

Subtle Evasions: Mary Sidney and Social Expectations for Women's Private Roles

By Martha Diede

Like never before, women and men have public personas, and the actions of the private person have consequences for the public person. The advent of MySpace, Facebook, and Google+, for example, has given every member a public persona that masquerades as a private one, although it is easily searchable in a few seconds with an internet connection. Much like Early Modern commonplace books in which people wrote down quotes they found particularly applicable to their lives or recorded small and large life events, Facebook and similar social networking sites serve as a record of daily activities, thoughts, and sometimes quotes for individual members. Then, as now, those women whose lives cannot be fully chronicled by social media, find that the news networks may take up the slack. Unlike the commonplace book and other private literary pieces that women then wrote for themselves or to circulate among trusted friends, social media now brings with it an inherent danger of public overexposure, an online reputation that anyone can find with an internet connection. The Early Modern woman called her pre-electronic version of this problem publicity. Just as today's smart users care about the degree to which unsavory users can access their information and what they post online, smart women and men in Elizabethan England took great care to maintain their good public reputations. Although Elizabethan society allowed men to have public lives while preserving their private lives at country houses or simply at home in the city, that same society dictated that women avoid public life as much as possible.

Essentially, women were to tighten their security settings to “Friends Only” and avoid any other public comment. For Elizabeth Tudor and her ladies, however, this dynamic created some tensions much like those that many women experience today. These women could not truly avoid building and maintaining a public persona with the attendant difficulties of maintaining a good name; at the same time, they could not truly avoid social mandates to preserve themselves as private citizens whose reputations serve only to build the good (or bad) reputation of the families into which they were born and into which they were married. For Elizabeth and the ladies of her court, as for women now such as Hillary Clinton, Angelina Jolie, and Katherine Middleton Windsor, social and news networks offer undeniable benefits while posing unavoidable risks to both their public and private lives.

Given such ongoing tensions between public and private life, readers should not be surprised that female figures who earlier navigated such contests became objects of fascination for the Early Modern reader, perhaps models of ways to navigate between public and private life both then and now. Particularly as a woman whose public and private lives combined to produce the fall of Egypt and a great Roman general, Cleopatra in all of the recounting of her story provides both a model and a warning for women who find or seek a public life but also hope to maintain a private one. Like her, Mary Sidney, Philip Sidney’s sister and literary executor, also serves as a model of a woman who navigated the tricky waters of public and private life. Although much of Sidney’s effort went to establishing and preserving a specific kind of reputation for her brother (she altered his *Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia* to make it less racy), she also produced a number of translations

of her own. Her translation of Garnier's *Marc Antoine*, which appeared 10 years before Shakespeare's *Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra*, does not attract much critical attention, although both the original and the translation clearly reveal women's concerns with the production of public and private, present and future, reputation. Scholars sometimes assert that translation merely represents authorized women's writing, and then focus on the intricacies of her *Psalms*.ⁱ When they examine it at all, critics occasionally consider *The Tragedy of Antonie* as a part of the long-standing tradition of mindfulness of one's own death or as part of the accompanying tradition of dying well after having lived with meaning, a tradition which greatly interested Sidney.ⁱⁱ In many respects, *The Tragedy of Antonie*, a retelling of what would become the familiar story of Cleopatra and Antony at their deaths, participates in the same tradition as *Tuesdays with Morrie* or "The Last Lecture." *Antonie* highlights the importance of recognizing the inevitability of death and of living meaningfully. But despite the title's focus on Antony, the play concentrates on Cleopatra and her failed attempt to balance public and private lives. For Cleopatra, the conflict between public and private responsibility leads to a suicide that expresses her marital love and seems to return her to a traditionally female role (5.1-27; 92-116; 137-208). In contrast, Antony hopes that his suicide will restore his reputation, tainted by his neglect of public duties (3.376-80). In this he develops a pattern followed by such men as Bill Clinton, who lied about his private life in a public forum, was publicly punished for so doing, but in later years has recreated a persona that is again suitable for public life. Despite the masculine title of her translation, Mary Sidney's *The Tragedy of Antonie* seems to focus on concerns primarily associated with

women and with women writers. The very act of translation positions Mary Sidney in a writing tradition deemed appropriate for women, camouflaging her repeated transgression of the line between public and private. While appearing to engage in both literary and cultural reputation-building in which women who die well after having lived meaningfully significantly increase the likelihood of their posthumous remembrance, the play also problematizes that public, posthumous reputation.

Translating a play in which a queen experiences tremendous role conflict between public political life and private love life parallels to some degree Mary Sidney's decision to make public her private translation of a play and other works, thereby creating public reputation that will outlive her regardless of the potential censure such actions might attract (Cerasano and Wynne-Davies 17). Translation is a genre considered "appropriate" for women; however, publicizing those translations is not. Cleopatra straddles a similar divide: a woman, traditionally a private person in Early Modern England (Stallybrass 123-42), she must develop and perform as a queen. So, she wields remarkable public power which guarantees her place in people's memory. In this duality, the Cleopatra that Sidney presents for her Early Modern readers much resembles Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama who have had to navigate the continuing divide between public and private life while aware that their remarkable positions ensure enduring public attention. However, as all women know, painful trade-offs are inevitable. Thus, for Cleopatra to save Egypt from Roman domination, she must induce Caesar not to tyrannize Egypt, however great her private sacrifice. Her secretary Diomedes fully believes that Cleopatra, as queen, can save her nation, but Diomedes also clearly reveals the public

and private lives that Cleopatra must negotiate (2.499-504). So Cleopatra must decide how to manage Antony, Caesar's representative. In the trade-off, Cleopatra may save her country, but lose Antony; or she may lose Antony, but save her country. These choices pit the public queen Cleopatra against the private lover Cleopatra. No matter her choice, every retelling of her story—whether by her Egyptian waiting women and subjects, conquering Roman soldiers, or future generations of historians, writers, playwrights, and translators—will inevitably show her privileging one role over the other. Every time an actor re-presents her on stage, that actor publicizes the conflict between these two roles, and for the moment of the play, creates a reputation for Cleopatra that highlights the tension between public and private. Hidden and revealed behind such materiality (Jones and Stallybrass) is Sidney the translator, for reading, performing, or viewing her translation publicizes her work while insisting on her privacy by shifting attention to the “original writer,” Garnier. Her reputation as a “proper” woman writer both maintained by and subsumed into the “original” text, hiding in plain sight behind Cleopatra's role conflict and the reproach her actions draw.

The Tragedy of Antonie publicizes Mary Sidney's personal concerns with her own and with her brother Philip Sidney's public and posthumous reputations, each of which had to follow socially accepted, gendered patterns. Because of the social strictures women faced with regard to public life, Mary Sidney relies on her personal relationships and the literary circle that gathered at her estate to create openings for her to produce work as a literary figure in her own right. Her brother Philip faced no such restrictions. He published original works such as *A Defense of*

Poesie, Astrophil and Stella, and *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, significantly dedicated to his sister, as a way to bolster his public reputation as a well-rounded courtier and to enjoy public praise for his political and religious stances as well as his literary skills. For Philip, his literary reputation was important to his public, political career, particularly after Elizabeth had banished him from court for espousing thoroughly militant Protestant opinions. In his private country life, Philip generated literary work, including translations of the Psalms with his sister. Philip's efforts to rehabilitate his image with Elizabeth was successful enough that she directed him to command military operations in the Netherlands as the English sided with Dutch Protestants to beat back Roman Catholic Spanish occupation. Philip Sidney was thus able to use his private life to produce and to rehabilitate an effective public persona. Very much aware of Philip's public status, Mary took care that after his death his originally authored works appeared appropriate to his public status as a learned literary courtier. Due in part to her efforts, Philip Sidney's literary reputation outlives him. Mary Sidney, however, continued to operate in the tensions similar to those experienced by Cleopatra. Thus Mary contributed primarily translations, yet these literary efforts still demonstrate her exceptional linguistic and literary capacity, all the while contributing to her pretense that she did not write original texts and lived exclusively as a private person.

Unsurprisingly then, the appropriateness of public reputation to the person is of great concern throughout the play and the tensions between public and private lives seem to publicize Mary Sidney's own concerns. For example, the heroine, Cleopatra repeatedly emphasizes even Antony's once and future reputation, albeit

negatively. Describing his response to her departure from the sea battle, she observes, "By this base part / [he blasts] his former flourishing renown" (2.209-10). Like Cleopatra, Antony comprehends that their private love affair has overtaken his public responsibilities and thereby damaged his reputation, much like contemporary male politicians or pastors who face public scorn after private extra-marital sex. Like such politicians and pastors, Antony knows that he has shamed himself by choosing to behave as a private person and not as a public figure: he calls Cleopatra the "idol of [his] heart" (1.5). A public man, he cannot choose heart over head, for such a choice is unacceptable, even scandalous. He, too, must make a choice, but the fate of his children and a nation do not hang on his choices. As Antony's general Octavius's presence shows, other men may become generals and lead Antony's troops thereby redeeming the purpose of Antony's public life, and as the absence of his wife in this play indicates, he can brush aside his Roman private life by claiming the demands of travel inherent in his public role.

Much like Philip Sidney who accepted a dangerous battlefield assignment in the Netherlands as part of a strategy to restore his public persona, Antony clearly sees his own suicide within a Roman framework: death at his own hand may help to repair his public image. Preparing to kill himself, Antony declares, "I must deface the shame, of time abused, / I must adorn the wanton loves I used, / With some courageous act" (3.377-79). However, when Cleopatra sends for him, he casts aside even that paltry honor. Bleeding from a self-inflicted wound, Antony allows Cleopatra to haul him up the monument to her. He dies in her arms, not on the battlefield with his men. Once a promising military leader, Antony dies derelict from

his duties. The qualifying implication that “he could have been great but for Cleopatra” hangs over Antony’s future reputation. Such tainted renown implies that a man’s decision to privilege private love over public duty is unacceptable. Significantly, contemporary society continues to insist on this line, demanding that politicians and pastors whose private lives interfere with public ones must commit a kind of career suicide by resigning from their public posts. Faced with a scandalous relationship to a female intern, Bill Clinton decided not to resign the presidency of the United States; Congress responded by impeaching him, thus preserving the social code that requires men to privilege public over private life. Having paid such penance, however, Clinton has been able to rebuild his reputation and now can fully engage in public life. Jim Bakker is another such example: publicity surrounding his extra-marital sexual relationship led to investigation and a prison term. Having served his time, Bakker has also been able to rebuild his public role, again running a television show. Regardless their seeming recovery, the fact remains that for such men as Clinton, Bakker, and Sidney’s Antony, their stories retold will consistently include the moments when they chose private over public life, the condemnation they receive, and the steps necessary to restore their public roles.

Clearly, choosing between public and private concerns affects how people remember Cleopatra and Antony, but gendered expectations make Cleopatra’s privileging of her private life acceptable in a way that Antony’s is not. Antony’s lover, Cleopatra refers to herself using the socially acceptable designation “wife” (2.320). Also, when Eras reminds Cleopatra that she is a noble queen (2.181-87), she responds as a “fearful woman” instead (2.219). Fleeing the sea battle, Cleopatra

does not seek to preserve herself from capture or Roman triumph, but to prevent Antony from returning to Octavia (2.227-28). To do so, Cleopatra invokes her public position as queen, her public persona, to prove her faithful love for Antony, a matter of her private person. Tragically, but again matching gender expectations, her private affairs consume her public person; she elects to produce a future reputation focused more on her private life than on her public persona, and returning to the private role expected of women. Cleopatra chooses to die with Antony, leaving her children alone and her country conquered. She proclaims:

[I] The crown have lost my ancestors me left,
This realm I have to strangers subject made,
And robbed my children of their heritage.
Yet this is nought (alas!) unto the price
Of you dear husband, whom my snares entrapped.

(5.12-16)

She bewails her choice, but even recognizing its potentially dire public consequences, she does not change her mind.

Cleopatra's private love for Antony so consumes her that neither Euphron nor Diomedes can convince Cleopatra to live, not even by invoking a competing public/private responsibility which will produce reputation and specific memories—motherhood. Although privately conceived with Antony, Cleopatra's children represent a public duty, their presence a constant reminder of her reign: they will physically resemble her, and more important, they will inherit Egypt (Wilcox 58-60; Wiesner 5-8). By making their later escape possible, she guarantees

psychological, tangible memories of herself that will survive and a reputation to go with them. Moreover, by choosing public suicide for herself, she manages her future public reputation: those retellings of her life will not present her as vanquished monarch and failed mother, but as a tragic figure of doomed love. Fitly to conclude her future public story, Cleopatra does not admit Antony when he arrives at her monument because she fears her own capture (4.282-86). Instead, she lets down a cord and draws him up, planning to die as his wife, but visually reinforcing her dual public and private roles. Egyptian servants and Roman soldiers see a conquered queen who chooses death over captivity yet postpones her demise long enough for her lover to come to her so that they will die together. This decision, however, backfires, transmogrifying her future memory: instead of remembering her as the valiant warrior queen, her children and her people will recall and retell the story of a woman ultimately doomed by intense love (or lust). Even in orchestrated death she cannot escape conflict between public concerns—her role as Queen of Egypt and mother of the future rulers of Egypt—and private attachments—her beloved Antony. Though Euphron reminds Cleopatra that children could face a life of bondage because of Cleopatra's suicide (5.30-33), Cleopatra still opts to die with her "husband."

Despite the fact that her elaborate production of drawing a bleeding Antony to her will almost certainly ensure posthumous public-private renown, Cleopatra, much like Mary Sidney and many women to follow, does remember those she will leave behind: she does her best to provide for the welfare of her children, whom she hopes will outlive her. In so doing, she attends to the quintessential private female

role—that of motherhood. Having given her children attention by planning for their care and education, Cleopatra reveals that she fully comprehends the difficult position in which those children will now find themselves. Technically illegitimate, they are nonetheless heirs to Egypt. In them Cleopatra's public and private lives collide. As a woman with a public duty to produce heirs, she conducts a sexual relationship with Antony despite the fact that he cannot marry her and the fact that he represents an empire known for hostile takeovers of neighboring territory. She knows that the children from such a liaison will face challenges in their own public and private lives, for their family reputations will be forever entangled with the reputations of their parents. Still, by choosing to conceive and bear children, Cleopatra fulfills the public role of queen by providing heirs to succeed her. She also takes on the very private, exclusively female role of motherhood. But even that private function, as Elizabeth Tudor and Diana Windsor knew, is entangled in public function. In her last attempt to fulfill maternal responsibility despite her political one, Cleopatra commands that her children forget their royal blood and depart with Euphron before sealing herself in the tower to die publicly. This public display offers at least a hope of public distraction so that her children might disappear from public life unnoticed, thereby preserving a small hope that they might one day return to power and safeguarding part of Cleopatra's private life. This episode demonstrates the tensions that women face: blame attends their choice of public over private life at any time. Regardless of the actual survival of Cleopatra's children, she will always be the mother who sent them away, and regardless of the political necessity of her decisions first to romance Antony and then to commit suicide as a means to

preserve the best of her state, she will always be the queen who abandoned political responsibility for love. This thinking, however, ignores the reality that public and private are not so easily separated—for women or for men.

Neither Cleopatra nor Antony, then, nor really anyone today can fully separate private from public in life, in death, or in the life-after-death of public and private memory. And Sidney's translation of this play makes that fact very clear. Sidney keeps the on-stage chorus of Egyptians to comment on the action in the first three acts because the choral response shows the public effects of private actions, for Cleopatra's choices most affect her Egyptian people. Most simplistically rendered, the Egyptians will lose their country because their queen, Cleopatra, has so recklessly loved Antony. Conquering Rome will occupy Egypt. The Egyptians realize that Cleopatra's private decisions (3.423-34) will subject them to Caesar. As they see Antony disappear into Cleopatra's tomb, her people despair so greatly that Dircetus exclaims, "Greater misery / In sacked towns can hardly ever be" (4.320-21). Antony's suicide, linked with Cleopatra's death, thus becomes a matter of public memory for the both Egyptians and the Romans as well. Complicating the matter even further, Sidney shows that even within the monument, Cleopatra and Antony cannot fully gain privacy. Cleopatra knows that her women will witness her last moments and will re-tell her death, thereby producing a public memory of it, for those women help her to lift Antony and later watch her die. Yet she cannot restrict her last moments to her friends alone, for she does not have the luxury of friends or a "friends only" moment. Cleopatra is a queen. Thus, she commands her waiting women, even within the tomb, to perform a mourning ritual designed as a public

display of grief (5.132-35, 191, 195-96). Also affected by this act, the Egyptians will remember their former independence and probably escape sacking, but they cannot escape the humiliation of Roman occupation, and they will always associate Cleopatra's name with national disgrace. Indeed, both Garnier's original and Mary Sidney's translation of *The Tragedy of Antony* contribute to memories of Cleopatra as a private-public woman. Mary Sidney's decision to translate and then to publish the translation suggests that she recognizes the tensions inherent in responding to female gender expectations of maintaining privacy while ignoring the reality that circumstances and role demands can and often do force women into public life. Sidney clearly empathizes with such women: she knows that for women, the competition between private and public demands has profoundly different costs as compared to the costs for men. While men may commit suicide, literally or figuratively, in an attempt to restore their good reputations and to maintain the reputations of their families, women have no such option. Women are, in fact, blamed for their inability to navigate successfully those complex, intertwined, competing responsibilities. They are safest when they either deny their private persons entirely, much like Elizabeth Tudor who refused all suitors but whose regular menses were a state concern, or when they refuse to take up any public life at all, much like Mary Sidney pretended to do. Then, as now, women like Cleopatra and Mary Sidney frequently find themselves in positions that do not offer simple choices such as denying private life for public life or public life for private life.

Despite the way in which other storytellers make and re-make her reputation posthumously, this Cleopatra successfully blends her public and private lives, suggesting

that Sidney and other women looked to female characterizations such as this one to help them navigate the tricky waters of pretending to carry on their private roles while actively sustaining public agendas. Though both Cleopatra and Antony privilege private concerns over public ones and their choices have far-reaching consequences, it is Cleopatra who capably manages private and public, present and future, simultaneously. She is queen, lover, and mother, and she balances those triple roles despite constant convergence of and conflict between public and private duties. Simply, by producing children with Antony, she fulfills both private desire and a required public function, thus literally insuring that people will remember her. Additional major actions deserve reinterpretation: for example, her going to sea with Antony is a public duty, for she leads her ships in battle; even Antony and Lucilius assign her flight from the sea battle to civic duty (3.19-22). Certainly, Cleopatra's military leadership, much like that of Elizabeth Tudor, also publicly rejects "proper" womanly place, and for this reason attracts disapproval and provokes interpretive debates that such women could and did use to their advantage. For example, Eras asserts that Cleopatra went with Antony as his wife, not as a leader of men (2.215), and Cleopatra references Antony as "husband." By using the conflicting ways in which observers might interpret her actions, Cleopatra deftly manages public and private demands. She seemingly maintains "proper" placement within a hierarchical structure despite a collision of role expectations much like Mary Sidney who wrote primarily within the translation genre but whose translations were printed and circulated during her lifetime, and who managed the castle at Cardiff until her son's majority (Hannay, "Unpublished").

Furthermore, although Cleopatra does surrender her nation to Roman rule, she assures that the Egyptians avoid much bloodshed, thereby claiming a meaningful death in an attempt to uphold her public persona. The Roman soldiers, not the Egyptian chorus, refer to civil war and its destruction. Though Dircetus does compare the mourning of the Egyptians outside Cleopatra's tomb to the lamentation of those whose city has been sacked, Octavius' response to Antony's death suggests his fair intentions toward the Egyptians, and reveals his determination to possess at least Cleopatra's corpse and her royal treasures (4.334-41; 360-67). The Roman soldiers also recognize her virtue, claiming that the only weapons she need fear now belong to Jove, and thereby immediately contribute to her public persona and to good memories of her as a politician and queen (4.440-47). Before she dies, Cleopatra also carefully manages events after her death so that the Romans will not capture her children and force them to parade as war prizes. Preventing such physical humiliation, Cleopatra clearly demonstrates her ability to control both her public and private lives. Publicly, as heirs to her crown her children are in danger; privately, she wants her children safe. Thus, by providing for their escape, Cleopatra defends public and private interest, for if neither she nor her children are captured, the Romans cannot exult in their victory and her children do escape physical harm. Those children may, of course, return armed later so as to reclaim their mother's throne. Plainly, Cleopatra ably negotiates between public and private tensions, future concerns for her political reputation and present concern for her children's welfare.

Accordingly, Mary Sidney's translation of *The Tragedy of Antonie* clearly engages concerns about women's public and private lives. Both Cleopatra and Antony lead highly public lives, but have private responsibilities. Cleopatra is a queen, lover, and

mother; Antony, Roman husband and father, is a lover and father in Egypt. As he moves inevitably toward death, Antony chooses private desire over public duty. His future reputation, up to Sidney's era, had suffered from that choice, much like the reputations of male politicians since then whose private decisions have incurred public humiliation. Cleopatra's reputation focuses on her actions before death and her wiles used to gain a political upper hand—perhaps partly because her decision to die with her “husband” rather than face the scorn of a triumphal parade and her children's destruction aligns with gendered expectations of women's private lives, even to the point of pushing private life into public view for political ends. Cleopatra's skill at settling both public and private demands publicizes role conflict for a woman like Mary Sidney, whose private and public experiences writing herself, managing public affairs for her son, and promoting Philip Sidney's literary legacy (Hannay, “Moses”) demonstrate that women's private actions have public purposes and create public purposes with all of the attendant risks of creating and maintaining a public persona. After all, Mary Sidney's translation of *Antonie* also positions Mary unimpeachably as a public writing woman—within social norms to be sure—but with a public persona nonetheless. Sidney's *Tragedy of Antonie* reveals a deep fissure inherent in expectations that women lead private lives—although circumstances might dictate otherwise—yet possess and promote public personas. Such tensions, as Sidney highlighted by even choosing to translate a play specifically about a very public and private woman, have not vanished. Attendant guilt for any choice that seems to privilege one instead of the other has not disappeared either. They have, as Sidney's Cleopatra knew, gone viral and lived for centuries.

Notes

ⁱ For a sampling of such work consider Fiskien; Hannay, ““Your vertuous”” and ““House-confined””; and Wall.

ⁱⁱ Numerous critics have commented on this facet of Sidney’s works, including Mary Ellen Lamb, “Art of Dying” and “Myth”; and Walker. In contrast, Gary Waller suggests that *Antonie* publicizes “the Countess’ dedication to her brother’s literary ideals” (108).

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