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New Directions: The Passion of Cleopatra: Her Sexuality, Suffering and Resurrections in *The Mummy* and *Ramses the Damned*

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I will argue that *Ramses the Damned: The Passion of Cleopatra* and *The Mummy* (confusingly subtitled *Ramses the Damned*) are ‘passion’ texts, in two senses of the word: firstly, in describing Cleopatra’s passionate sexuality and, secondly, in giving an account of her death and suffering (as in the Gospels’ recollection of the Passion of Christ). *Ramses the Damned* (2017) is a co-authored sequel by Anne Rice and her son Christopher, coming almost thirty years after Anne’s *The Mummy* (1989). They are set in 1914, in Africa and Britain. I have chosen them as the focus for this chapter on *Antony and Cleopatra* in popular culture partly because of Anne Rice’s best-selling author status and partly because of the sheer newness of *Ramses the Damned*. Yet while the sequel is new, its *premise* (from the Latin for that which is ‘set before’: here, the texts which are set before) is old. Thus, the Rices’ novels contain a plurality of resurrections, a fitting topic to dwell on in this chapter because it is only through the medium of various restorations (theatrical, filmic, televisual, musical, fictional and so on) that Shakespeare can even be considered popular culture in the early twenty-first century.

In these novels, Cleopatra’s suffering occurs after – and directly stems from the physical and mental anguishes brought on by – her resurrection, rather than as a precursor to it. Another facet of her suffering is represented as stemming from confronting her own pre- and early twentieth-century artistic and critical representations. The representation of her sexual allure, and resultant sexual power (particularly in its workings on Mark Antony), in popular texts, from Shakespeare to the Rices’ novels, is almost ubiquitous. I demonstrate this with texts drawn from diverse genres (historical romance, parody, soft porn, adventure, science fiction), forms (such as graphic novels and animation) and intended audiences (from primary-school-aged readers to ‘adults only’). Portraying the bulk of her suffering as that of a woman whose reputation has been slandered allows the characters of both novels to explore critically a range of Cleopatra narratives, including but not confined to, Shakespeare. It invites readers to do the same by extending their consideration of her representation beyond the Cleopatra narratives available at the time and in the places in which the novels are set to those they are familiar with from their later twentieth- (and early twenty-first-) century schooling, reading and viewing. The examples I will draw on to demonstrate this hail from the UK, US and Japan. They include anime and film. The Rices’ popular fiction can be read as akin to fictocritical writing (a practice of writing which blurs traditional divisions between fiction, theory and literary criticism within a single text), as they perform feminist and postcolonial reading, critique methods for interpreting Plutarch and scrutinize ways of determining ‘authenticity’ in scholarly research. This chapter concludes with a consideration of the metafictional aspects of the Rices’ Cleopatra texts.

The plots of the novels, which combine elements of the adventure, horror, supernatural thriller, historical romance and erotica genres, are deliciously convoluted, so a brief synopsis of both is necessary. Anne Rice (best known for her series *The Vampire Chronicles*) published *The Mummy* in 1989. Fictional Egyptologist Lawrence Stratford (Rice chooses her names carefully, so this may well be a deliberate Shakespearean echo) has discovered the tomb of Ramses the Great, when he is murdered by his dissolute and avaricious nephew, Henry. His daughter, Julie, aspiring to follow her father into an archaeological career, is about to be murdered by her cousin when Ramses awakes and saves her, scaring off Henry. Ramses explains to Julie that during his reign as pharaoh, he discovered the formula for an elixir of eternal life and became immortal. He served as a counsellor to the kings and queens of Egypt, including Cleopatra. He became her lover, encouraged her relationship with Julius Caesar to secure Egypt’s safety from Roman domination but despised her relationship with Mark Antony. He refused to give Antony the elixir as he lay dying, suspecting Antony would then demand the elixir be used to create an immortal Roman army. After Antony’s death, Cleopatra killed herself in despair, refusing Ramses’ offer of the elixir for herself. The distraught Ramses had himself sealed up in a tomb.

In Julie, and her beauty, especially her brown eyes, the re-awakened Ramses finds echoes of his lost love Cleopatra.[[1]](#endnote-1) Julie and Ramses begin a sexual relationship, with Ramses adopting the persona of ‘Reginald Ramsey’, also an Egyptologist, to pass among London society. On a visit to Cairo, Ramses recognizes an unidentified mummy as Cleopatra and revives her with the elixir. However, he is too sparing with the elixir, and the resurrection is incomplete – parts of her body remain rotted away, her brain has not been fully restored. She is sometimes incoherent as well as experiencing the compulsion to have sex with, then kill, a number of men, and to murder women of whom she is jealous, or who otherwise obstruct her. Indeed, she plots to murder Julie to exact revenge on Ramses for resurrecting her against her wishes and refusing Antony the elixir. This is not the imagined immortality leading to reunion of Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra, or Burton and Taylor.[[2]](#endnote-2) As the book reaches a climax, Cleopatra falls passionately in love with the fiancé Julie has discarded for Ramses, Alex Savarell, and he returns her feelings. However, she appears to be killed in a collision between her car and a train, attempting to outrun Ramses in a chase through the desert. In fact, she awakens in a British-run hospital in Sudan, seduces her doctor, Teddy, and convinces him to elope with her, intending to resume her vengeful pursuit of Ramses. In the meantime, Julie has accepted Ramses’ offer of the elixir so that they can remain together for eternity.

*Ramses the Damned* is the first collaborative novel from this mother and son, already independently established authors in their own right. The novel opens as the American, ‘Egyptian novelist’ Sybil Parker ventures on a tour of England. It is no coincidence that the Rices choose for this character the name of the mouthpieces of the ancient oracles and seers: the material for Sybil’s historical romances comes to her in vivid dreams about the lives of the Egyptian rulers. This inspiration is added to through research – including, in her mother’s opinion, ‘too much Plutarch!’[[3]](#endnote-3) On arrival in the UK, Sybil visits the stately home of Alex, who is hosting an engagement party for Julie and Ramsey. Also on the move, this time from Africa to England, Cleopatra has decided to frequent the event to rekindle her relationship with Alex and to confront Ramses and Julie. One of the realisations brought about by this collision of characters is that Cleopatra’s soul has been repatriated in Sybil’s body; that is to say, the ‘dreams’ that have inspired Sybil’s novels are actually flashbacks. Additionally, they are sometimes intense forebodings or current experiences of Cleopatra’s. They include, for example, occasions when Cleopatra is endangered (as much as an immortal can be) and when Cleopatra unites with Alex for passionate sex.[[4]](#endnote-4) Cleopatra’s memories, her ‘true spirit’, are housed in the ‘vessel’ or ‘tabernacle’ of Sybil.[[5]](#endnote-5) This is supposed to explain the changes Sybil discovers in herself at the novel’s outset, having developed a ‘new authoritative voice’ and ‘assertiveness’.[[6]](#endnote-6) To a limited extent, Sybil and Cleopatra are able to converse virtually. Cleopatra, on first learning of the psychic connection, suspects Sybil of trying to usurp her identity and stealing her memories. Though her body is now totally healed, the restoration of her mind remains imperfect. She particularly grieves the loss of her memories of her son Caesarion, and recalls relentlessly the death of Antony and her desire to avenge it.[[7]](#endnote-7) To pacify and befriend Cleopatra, Sybil presents her with copies of all her Egyptian novels.[[8]](#endnote-8) The hope is that Cleopatra will be able to fill the gaps in her mind and find peace through reading about her past experiences and emotions as recorded by Sybil.

**Sexual passion: Shakespeare’s model for a creative consensus on Cleopatra**

The Rices’ description of Cleopatra’s attractiveness and passionate sexuality is part of a popular creative consensus inherited from Shakespeare, among others. In the novels, Cleopatra is robustly beautiful: ‘a woman of great and exceptional beauty’, ‘luscious’, ‘so beautiful it had been almost painful to look at her. Her unmarred features exquisitely proportioned’.[[9]](#endnote-9) The Rices demonstrate a Shakespeare-like ‘enjoy[ment in] the staging of Cleopatra’s allure’.[[10]](#endnote-10) Where Shakespeare’s text establishes that Cleopatra is sexually enchanting and gratifying (‘sensuous’) to the point of seeming a magical being, through descriptions of her by Antony as ‘this great fairy’ (4.8.12) and his detailed accounts of being aroused by her, they follow and extend, making her literally magical through her resurrection.[[11]](#endnote-11) Where Shakespeare has her enemy, Octavius, declare that the dead Cleopatra looks ‘as she would catch another Antony / In her strong toil of grace’ (5.2.346-7), Anne Rice has Ramses describe the partially unwrapped mummy in the Cairo museum, which he identifies as Cleopatra, in similarly captivating terms: ‘that face, that beautiful face … her hair, her thick rippling hair; why, the whole form had almost glistened in the dim light’.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Following the Shakespearean precursor, the Rices’ Cleopatra is not just beautiful but sexually passionate, skillful, indefatigable and able to use her sexual magnetism to render men subservient to her wishes: she is the ‘fabled seductress of a thousand talents’.[[13]](#endnote-15) Her strength and agency are manifest in her looks, rather than a surprise that lies beneath more fragile features: ‘the fine dark eyebrows gave her a distinct look of will and determination, which he found oddly exciting in a very direct physical way’.[[14]](#endnote-18) Sometimes, she uses brute force in the bedroom, throwing Ramses across the bed and straddling him.[[15]](#endnote-21) This is a useful reminder that in the Rices’ novels, some of her unique sexual force is attributed to her immortal strength and stamina. Perhaps evidence of the Rices’ engagement with critical and cultural movements such as feminism, her sexuality in their novels is no longer monstrous because it is female, but because it is the product of a partially successful, supernatural resurrection. That Cleopatra is not just beautiful but also physically passionate is rooted in Shakespeare, including Antony’s lines inviting her to embrace him: ‘O thou day o’ th’world, / Chain mine armed neck! Leap thou, attire and all, / Through proof of harness to my heart, and there / Ride on the pants triumphing!’ (4.8.13-16). Her sexual agency is reiterated by several Roman characters, although in language that suggests it is excessive, even false. Shakespeare’s Romans such as Scarrus, as well as Antony himself, connect her sensuousness with sexual power over the leaders with whom she has united and its political consequences. The Rices’ novels show flashes of this destructive sexuality in the deaths of several of the resurrected Cleopatra’s six successive conquests.

Other hugely popular versions of Cleopatra’s story, originated between Shakespeare’s play and the Rices’ novel of 2017, focus extensively on the source of her sexual allure in her physical beauty. She is termed the ‘Queen of Beauty’ in Rider Haggard’s novel *Cleopatra* (1889).[[16]](#endnote-22) The 1963 film conveys Cleopatra’s beauty (and sexual availability) through long, languorous shots of Elizabeth Taylor, lounging on Egyptian daybeds, her petite hourglass figure enhanced by a range of ‘revealing gowns’ that have become a hallmark of stage and screen productions.[[17]](#endnote-23) The 1970 Japanese animation *Kureopatora* by Osamu Tezuka builds on and pornographically exaggerates live action films in its portrayal of Cleopatra as ivory-skinned and long-legged, with voluptuous, over-sized hips and thighs, almost-infeasibly pert breasts studded with erect, pink nipples and a black shoulder-length bob. While her beauty is ubiquitous in these Cleopatra narratives, there is rather more variation in terms of whether it translates into agency and political power. Rider Haggard’s *Cleopatra* is the subject of an assassination plot. Her suicide is not a powerful choice to maintain autonomy over her body, but a course of action suggested to her by the duplicitous Charmion (as it is spelt in his novel), saving her faction the effort of murdering Cleopatra and overcoming the hurdle that they have struggled with to find a willing and capable assassin. Befitting the soft porn genre it is intended to make a contribution to, her agency in *Kureopatora* is much reduced: she seduces on command from a faction within Egypt, she is subjected to the humps of a lecherous leopard when bound as a parcel for Caesar and she is so dejected at her rejection by the homosexual Octavius that she commits suicide in despair. On top of this, her great beauty is explained away as supernatural: at the start of the film, she is an average, freckled girl given a magical make-over by an Egyptian wizard who slathers and sculpts her body with a potion. The notion of Cleopatra’s feminine sexual wiles married with masculine sexual agency is at the core of Joseph Mankiewicz’s film. Audiences see this when she provocatively describes her fertility to the childless Julius Caesar: ‘I am the Nile. I will bear many sons. Isis has told me. My breasts are filled with love and life. My hips are rounded and well apart. Such women, they say, have sons’. In the parody of the Mankiewicz blockbuster, *Carry on Cleo*, straight-talking, war-mongering Antony (‘Now, when we see her, no messing about. She has got to go. And if she won’t go quietly…’) is reduced – on sight of Amanda Barrie’s lithe Cleopatra in her bath – to growling lustfully, incoherently apologising for the work he has been sent to do in deposing her and agreeing to execute Ptolemy instead.

While there are some limited variations in Cleopatra’s beauty – which reflect different ideals of beauty for these writers, artists and directors, as well as the different genres and audiences they are aimed at – these texts demonstrate that she is universally conceived of as attractive. There is greater variation in terms of whether or not her beauty results in sexual and political agency, with the Victorian and pornographic texts featured here stripping this out from their retelling of Shakespeare. What I want to suggest here is that, unlike her allure, her power is not a constant feature of new versions of Cleopatra narratives. The Rices had other models of Cleopatra’s agency available to them but they chose (in line with) Shakespeare. This is important to bear in mind as the remainder of the chapter demonstrates his abiding presence in their novels, even as direct engagement with his play is frequently skirted by the writers.

**Suffering: Cleopatra’s resurrection and ‘Roman’ reputation**

In terms of the second definition of passion, Cleopatra’s suffering in the Rices’ novels originates in part from her imperfect resurrection, which is physically painful: ‘She suffers unspeakably because of the great gaping sores on her body, through which the bones are visible’.[[18]](#endnote-26) Her mental anguish is longer lasting, as she has been given more of the elixir to treat the unrecovered areas of her body. Cleopatra is painfully aware of the gaps in her mind.[[19]](#endnote-28) She asks Teddy to remind her ‘what is this thing that I am?’: ‘He grabbed her by the shoulders. He almost shook her … “You are Cleopatra VII, the last queen of Egypt … You ruled an empire that fed Rome, and your capital city was the center … of the very world. And you, its queen. And your son. Your son, Caesarion”’.[[20]](#endnote-29) Her loss of memory regarding her son torments her most. Her physical and mental losses feed her murderous rage, which is dangerously coupled with supernatural strength that allows her to break the necks of her victims with ease and celerity. Yet the Rices’ Cleopatra remains emotionally vulnerable, afraid that her amnesia is a sign of a madness that will engulf her completely and deny her the comfort of the sustained romantic relationship with Alex that she craves, dooming her to perpetual loneliness even as she is trapped interminably in an immortal body.[[21]](#endnote-30)

However, Cleopatra’s greater suffering stems from confronting the unfavourable representations of her in literature and culture, particularly those which are Roman in standpoint if not authorship, such as Plutarch. The writer is described by Ramses as a ‘liar! How dare the bastard say that Cleopatra had tried to seduce Octavian …What a monstrous idea! There was something about Plutarch which made him think of old men gossiping as they gathered on the benches in public squares. No *gravitas* to the history’.[[22]](#endnote-31) Julie is prompted to deliver a feminist criticism of Plutarch when she reads some publicity for ‘Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* [which] was enjoying a long run in London’:

She stood up and reached for Plutarch on the bookshelf above the desk. Where was the story of Cleopatra? Plutarch had not devoted a full biography to her. No, her story was contained in that of Mark Antony, of course. She paged quickly to the passages she only dimly remembered. Cleopatra had been a great queen, and what we now call a great politician. She had not only seduced Caesar and Antony, she kept Egypt free of Roman conquest for decades … Had Mark Antony been a little stronger, Octavian might have been overthrown. Even in her final days, however, she had been victorious in her own way. Octavian wanted to take her to Rome as a royal prisoner. She had cheated him. She tried out dozens of poisons on condemned prisoners, and then chosen the bite of a snake to end her life. The Roman guards had not prevented her suicide. And so Octavian took possession of Egypt. But Cleopatra he could not have.[[23]](#endnote-32)

As well as correcting what she sees as overestimation of Mark Antony, Julie emphasizes qualities she feels get buried in Plutarch’s account but that testify to Cleopatra’s equality with her male peers: her political and military leadership skills, the extent of her national and individual autonomy, and her empirical approach to researching the efficacy of poisons. Julie’s reading demonstrates the way in which Roman-slanted histories have, according to the novels’ key characters the Stratfords and Ramses, reduced her reputation to that of an Egyptian whore. This slur, among others, is revealed to Cleopatra herself shortly after her resurrection: ‘On the train to Alexandria, she had devoured the history books Teddy had bought for her. And it hadn’t surprised her in the slightest how the Romans had told her story. A powerful whore, whose only true power lay in between her legs’.[[24]](#endnote-33) Her critical stance on Roman historiography becomes known to her enemies, who seek to undermine the hopefulness and sense of self-worth she has built from critiquing her representations by expressing their scepticism in her attempts at revisionism. For example, they sarcastically invite her to ‘lecture me more on your history as queen … which aspects of your known story are truth, and which are fantasy created by an Empire that despised you and cheered your fall’.[[25]](#endnote-34) Later, finding a way to appropriate advantageously that which she previously found dubious and defamatory in her legacy, she states, ‘I know that I have charmed many men … I know that I have charmed many rulers of Rome. I cannot remember how many exactly but the history books tell me I have done it and so I must be able to do it again’.[[26]](#endnote-35)

The rendering of her sexual allure and wiles in the Roman-leaning histories is further degraded and parroted – to the horror of both Cleopatra and Ramses, with their first-hand knowledge of events in ancient Egypt and Rome – in the recollections of Oxford graduates such as Alex Savarell in the early twentieth-century. Alex lists her qualities as taught to him thus: ‘she was the trollop of the ancient word, a spendthrift, a temptress and an hysterical woman’.[[27]](#endnote-36) Julie hushes Alex insisting, ‘I don’t want to hear any more of your schoolboy history!’, thereby unintendedly corroborating Alex’s earlier assertion that ‘you don’t have to go to Oxford to hear mean things about Cleopatra’ and confirming that disdain for Cleopatra is culturally widespread in the England of the novels, indeed systematized in its male-oriented educational institutions.[[28]](#endnote-37) Indeed, the aspersions about Cleopatra put into Alex’s mouth by the authors echo the verdicts of moralizing critics of the play such as John Dryden and Edward Dowden eminently available in the 1910s. Ramses has previously lashed out at the infidelity of the ‘bastard’ Plutarch’s biography of Cleopatra.[[29]](#endnote-38) On this occasion he counters Alex, insisting that the fault is in the readers – their limited powers of interpretation and inability to identify bias – not solely the text: ‘She could’ve charmed God. Read between the lines of your Plutarch. The truth is there. She was a brilliant mind; she had a gift for languages and for governing which defied reason. The greatest men of the time paid court to her. Hers was a royal soul in every sense of the word. Why do you think Shakespeare wrote about her? Why do your schoolchildren know her name?’ Samir, another Egyptian and Egyptologist, joins in: ‘Cleopatra was by any standards a formidable queen’. Ramses offers a parting shot: ‘Egypt could use a Cleopatra now to rid it of British domination. She would have turned your soldiers packing, you can be sure’.[[30]](#endnote-39) Here, even as they resist British colonialism and criticize Alex’s British (mis)education, these Egyptian characters espouse an idealized view of Shakespeare and English education policy as a testimonial to Cleopatra’s worth. They argue that neither the playwright nor the literary canon underpinning English education would immortalize a dissolute whore since they constitute global gold standards. Their support for both echoes the school inspector and critic Matthew Arnold’s pronouncements on English education as involving ‘the best that has been thought and said’. Their embracing of Shakespeare’s play and canonical English literature is in stark contrast to their rejection of Plutarch’s sensationalist and antagonistic treatment of Cleopatra, attributed to his Roman bias. These characters’ dismissal of Plutarch is perceptive on Anne Rice’s part as it contributes credibility to her depiction of England in 1914: it is redolent of the xenophobia that saw ‘the national poet’ Shakespeare emerge as a core ingredient in subject English in England around the First World War, replacing ‘foreign’ texts (i.e. the Classics) and approaches such as philology.[[31]](#endnote-40) Sentiments befitting the period in which the novels are set, the Western-educated, Egyptian characters’ expression of them adds to the Rices’ picture of their complex and conflicted identities. Ramses and Samir are patriotically in favour of Egyptian independence but also collaborating with British archaeologists and, in Ramses’ case, masquerading as a British expat.

Although Shakespeare is occasionally invoked by the Rices, nowhere in the novels does he come in for the savaging they mete out to Plutarch. Perhaps this is because Shakespeare provides the Rices with a model for identifying the Romans as responsible for Cleopatra’s bad reputation. Shakespeare places criticism of Cleopatra in the Roman characters’ mouths. Enobarbus reduces her to and objectifies her as a ‘piece of work’ (masterpiece), ‘a new petticoat’ (perhaps equivalent to our ‘piece of skirt’) and the ‘Egyptian dish’ (1.2 161, 176; 2.6.128). Antony expresses his awareness of her reputation among his countrymen when he demands of a messenger: ‘Mince not the general tongue. Name Cleopatra as she is called in Rome’ (1.2.112). Later, Antony – angered by her perceived over-familiarity with the (comparatively) lowly Thidias – upbraids her for her whoreish qualities: ‘To flatter Caesar, would you mingle eyes / With one that ties his points?’ (3.13.161-2). More explicitly, he labels her ‘half blasted’ (rotten), a ‘boggler’, ‘a morsel, cold upon / Dead Caesar’s trencher – nay … a fragment / Of Gnaeus Pompey’s’ (3.13.110, 115, 121-3). In the next act, after she has retreated from battle, (in his mind) compelling him to follow suit, he further articulates the Roman association of whores with deception, particularly as practised by ‘gipsies’, and its application to Cleopatra:[[32]](#endnote-41) ‘This foul Egyptian hath betrayed me’ (4.12.10). He resumes this theme later, telling Eros: ‘the Queen – / Whose heart I thought I had, for she had mine, / … has / Packed cards with Caesar, and false-played my glory / Unto an enemy’s triumph’, ‘O thy vile lady! She has robbed me of my sword’ (4.14.15-20, 22-23). The implication is she has robbed him militarily (of victory), materially (of his sword), sexually (the sword has phallic connotations) and romantically (of his heart). Of course, this is not Antony’s only, or predominant, view of Cleopatra. Rather, in Antony’s rage, his deeply ingrained Roman prejudices against her are let fly. Shakespeare is excused by the Rices as merely ‘dramatizing’ Roman slanders against Cleopatra; giving voice to both sides of the warring parties through dramatic form, which makes ‘Shakespeare’s judgement of his characters less easy to discern’.[[33]](#endnote-42) They may agree with critical interpretations of Shakespeare’s nuance and even-handedness: ‘Nothing purely good or evil can be found in the play and what seems admirable in one context is shown as ridiculous in another – or, rather, appears both admirable and ridiculous at one and the same time’.[[34]](#endnote-43) The Rices’ criticism of Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* in the novels condemns him for owning negative views of Cleopatra – such as laying the blame for Antony’s decline ‘squarely’ on her – and for setting them forth as factual, as part of a scholarly biography.[[35]](#endnote-44) However, it should be noted that the didactic purpose of Plutarch’s work is to encourage readers to weigh up the merits and demerits of two historical personalities and to identify who is the better person, statesman and warrior, so as to equip readers with models of virtue to follow and of vice to avoid.[[36]](#endnote-45) He ‘is by no means a simple moralist’: he also acknowledges their ‘strengths and virtues – Antony’s courage and magnanimity, Cleopatra’s vitality, her magnetism’.[[37]](#endnote-46) Unlike Plutarch, Shakespeare might be favoured by the Rices as an author who constitutes a model for placing Cleopatra centre stage. Shakespeare is friend, Plutarch foe as far as the Rices, or at least their characters, are concerned. However, notwithstanding his being briefly, directly invoked in the novels and his notions about the eponymous characters informing the Rices’ writing, there are multiple instances in which they disavow the influence of Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* throughout, preferring to name other versions of the lovers’ story. Unlike Shakespeare with Plutarch, they eschew adapting entire passages of text. Perhaps the duo in this way manifest *The Anxiety of Influence*,the authorial struggle inherent in engaging with a culturally and literarily dominant precursor, in this case, Shakespeare.[[38]](#endnote-47) That Shakespeare’s is the monolithic pre-text in our era is suggested by John Wilders’ critical introduction to the Arden third edition of the play: ‘In attempting to write a play on such a celebrated subject, Shakespeare clearly set a challenge for himself. He rose to it so splendidly that in most of our minds Antony and Cleopatra actually were the people he created’.[[39]](#endnote-48)

**Shakespearean creative and critical legacies**

Almost unanimously well received by the significant characters in the book, and particularly beloved of Cleopatra and Alex, is Giuseppe Verdi’s *Aida*. The opera is not ostensibly an adaptation of *Antony and Cleopatra.* Verdi deliberately specified a vast time period for the setting – ‘ancient Egypt, in the time of the pharaohs’ – and made ‘no claims to authenticity’ in his Italian Romanticist musical palette ‘imbued with a convincingly mysterious and exotic hue’ in order to avoid the opera being approached as ‘anthropology or history’ rather than ‘myth’.[[40]](#endnote-49) Indeed, *Aida* instead has readily identifiable parallels with another Egyptian love-triangle in the libretto of Pietro Metastasio, *La Nitteti.* Aida’s creation in the late nineteenth-century also represents a general vogue for Egyptology inspired by the immortalisation of Antony and Cleopatra’s fiery and tragic love story in literature. Verdi’s composition will nonetheless readily evoke for many Shakespearean readers his knowledge of and passion for Shakespeare (including pity at his mistreatment by other librettists) as witnessed in his operatic adaptations of *Othello* and *Macbeth* as well as the comic opera *Falstaff*.[[41]](#endnote-50) *Aida* is set in ancient Egypt and tells the story of the love between the eponymous Ethiopian princess enslaved by the Egyptians, with whom Ethiopia is at war, and the nation’s military chief Ramadès. In spite of her love for her father, and Ramadès’ otherwise loyal following of his King, their love flourishes. Amneris, the Egyptian princess, is also in love with Ramadès and suspects a rival affection between Aida and Ramadès. Jealous romantic and military plotting ensue, resulting in Ramadès being sentenced to death in a sealed tomb – the twist being that Aida has secretly stowed herself in the tomb to die with him. The similarities between *Aida* and *Antony and Cleopatra* lie in the ancient Egyptian setting; the tragic love story between a warrior man and royal woman (who is in both – although to different extents and in markedly different roles – an outsider to Egypt, as a Greek or Ethiopian); the foregrounding of betrayals and divided loyalties between self and nation – the Metropolitan Opera’s description of *Aida* as a peerless opera in ‘its exploration of private emotion and public duty’ could almost be taken from a critical introduction to Shakespeare’s play;[[42]](#endnote-51) rivalry for the warrior’s hand-in-marriage, and the protagonists’ suicidal behaviours leading to their deaths in a monumental Egyptian tomb.

There are some significant differences too. For example, unlike Antony or Romeo, Ramadès death is arguably only suicide in that he knows the likely outcome of his conduct will be a death sentence. Nonetheless, Verdi’s sympathetic portrayal of faithful lovers, which foregrounds their romantic love and suffering – with no trace of stereotypes of, let alone ‘austere’ Roman scorn for, Egyptian ‘erotic passion’, ‘sexual freedom’, ‘extravagance’ and sensuousness – is accorded much greater approbation from the Rices’ characters than Plutarch and other Roman-slanted histories.[[43]](#endnote-53)

For example, the resurrected Cleopatra’s first contact with the opera comes as she spies a ‘newspaper lying on the dressing table’: ‘now she snatched it up and stared at the advertisement for the opera – at the quaintly Egyptian woman and her warrior lover, and the sketch of the three pyramids behind them and the fanlike Egyptian palms. She gave a little agitated moan as she studied this’.[[44]](#endnote-54) Note that Aida is repeatedly misunderstood by the Rices’ characters, or misread by the authors, as Egyptian, rather than an Ethiopian prisoner in Egypt as the libretto and productions make clear. The misreading may be deliberate on the Rices’ part, perhaps to make an analogy with the story of Antony and Cleopatra*,* though it constitutes evidence of ‘whitewashing’, or at least ‘lightwashing’, something also discussed in relation to Shakespeare’s Cleopatra.[[45]](#endnote-55) The implication of the resurrected Cleopatra’s response to the advertisement is that it fills her with a painful nostalgia for her past reign and her relationship with Antony and, perhaps, also Ramses (also her lover and a former military leader in his own right, with a name but two letters shy of the opera’s hero). Soon after this, an unspecified recording of the aria sung by Ramadès, ‘Celeste Aida’ (Heavenly Aida), is played to Cleopatra by another character, describing it to her as a song ‘from a man to his Egyptian love’, in an attempt to jog her memory of her previous life.[[46]](#endnote-56) Later, in one of her victim’s pockets she finds ‘two small bits of paper with AIDA written on them. And OPERA. They bore the same tiny drawing she had seen in the “magazine” of the Egyptian woman’s head’.[[47]](#endnote-57) Cleopatra walks off from the scene of her crime with the tickets, curious to see the production, softly singing ‘Celeste Aida’ to herself. She sings it again to comfort herself when in physical pain and emotional turmoil before Ramses gives her a sufficient dose of the elixir, correctly administered orally as opposed to on the skin.[[48]](#endnote-58) In *The Mummy*, Cleopatra attends the performance at the opera house in Cairo. This is the location for which Verdi’s opera had been commissioned and was debuted in 1871, suggesting a knowing cultural reference on the part of Anne Rice. Cleopatra describes how ‘the ugly little man sang the song … his voice enormous, the melody enough to break the heart’ (beyond this comment on this fictionalized Ramadès’ appearance, the cast, crew and production go unidentified).[[49]](#endnote-59) At this point, readers are not given the lyrics of the aria in detail: it has only been established that it is a *romanza*, taking place in an ancient Egyptian setting and sung by a warrior to a royal woman. In *Ramses the Damned*,however, a Caruso recording of Aida is purchased by Alex’s mother as a gift for him, transporting him back to holding the hand of Cleopatra, a ‘magnificent jewelled creature, radiant with an energy that seemed almost otherwordly’ in the Cairo opera house: his longing for her drives him to ‘read the entire libretto of *Aida* in a single, hungry sitting’.[[50]](#endnote-60) This same gift is heard playing by Alex at the end of the novel. The Italian lyrics are quoted at length as he tries to understand who is playing it, in a house he believed empty: ‘Celeste Aida, forma divina / Mistico serto di luce e fior /… Del mio pensiero / tu sei regina / tu di mia vita sei / lo splendor’ (which, although it is not given in the book, translates as ‘Heavenly Aida, divine form, mystical garland of light and flowers; … Of my thoughts, you are queen; Of my life, you are the splendour). Following the source of the sound to the drawing room’s phonograph reunites him with Cleopatra who has secretly entered the house and put the record on. Cleopatra and Alex share a love of *Aida* because it offers them a redemptive version of Cleopatra as stable, noble and romantic rather than flighty, unprincipled and sexual, and thus (according to early twentieth-century social codes, however priggish and hypocritical) eminently more suitable for marriage into the British aristocracy. I will discuss metafictional aspects of the novels further in the conclusion, but it seems pertinent to note here briefly the introduction of a strong emphasis on this mother-son relationship in the collaborative novel by the mother-and-son authors of *Ramses the Damned*. Alex and his mother are working together to resurrect their stately home, his life after the collapse of his intended marriage to Julie and the car-crash ‘death’ of his lover, Cleopatra, as well as his memories from their fling through this ‘Egyptian’ opera; Christopher and Anne are working together to resurrect a plot and set of characters from Ancient Egypt that has lain dormant for twenty-eight years. Interms of the plot, the mummy (Cleopatra) is recalled for the son by the mother’s gift of a record; in terms of authorship, the mummy (both the character Cleopatra and the novelist Anne Rice) is renewed by the gift of co-authorship with the son (Christopher).

One of the exceptions to *Aida*’s acclaim in the novels comes when Ramses sees a poster for the production with what he perceives as ‘a lurid, vulgar picture of ancient Egyptians entwined in each other’s arms amid palms and pyramids’.[[51]](#endnote-61) I have suggested throughout this chapter that there are resonances in the Rices’ fiction with contemporary literary and cultural criticism, and this scene in the novel does imbue Ramses with an awareness of and disdain for Orientalism, the West’s patronizing, frequently sexualized, representations of the East that would not look out of place in a discussion of Edward Said’s seminal work of postcolonial criticism. Indeed, we are shown as a sign of his privilege and depravity that Henry routinely plays *Aida* on his gramophone, along with making his Egyptian concubine dress in (what he regards as) traditional costumes as part of the oriental(ist) paradise he has created for himself in Cairo.[[52]](#endnote-62) However, Ramses’ ire at the production’s publicity material needs to be contextualized within his own conflictedness about depictions of Cleopatra. This conflict is rooted in his desire for the original Cleopatra and his jealousy of her relationship with Antony, against which he had advised her, and leads to a further sense of her betrayal of him as both her lover and counsellor. His inner conflict is borne out in that sometimes Ramses agrees with Plutarch’s and Shakespeare’s Romans in their criticism of her luxuriousness and profligacy; sometimes he rejects them – and this wavering spans the two novels. For example, as shown above, he jumps to the defence of Cleopatra’s reputation when Alex recites his schoolboy understanding of her character. Elsewhere, he damns the historical Cleopatra he had known (along with Antony, his love rival) as ‘selfish’ and lacking insight.[[53]](#endnote-63) Despite being her (re)creator, he condemns both ‘the recent body’ and the original Cleopatra when he rails: ‘Whole, alive, and a mad woman! Madder than she had been before he gave it to her’.[[54]](#endnote-64) In yet other places, he attempts to weigh up his perceptions of her good and bad qualities: ‘her beauty shall ever haunt me; as well as her courage and her frivolity; her passion for life’ and she ‘who was wise as well as impulsive … Who loved recklessly but knew always how to conquer and rule?’[[55]](#endnote-65) Ironically, these cogitations echo Shakespeare’s Antony’s ricocheting between Cleopatra as, ‘at one moment “this enchanting queen” and at another a “triple-turned whore”’.[[56]](#endnote-66) Like Shakespeare’s Antony, his ambivalent feelings towards Cleopatra testify to his persistent ‘absorption’ with her, even as he embarks on a relationship with Julie.[[57]](#endnote-67) He is both like Antony in his emotions concerning Cleopatra, while unable to see or unwilling to recognize these likenesses. His continuing jealousy of and ill-will towards Antony are perhaps as great a factor as the blatant orientalism of the poster in his instinctive recoiling from *Aida* (which he does, after all, attend with his new ‘Queen’, Julie).

Finally, the novels’ reference to the Shakespearean legacy of Cleopatra in the early twentieth-century arts is another instance of the Rices’ preference to stay at one remove from Shakespeare’s play in these novels by mentioning it in a conversation about the education system, recalling images from a theatre programme.

A more explicit reference to Shakespeare’s legacy, in terms of representations of Cleopatra, comes when Julie contemplates Cleopatra’s profile on some ancient coins. She compares them favourably to ‘the silly Egyptian image so popular in programmes to Shakespeare’s tragedy’.[[58]](#endnote-68) In her comparison, she absolves Shakespeare’s play-text of the shortcomings in Cleopatra’s representation: the fault lies not with the words on the page but with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ‘archaeological’ extravaganza stage productions of Shakespeare.[[59]](#endnote-69) In Julie’s critical phrase ‘silly Egyptian image’ Rice perhaps has an oblique dig at representations of the Cleopatra presented in similarly visually spectacular, blockbuster films of Cleopatra, in mid-late twentieth century popular culture: the elaborate hair and headdresses of the films discussed at the start of this chapter. The novels’ emphasis on the resurrected Cleopatra’s, and her allies’, suffering at her misrepresentation offers a springboard for exploring scholarly notions of authenticity more broadly. Throughout the novels, the fictional Egyptologists consider the inauthenticity of images of Cleopatra in theatrical and operatic illustrations, the Tussaud’s waxwork, as well as attempting to authenticate what they believe to be Egyptian coins and busts of Cleopatra.[[60]](#endnote-70) Moreover, in the sequel, readers are told that the busts have been discovered by British Egyptologists emptying out the tombs because Cleopatra horded them out of reach of the Romans: ‘once it was clear Octavian could not be stopped, once I had chosen to give my life to the serpent’s bite, I couldn’t bear the thought of my likeness being destroyed by their soldiers. Write my history as the harlot queen … I would not surrender my countenance to the dismemberment of Roman hoards’.[[61]](#endnote-71) In these lines, Cleopatra recalls a foreboding that she had about the rough treatment her legacy would receive at the hands of the Romans. This presentiment might explain her later claim that ‘it hadn’t surprised her in the slightest how the Romans had told her story’.[[62]](#endnote-72) It also articulates a scholarly, historiographical awareness forged from this Cleopatra’s experience of being resurrected and from reading her biographers: that truth and history are constructed and contestable, written by the victors.

Furthermore, as the novels progress, the scholar-characters, and Cleopatra herself, apply their criteria for and judgements about authenticity, beyond representations of Cleopatra, to ‘the recent body of Cleopatra’, the empty ‘duplicate’ and ‘monstrous shell’:[[63]](#endnote-73) ‘She’s not Cleopatra. She’s a stranger in Cleopatra’s body. A monster looking through Cleopatra’s eyes’.[[64]](#endnote-74) In this way, some of Cleopatra’s ‘bad’ behaviours identified by the novels in ‘Roman’ representations of her, and mouthed by Shakespeare’s Roman characters as well as some of the Rices’ unsympathetic ones, are explained away as products of her literal monstrosity and madness. Although her sexual allure and power has been depicted chauvinistically as metaphorically monstrous over the centuries, in the novels she is a physically monstrous hybrid of a beautiful young woman and rotten corpse. As an immortal, she also is also imbued with monstrous strength to lift, throw and crush humans and an insatiable appetite for food, drink and sex.[[65]](#endnote-75) Her excessive love for Antony fits the early modern humoral theory’s pathologising of such strong emotion, and successive centuries have continued to deploy the association between love and insanity figuratively. In the novels, however, her madness stems from her pathological rage at Ramses forcing the elixir on her against her explicit instructions, her desire to revenge herself on him for this (and for refusing it to Antony) and the partial restoration of her brain tissue (and therefore also memory) due to the corrupt version of the elixir used (‘the elixir itself … is dangerous, more dangerous than you know’).[[66]](#endnote-76) Her mental impairment is attested to by her amnesia and compulsive desire for sex, frequently coupled with murder. Made literal, these characteristics of Cleopatra can be doubly excused: in the Rice’s novels, they are not merely wilful misrepresentations of the historical Cleopatra, they are the fictional truth about her supernatural reincarnation in the early twentieth-century, about the not-Cleopatra, a ‘thing’ masquerading in Cleopatra’s familiar form, her soul split off into Sybil Parker.[[67]](#endnote-77)

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have articulated some ways in which the contents of *The Mummy* and *Ramses the Damned* constitute a ‘passion’ of Cleopatra giving a sympathetic account of her sexuality and suffering. I have also argued that *Ramses the Damned* performs a resurrection of the oft-written and -filmed character, Cleopatra. This reanimation occurs on multiple levels with Anne Rice bringing back her character from *The Mummy,* almost three decades old, as well as the renewal of Cleopatra’s legendary sexuality, which seems to ‘breed’ reincarnations because it is so ubiquitously and powerfully appealing. The appeal of writing about Cleopatra’s sexuality seems to exist regardless of authors’ sex or sexuality, as demonstrated by my consideration of multiple novels and films internationally: Anne Rice is a cis-gendered woman, Christopher Rice is a cis-gendered gay man. The collaboration between the mother and son could also be seen as having a regenerative force for these two authors. The collaboration with Christopher resurrects Anne’s own ‘salad days’: *The Mummy* was published during a period when she was incredibly prolific, releasing more than a book a year, perhaps explaining why the promise that ‘the adventures of Ramses the Damned shall continue’ on the closing page of *The Mummy* took so long to be fulfilled. The collaboration liberates Christopher from some of the literary classifications, such as ‘gay writer’, which he has spoken of as constraining during his career.[[68]](#endnote-78)

Throughout, I have demonstrated that the Rices blend notions from literary criticism and scholarship into their fictional narratives to tackle pejorative representation of Cleopatra in literature and culture, from Plutarch to the present. Shakespeare is included rather more approvingly than that biographer or stage productions. On occasion he is invoked through a direct reference, but more usually through the Rices’ characterisations of the historical personalities. They also engage with Shakespeare indirectly by referencing his creative legacies such as *Aida*. Their apparent critical engagement is discernible in spite of Anne Rice’s avowed personal disenchantment with the emphasis placed on literary criticism during her time as a doctoral student at the University of California, Berkeley: ‘I wanted to be a writer, not a literature student’, something similarly borne out in her son’s junking two programmes of study in favour of honing his craft as, at first, a screenwriter.[[69]](#endnote-79) Given their emphasis on the craft of writing, constructed in opposition to literary criticism, I want to conclude by considering some ways in which they enact metafictional writing. That is, fiction which purposefully reminds the reader of its own constructedness or literariness. True to her naming for the female oracles of ancient Greece and Rome, Sybil Parker seems to be an autobiographical mouthpiece for the Rices. She declares of her Egyptian novels that ‘being freed from the burden of historical accuracy has allowed her to let her own childhood dreams of Egypt … reign as queen over her creative process’.[[70]](#endnote-80) The Rices remind their readers of their own poetic license. In doing so, they problematize their endeavour to rehabilitate Cleopatra by reminding readers that they are adding yet another fictional representation to the existing mass. This metafictional moment ties the Rices back specifically to Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, the iconic metatheatricality of that play, and establishes their shared concern with reputation and misrepresentation in his queen’s declaration that:

saucy lictors
Will catch at us, like strumpets; and scald rhymers
Ballad us out o’ tune: the quick comedians
Extemporally will stage us, and present
Our Alexandrian revels; Antony
Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
I’ the posture of a whore. (5.2.213-20)

1. I gratefully acknowledge the help of three opera-loving colleagues, some of whom are also trained musicians, in trying to decipher the influence of particular productions of *Aida* on the authors. My sincere thanks to José Alberto Pérez Díez (Leeds University), Samantha Landau (Showa Women’s University) and Clémentine Beauvais (University of York) for their advice in the preparation of this chapter.

 Anne Rice, *The Mummy* (New York: Ballantine, 1989), 231, 243. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid.*,* 339–40, 354. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Anne Rice and Christopher Rice, *Ramses the Damned: the Passion of Cleopatra* (New York: Anchor, 2017), 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid.*,* 369. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid.*,* 265, 274. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *Mummy,* 373, 429, 437, 438, 446, 456. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Ramses,* 79,274, 356. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. *Mummy, 3*05, 318, *Ramses,* 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (London: Royal Shakespeare Company/Macmillan, 2009), 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid.,137, 141. ~~IS THIS TO~~ *~~RAMSES~~* ~~OR TO~~ **BATE/RASMUSSEN?** [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. *Mummy*,280. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. *Ramses*,272. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
14. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
15. Ibid.*,* 132. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
16. Henry Rider Haggard, *Cleopatra* (Floating Press: 2012), 197. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
17. Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. Bate and Rasmussen, 173. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
18. *Mummy*,362. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
19. Ibid.,365. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
20. *Ramses*,179. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
21. Ibid.,307,205. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
22. Ibid., 175. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
23. Ibid., 307, 205. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
24. Ibid., 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
25. Ibid., 206–7. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
26. Ibid., 296. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
27. *Mummy*, 213. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
28. Ibid., 213. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
29. Ibid., 175. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
30. Ibid., 213. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
31. Christopher Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 87–8. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
32. Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. Bate and Rasmussen, 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
33. John Wilders, ‘Introduction’ to William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* (London: Routledge, 1995), 1–84 (1, 38). [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
34. Ibid., 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
35. Ibid., 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
36. Ibid., 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
37. Ibid., 60, 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
38. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1973. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
39. Wilders, ‘Introduction’, 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
40. Metropolitan Opera, ‘Aida’, *Metopera*. Available at https://www.metopera.org/Season/2018-19-season/aida-verdi-tickets/ (accessed 19.07.18). [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
41. Gary Wills, ‘Shakespeare and Verdi in the Theater’, *New York Review of Books.* Available at https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/11/24/shakespeare-and-verdi-theater/ (accessed 19.07.18). [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
42. *Metopera*. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
43. Ibid., 7–8. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
44. *Mummy*, 307. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
45. Ben Child Bate, ‘“Whitewashing” row over Scarlett Johansson’s *Ghost in the Shell* role reignites’. *Guardian*. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/apr/15/scarlettjohanssons-role-in-ghost-in-the-shell-ignites-twitter-storm (accessed 25.07.18). [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
46. *Mummy*,310. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
47. Ibid., 341. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
48. Ibid., 369. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
49. Ibid., 441. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
50. *Ramses*,346. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
51. *Mummy*, 268. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
52. Ibid.,266. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
53. Ibid.,254. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
54. *Ramses*, 79; *Mummy*,254. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
55. *Mummy*, 26, 455. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
56. Wilders, ‘Introduction’, 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
57. Ibid.,2. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
58. *Mummy*,57. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
59. Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. Bate and Rasmussen, 156; Wilders, ‘Introduction’, 4, 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
60. *Mummy*,16, 45, 57, 80. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
61. *Ramses*,29. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
62. Ibid.,52. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
63. *Ramses*,79,274, 356. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
64. *Mummy*,400. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
65. *Mummy*,314, 402, *Ramses*,26. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
66. *Mummy*, 350; see also *Ramses*,340. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
67. *Mummy*, 286. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
68. Robert Birnbaum, ‘Author Interview: Christopher Rice’, *Identity Theory*. Available at http://www.identitytheory.com/christopher-rice (accessed 26.07.18). [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
69. Anna Metcalfe, ‘Small talk: Anne Rice’, *Financial Times*. Available at https://www.ft.com/content/d15d15e4-ede9-11df-8616-00144feab49a (accessed 19.07.18). [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
70. *Ramses*, 173. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)