151–52). “Cleopatra,” Archer says, “is this ‘piece of work,’ like a building or statue, marble constant but also a little touristy.”<sup>6</sup> The argument goes on to consider Cleopatra and Antony as monuments, and Egyptian monuments as emblems of trans-

gressive sexuality and unstable racial categories, but I would like to take Archer's interesting insight here and draw it back toward my own rather limited question: how did Shakespeare meet the expectations of his audience with regard to Egypt?

Along with the annual flooding of the Nile (a motif threading throughout the play) and the "manner" of the crocodile (a topic on which Antony famously puns when Lepidus asks him about it, 2.7.40 ff.), the audience for *Antony and Cleopatra* seems to have expected to hear about pyramids. In his passing conversation with Lepidus about the Nile, Antony curiously transforms the pyramids into devices for measuring the flood: "... they take the flow o' th' Nile / By certain scales i' th' pyramid; they know / By th' height, the lowness, or the mean, if dearth / Or foison follow" (2.7.17–20). A few moments later, Lepidus declares, "I have heard the Ptolemies' pyramises are very goodly things; without contradiction I have heard that" (2.7.33–35). And in the play's last scene, Cleopatra invokes the pyramids at the climax of her defiant speech to Proculeius after she has been surprised and captured by Caesar's men: "Rather make / My country's high pyramides my gibbet, / And hang me up in chains!" (5.2.60–62) These references suggest the very long-standing "touristy" aspect of the pyramids; for Lepidus, they would be the things to see in Egypt, along with the crocodile.<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare did not gather his sense of this from Plutarch, though it is difficult to avoid connecting the pyramids (quite anachronistically, one must add) with Cleopatra's monument in Alexandria, which Plutarch does address at some length—leading, of course, to Shakespeare's having left modern directors of the play with a notorious conundrum in staging the later scenes. Perhaps Shakespeare is simply drawing on popular lore about the pyramids, but the notion that they are 'the things to see' is already present in Herodotus, writing in the fifth century B. C. E. In describing the Great Pyramid, he retails an anecdote that Cheops financed its construction by prostituting his daughter, and this is the part of the account that most interests Archer, since it feeds into the discourse of sexuality surrounding Cleopatra.<sup>8</sup>

Herodotus's broader concern, however, is with the cost of Cheops's pyramid. He notes that there are hieroglyphics engraved at the base, "declaring" (or so his interpreter tells him),

the expence the King was at in the time of his building, for mustardseed, onnyons, and garlike, which... did amount to the summe of a thousande six hundred talents. If this were so, how much shal we deeme to have bene spent upon other things, as upon tooles, engins, victuals, labouring garments for the workemen, being tenne yeares busied in these affayres? I reckon not the time wherein they were held in framing and hewing of stones to set them in a readinesse for the main worke; neyther all the space that passed over the conveyance of the stone to the place of building, which was no small numbers of dayes, as also the time which was consumed in undermining the earth, and cutting out of chambers under the grounde...

Herodotus is aware that this treasury-draining landmark is, after all, primarily a

tomb; he notes that after the first ten years of construction, another ten were “consumed. . . causing certayne chambers to be cut out under the grounde, undermining the stoneworke upon the which the towres were founded, whyche. . . [Cheops] provided for hys sepulcher.”<sup>9</sup> The idea of the pyramids as both extravagant and funereal survives in George Sandys’s account (obviously influenced by his reading of Herodotus) of his visit to the Great Pyramid in one of the best English travel books of the early seventeenth century, *A Relation of a Journey begun An. Dom. 1610*:

Twenty yeares it was a building, by three hundred threescore and six thousand men continually wrought upon: who only in radishes, garlick, and onions, are said to have consumed one thousand and eight hundred talents. By these and the like inventions exhausted they their treasure, and employed the people, for feare lest such infinite wealth should corrupt their successors, and dangerous idlenesse beg in the Subject a desire of innovation. Besides, they considering the frailty of man, that in an instant buds, blowes, and withereth; did endeavour by such sumptuous and magnificent structures, in spite of death to give unto their fames eternity.<sup>10</sup>

For Sandys as for Herodotus, the Great Pyramid is a wonder not only because of its sheer size, but because of its “exhaustive” character in terms of the time, money, and labor dedicated to its construction—all spent for the purpose of housing a corpse. Even for a European traveler to visit the pyramid and descend into its stifling inner chambers, long emptied of everything except trash and rubble, would involve a very significant expenditure in those same terms. This distorted ratio between expenditure and function might be said to feature in the early modern perception of many of the monumental wonders of the ancient world. An English citizen in the early seventeenth century could go into almost any church in the land and see lavish memorial sculpture produced at great cost to the family estate, but never on the scale that seemed to prevail in the long-gone civilizations of the Mediterranean and the Near East. The ancient Egyptian case was made that much more intriguing because it was associated with a deeply mysterious set of funerary customs.<sup>11</sup>

John Gillies has usefully discussed *Antony and Cleopatra* in terms of what he calls the “exorbitant,” which for him is closely related to though not exactly the same as the exotic. In his argument the word certainly retains its base meaning of being “off the track”—out of orbit, over the limit, exceeding the bounds, and so on. It has special application to Antony and to his avatar Alexander the Great; the exorbitant character is one who cannot be satisfied, archetypally “the conqueror who, having conquered ‘the’ world, restlessly scans the ocean for another.”<sup>12</sup> But “exorbitant” is perhaps most commonly used at present to denote a thing or activity that is outrageously expensive. Though Gillies does not pursue the economic aspect of exorbitance in his treatment of *Antony and Cleopatra*, this aspect does seem essential to the ambience of the play’s Egyptian scenes. While we ponder the decadence, beauty, and wonder of Plutarch’s description of Cleopatra’s barge on the Cydnus, as delivered so memorably by Enobarbus in Act 2 scene 2, we should also be aware that this particu-

lar pageant would have cost a lot of both money and “sweat equity.” Strikingly, the adjective that Agrippa uses (twice) in responding to Enobarbus’s account is “rare” (2.2.212, 225); what is rare is rarely also cheap.

It seems plausible to say that in Shakespeare’s time there existed among the English an idea of Egypt as a place of exorbitant objects, more specifically of exorbitant objects that have a peculiar mortuary character. Of course, to experience the pyramids and other Egyptian monuments properly meant traveling to where they stood; the traffic associated with them was the emergent traffic of exploration and tourism. However, an “export” traffic to Europe did exist in at least one item connected with ancient Egypt: the panacea known as mummy, which in its authentic form was in fact a powder or paste made since the middle ages from grinding up mummies removed from various desert necropolises.<sup>13</sup> Shakespeare was aware of mummy, as evident from his references to it in *Othello* and *Macbeth*, and Philip Schwyzer points to its mention in the work of a fair number of Shakespeare’s contemporaries as well.<sup>14</sup> It does not appear in *Antony and Cleopatra*, but then again it would be a glaring anachronism there, since its use as a medicine developed after the Roman empire was long gone.

Mummy would have been the most readily available Egyptian item in early modern London—available if expensive in quantity, like so many other items of pharmacopoeia arriving from faraway places. Its existence as a trade good appears to have provoked some inquiring minds in Europe to investigate its origins, and so in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries one begins to see detailed accounts of the mummy fields as well as the mummification process.<sup>15</sup> Some of these accounts are accompanied with illustrations, but interestingly not of the mummies themselves; rather of the objects that accompany the mummies. For example, Prosper (or Prospero) Alpini, who used his experience as physician to the Venetian consul in Cairo in the early 1580s to write several important studies of Egypt, offers in the first part of his *Historiae Egyptae Naturalis* (1590) an engraving of examples of the small idols known as *ubshabti* that were placed around the mummies in their sarcophagi. In presenting a picture of such idols in his *Relation of a Journey*, Sandys indicates, perhaps mistakenly, that they actually come *out* of the mummies: “Within their bellies are painted papers, and their Gods inclosed in little models of stone or mettall: some of the shape of men, in coate-armours, with the heads of sheepe, haukes, dogs, &c. others of cats, beetles, monkees, and such like. Of these I brought away divers with me, such in similitude”.<sup>16</sup> Both illustrations suggest a deepening interest in these objects as objects, distinct from the mummies that sponsor them, so to speak.

Could such objects have circulated in England at the time that *Antony and Cleopatra* was first produced? More pertinently, could their “similitudes” have figured in any way as stage properties in the early Jacobean theater? There is no evidence one way or the other in the case of *Antony and Cleopatra*, since there are no contemporary records of its earliest performance(s). What we can say with a fair degree of certainty is that images of such objects were becoming available in England, allowing for the development of a frame of reference, though the range, depth, and quality of reference might still be quite limited.

The most portable of Egyptian antiquities, of course, were the hieroglyphs, authentic examples of which could be studied on the various obelisks and other sculptures of Egyptian origin in Rome, but which also circulated textually throughout Europe from the fifteenth century onward, often in renderings quite far removed from the originals. The most historically significant manuscript source of information on the ancient Egyptian letters was Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica*, a work of unknown provenance first discovered in the fifteenth century, elevated to prominence by the Florentine humanists, and reprinted many times (often with modern commentary) well into the seventeenth century.<sup>17</sup> However, this work only describes the hieroglyphs; in its original form it did not provide illustrations of them, though early modern artists (notably Dürer) later added illustrations based on Horapollo's descriptions. Perhaps just as influential as the *Hieroglyphica*, though of surpassing strangeness, was *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, a prose romance with many illustrations first published by the Aldine Press in 1499, written in a pastiche of Italian, Latin, and Greek; the author has been identified, though not definitively, as Francesco Colonna, a Dominican Friar in Venice.<sup>18</sup> An English translation of this work appeared in 1592 under the title *The Strife of Love in a Dreame*, with the illustrations included. If this text provides the most accessible representation of hieroglyphs for English readers, then those readers would have had a fairly distorted notion of the appearance of the genuine articles, which the *Hypnerotomachia* has translated into the familiar forms of European pictorialism. Judging by Sandys's illustration of hieroglyphs in 1615, common knowledge about them was no more accurate in the early seventeenth century than it had been in the sixteenth.<sup>19</sup> What remained consistent in the early modern reception of hieroglyphs was the idea that they contained a surplus of meaning, that they were vessels of recalcitrant ancient wisdom and talismans that carried magical power—wisdom and power only to be tapped through long, hard study of the hermetic mysteries.<sup>20</sup> This approach led to increasingly elaborate and even cultic interpretations of the hieroglyphs that continued until the symbols were permanently demystified by the discovery of the Rosetta Stone in 1799 and Jean-François Champollion's deciphering of the stone's inscriptions in 1822.<sup>21</sup> The main point I want to make about hieroglyphs, though, is that they fit comfortably into the discourse of exorbitant objects connected with ancient Egypt. They are not precious, indeed they are close to trivial, in a material sense, but to extract their immense metaphysical value requires a huge expenditure of intellectual labor—a form of pyramid-building in the mind.

This is not to say that *Antony and Cleopatra* as a play cares much if at all about hermetic esoterica; no one is likely to mistake Shakespeare for a high-flying neoplatonist (though it is true that George Chapman wrote at least one decent tragedy). The closest we come to anything like an interest in this sort of thing in the play is by way of the soothsayer, who in Act 1 scene 2 claims that “In nature's infinite book of secrecy / A little I can read” (9–10), and in Act 2 scene 3 invokes Antony's “daemon,” “spirit,” and “angel” while warning him to avoid Caesar (18–20). While he draws the soothsayer and the “daemon” directly from North's translation of Plutarch and does not appear to have absorbed much material from sources other than Plutarch, Shakespeare has nonetheless invested the play in general with a sense of E-

gypt as a place full of objects that, like hieroglyphs, seem to imply higher and more obscure meanings. Isis and Osiris may be somewhere in the deep background, but the prevailing impression is of an Egyptian world that is not quite ready to give up all its secrets. And there is also a strong impression, inseparable from the catharsis of the tragedy, of expense, of vast resources dedicated to an enterprise that finally reveals itself to be of no earthly use. This takes us back to Archer's notion of monumentality; whether the monument in question is Cleopatra or the Great Pyramid, its practical reasons for being never quite seem to square with the awe that it evokes.

The case for *Antony and Cleopatra* as an explicit presentation of Renaissance ideas about ancient Egypt consists, like a mummy broken up for sale, of "shreds and patches" (to borrow a few apt words from *Hamlet*). Even so, these largely circumstantial bits of evidence suggest that Shakespeare is participating, however momentarily, in the shaping of early modern attitudes toward the matter of ancient Egypt. For the Egyptian antiquities—pyramids and ushabti alike—appear to have entered the consciousness of the English in Shakespeare's time not only as curiosities, talismans, and "things to see," but as luxury goods in a very radical form—of the highest quality and craftsmanship, involving countless hours of human labor, but the purpose of which cannot be parsed and made morally valuable in a Christian society living under a reformed dispensation. Such objects, with their relentless claim to otherness and their resistance to conventional interpretations, have always exerted great fascination in societies that could never accept the beliefs that caused the objects to be made in the first place. The fascination only increases with the perceived preciousness of the objects. In the first decades of the seventeenth century we can see the inklings of a market that would grow steadily in size and intensity over the next three centuries, even as the belief of the magical qualities of the antiquities gradually disappeared. One could argue that the development of Egyptology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was at one level an effort to put an existing form of connoisseurship, and even treasure-hunting, on a serious scientific basis. The principles of this connoisseurship were already sketched out Shakespeare's time, and they can be teased out of *Antony and Cleopatra*. Scion of the Hellenic dynasty of the Ptolemies, far removed in time from the works of the pharaohs, Cleopatra is nonetheless authentically Egyptian because she costs so much, more than anyone except Antony is willing to pay.

### [ Notes ]

1. Curran 15.
2. For my text of the play I have used the Oxford edition edited by Neill. This edition uses "Anthony" rather than "Antony" but I have retained the traditional spelling of the title.
3. See also MacDonald 145–64 and Archer, *Old Worlds* 23–62. As a supplement to Archer's essay see de Sousa 129–40—though in my view this rather differently inflected account of the Egyptian references in the play does not offer any significant advances over what Archer has to say.
4. The first two books of Herodotus's *Histories* were translated by B. R. (otherwise unidentified) and published in 1584; Pliny's *Natural History*, by Philemon Holland, in 1601; and Leo Africanus's *History and Description of Africa*, by John Pory, in 1600.
5. Archer, "Antiquity and Degeneration" 10.

6. Archer, "Antiquity and Degeneration" 18.
7. Perhaps there is some ominous foreshadowing in the doomed Lepidus's fascination with monuments designed to house the dead.
8. Herodotus 211; Archer, "Antiquity and Degeneration" 19.
9. Herodotus 210. Strikingly, the translator B. R. uses the word "pyre" to denote the pyramid throughout this passage.
10. Sandys 128 – 29. This notion is already present in earlier Renaissance writers such as Leon Battista Alberti, who treats the pyramids as grand absurdities in his important architectural treatise *De re aedificatoria*: "Certainly I abhor those monstrous works that the Egyptians built for themselves—works also resented by the gods themselves, since none of them would be buried in tombs as sumptuous" (Alberti 250; qtd. in Curran 72).
11. Archer, "Antiquity and Degeneration" 19, notes the pyramids' "association with death," but does not pursue the consequences of this association in much detail, since his interests mainly lie elsewhere.
12. Gillies 20.
13. On this topic see Wolff 182 – 84 and, on the presence of mummy in seventeenth-century English literature, Schwyzer 151 – 74.
14. Schwyzer 160.
15. Wolff 183 – 94.
16. Sandys 133. Haynes 86, indicates that Sandys gave these objects to John Tradescant, though he provides no source for this information.
17. Allen 112 – 20, Curran 58 – 59 and Hornung 83 – 91.
18. Curran 153 – 58, provides a good overview of this text.
19. It is odd that Sandys, who was in a position to see actual hieroglyphs during his travels, provides such an inaccurate representation of them in his book, but this perhaps points to the familiar problem of the perceptual blind spot that exists for participants in one iconographic tradition when they attempt to render the images in a very different tradition; they will tend to bring those images into line with "existing standards." And it is possible that Sandys simply did not pay much attention to the hieroglyphs that he did happen to see. Haynes points out that the picture in the *Relation of a Journey* is in fact based on second-hand knowledge: "the sample hieroglyph. . . is not one Sandys saw, but the one everyone read about in Plutarch's *Isis and Osiris* 32; the artist simply drew pictures of an infant, a falcon, a fish, and so on in the style that came naturally to him" (86).
20. Yates is still the best English-language introduction to the complex history of Renaissance hermeticism. Yates, Frances A. *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1964).
21. On attitudes toward the hieroglyphs between the early seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries, see Hornung 98 – 140.

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