

**"ALEXANDRIAN KINGS"**  
**«Αλεξανδρινοί Βασιλείς»**

---

*The article offers a sample of didactic analysis of a Greek poem "Alexandrian Kings" by Constantine Cavafy in comparison to Plutarch historical work "Parallel Lives". Opposition of historical and poetic viewpoints are highlighted.*

**Key words:** Hellenistic era, historical figures, irony.

**Подковирюфф Н. "Александрійські королі".** *Стаття пропонує зразок дидактичного аналізу грецької поеми Костянтина Кавафі "Александрійські королі" у зіставленні з історичною працею Плутарха "Паралельні життя". Протиставляється історичне та поетичне світобачення.*

**Ключові слова:** елліністична епоха, історичні постаті, іронія.

**Подковирюфф Н. "Александрійские королі".** *Статья предлагает образец дидактического анализа греческой поэмы Константина Кавафи "Александрійские королі" в сопоставлении с исторической работой Плутарха "Параллельные жизни". Противопоставляется историческое и поэтическое мировосприятие.*

**Ключевые слова:** эпоха эллинизма, историческая фигура, ирония.

The presentation and analysis of a poem like the one titled "Alexandrian Kings" by C. P. Cavafy requires an introductory comment about the Greek poet. Constantine Cavafy was born on 29 April 1863 in Alexandria, where his parents settled after leaving Constantinople in 1840. After his father's death in 1870, Cavafy and his family settled in England (Liverpool and London) until 1876. While in Alexandria, Cavafy was taught English, French and Greek by a private home tutor and continued his education for a couple of years in the Hellenic School of Alexandria. Besides, he spent 3 years in Constantinople (1882-84), the period of time which is considered critical in his emotional and intellectual development.

With the exception of travelling to Paris in 1897 and Athens in 1903, Cavafy did not leave Alexandria for 30 whole years ever since. After doing temporary work in stock broking companies, he decided to become a civil servant and at the age of 26 he took a position in the Ministry of Public Works (1922).

As early as in 1886, he started publishing poems which bore the influence of the Athenian romantic literary circles. Cavafy seemed to be unaffected by the features of the 80s generation. When in 1891 he published his poem "Builders" in the form of a brochure and later on when in 1896 he wrote the poem "Walls", the first to receive recognition, his individual features of mature poems started to emerge.

Cavafy is known ironical element in his poetry, which is a unique combination of verbal and dramatic irony. Greek poets in general used to snub him for his

homosexuality. Yet many foreign poets and readers of his work (like Auden, Forster) met Cavafy and actually fell in love with his romantic nature.

In 1932 Cavafy moved to Athens to be treated for throat cancer. He remained there for quite some time receiving the sympathy of a multitude of fans. On returning to Alexandria his health deteriorated. He was admitted to the hospital of the Greek Community and there he died on 29 April 1933, the day he turned 70.

A brief autobiographical note of the poet:

"I originally come from Constantinople, but I was born in Alexandria, in a house on Serif Street. I left Alexandria when I was very young and spent a large part of my childhood years in England. I visited England again when I was older, but only for a short while. I also lived in France. I spent more than two years of my teens in Constantinople. I haven't been to Greece for a long time. My last occupation was as an employee in a governmental office related to the Ministry of Public Works of Egypt. I speak English, French and a little Italian".

Αλεξανδρινοί βασιλείς

Μαζεύθηκαν οι Αλεξανδρινοί  
να δουν της Κλεοπάτρας τα παιδιά,  
τον Καισαρίωνα, και τα μικρά του αδέρφια,  
Αλέξανδρο και Πτολεμαίο, που πρώτη  
φορά τα βγάζαν έξω στο Γυμνάσιο,  
εκεί να τα κηρύξουν βασιλείς,  
μες στη λαμπρή παράταξη των στρατιωτών.

Ο Αλέξανδρος -- τον είπαν βασιλέα  
της Αρμενίας, της Μηδίας, και των Πάρθων.  
Ο Πτολεμαίος -- τον είπαν βασιλέα  
της Κιλικίας, της Συρίας, και της Φοινίκης.  
Ο Καισαρίων στέκονταν πιο εμπροστά,  
ντυμένος σε μετάξι τριανταφυλλί,  
στο στήθος του ανθοδέσμη από υακίνθους,  
η ζώνη του διπλή σειρά σαπφείρων κι αμεθύστων,  
δεμένα τα ποδήματά του μ' άσπρες  
κορδέλλες κεντημένες με ροδόχροα μαργαριτάρια.  
Αυτόν τον είπαν πιότερο από τους μικρούς,  
αυτόν τον είπαν Βασιλέα των Βασιλέων.

Οι Αλεξανδρινοί έννοιωθαν βέβαια  
που ήσαν λόγια αυτά και θεατρικά.

Αλλά η μέρα ήταν ζεστή και ποιητική,  
ο ουρανός ένα γαλάζιο ανοιχτό,  
το Αλεξανδρινό Γυμνάσιον ένα  
θριαμβικό κατόρθωμα της τέχνης,  
των αυλικών η πολυτέλεια έκτακτη,  
ο Καισαρίων όλο χάρις κ' εμορφιά

(της Κλεοπάτρας υιός, αίμα των Λαγιδών)-  
κ' οι Αλεξανδρινοί έτρεχαν πια στην εορτή,  
κ' ενθουσιάζονταν, κ' επευφημούσαν  
ελληνικά, κ' αιγυπτιακά, και ποιοί εβραίικα,  
γοητευμένοι με τ' ωραίο θέαμα --  
μ' όλο που βέβαια ήξευραν τι άξιζαν αυτά,  
τι κούφια λόγια ήσανε αυτές οι βασιλείες.

*Κωνσταντίνος Π. Καβάφης (1912)*

### **Constantine Cavafy: "Alexandrian Kings"**

*The Alexandrians turned out in force  
to see Cleopatra's children,  
Caesarion and his little brothers,  
Alexander and Ptolemy, who for the first time  
had been taken out to the Gymnasium,  
to be proclaimed kings there  
before a brilliant array of soldiers.*

*Alexander – they declared him  
king of Armenia, Media, and the Parthians.  
Ptolemy – they declared him  
king of Cilicia, Syria, and Phoenicia.  
Caesarion was standing in front of the others,  
dressed in pink silk,  
on his chest a bunch of hyacinths,  
his belt a double row of amethysts and sapphires,  
his shoes tied with white ribbons  
pinked with rose-colored pearls.  
They declared him greater than his little brothers,  
they declared him King of Kings.*

*The Alexandrians knew of course  
that this was all mere words, all theatre.*

*But the day was warm and poetic,  
the sky a pale blue,  
the Alexandrian Gymnasium  
a complete artistic triumph,  
the courtiers wonderfully sumptuous,  
Caesarion all grace and beauty  
(Cleopatra's son, blood of the Lagids);  
and the Alexandrians thronged to the festival  
full of enthusiasm, and shouted acclamations  
in Greek, and Egyptian, and some in Hebrew,  
charmed by the lovely spectacle-  
though they knew of course what all this was worth,  
what empty words they really were, these kingships.  
{1912}*

Cavafy's main source of inspiration for his poem "Alexandrian Kings" is the work "Parallel Lives" by Plutarch. The poem consists of 3 stanzas and 34 verses. The first stanza presents the place, the heroes, and the actual time of the historical event with the use of "Greek Demotic" (or vernacular Greek), which gives the poem a more realistic tone and creates a warm atmosphere from the very beginning. The second stanza again presents the heroes mentioning their titles, and contains a more detailed description of Cleopatra's youngest son, Caesarion. There is also a description of the gathered crowd and their impression of the ceremony they are attending. The third and final stanza once again describes the place and recreates the atmosphere of the ceremony in a dramatic way, making the reader wonder about the possible turnout of the ceremony and the fate of its heroes.

The poem "Alexandrian Kings" belongs to the Hellenistic period in which historical figures are symbols, which are just outlined, lacking willpower and remaining distant observers. They are pawns in the hands of those who have the power and who are motivated by certain political goals. On reading the poem we understand that the poet's ultimate goal is not lyricism as it is (nature plays a very limited role in this poem). Cavafy wants to urge the reader to think, judge and finally conceive things which are not explicitly mentioned or which are simply concealed in his poetry. Yet, eventually to his poetic technique, they all become very conspicuous. A detailed analysis of Cavafy's poem "Alexandrian Kings" in the form of a series of questions might help us to better comprehend all of its hidden aspects.

1. In the first stanza certain historical figures are mentioned. Who are they and what is their role?

Focusing on such names as Cleopatra, Caesarion, Alexander and Ptolemy, we realize that the nature of the poem is purely historical. It seems that these names are mentioned in the poem as a reminder of the historical past of the Hellenistic period in Alexandria and not as lyrical idols which are described in detail. That is why the poet mentions only the names of these important figures. Thus, we could assume that the aim of this poem (and Cavafy's poetry in general) is neither lyricism itself nor stirring any emotions from linking it to specific historical figures or events. From the very first stanza of the poem it is made clear that Cavafy's poetry is totally different from the lyricism of his era. His use of the Greek Demotic combined with some sporadic uses of "katharevousa" (or archaic Greek) gives his poetry a more personal style. The names of the historical figures mentioned in the poem take us to a distant historical era, somewhere close to the end of the Hellenistic period. Also, its geographical setting is very familiar to Cavafy since it is Alexandria, his birthplace. It seems that in the 19th century Alexandria is an isolated Greek town founded by Alexander the Great (a reminder of that is Pompey's Pillar), reigned by Queen Cleopatra and conquered by Caesar and later by Napoleon Bonaparte.

2. Is it easy to understand the historical era and the historical events which the poem refers to judging by the historical figures mentioned in it?

The real names and the content of the 6<sup>th</sup> verse of the poem highlight a very specific event in history, namely the coronation of Cleopatra's children in Alexandria. The coronation ceremony is a historical event that took place in 34 B.C. and is described in Plutarch's work *"Parallel Lives"*. In his work, Plutarch describes the way in which Antony planned the offering of gifts and the crowning of himself, Cleopatra and their children before a large crowd of people in the city stadium. Cleopatra is proclaimed Queen of Egypt, Cyprus, Libya and Celesyria while Caesarion, Cleopatra and Caesar's son, is proclaimed Regent. Alexander and Ptolemy, two other sons of Cleopatra and Anthony are proclaimed Kings of Kings. Alexander is described wearing a Persian-like dress, a Persian coat and a crown whereas Ptolemy is clad a toga, a pair of shoes and a broad-brimmed hat. This historical event is of an utmost importance since it aimed at creating a new Greco-Roman Empire by Cleopatra and Antony, thus annexing the territory that had been conquered by Alexander the Great.

3. What is the significance of this era?

This is a historical period of loose political morals. Being far away from Rome, Cleopatra and Antony indulged in vanity (which finally lead to their decay) and they distributed both territories and titles to subjugated kings in order to create an empire. Yet, they acted without any consent of either their people or of Rome, as they should have done in the first place. The setting is impressive, yet phony, and the message is the following: nobody can get away with lying. Eventually, what matters is not the luxurious setting, the crowds' enthusiastic cheers, the extravagant fabrics and jewelry or the royal titles but our ability to see the truth, so that we can rule our own destiny.

4. Comparing Cavafy's poem to the historical description by Plutarch. What differences do you see?

The poet's intention is not to assume the role of a historian and thus present this event from a historical point of view, since certain facts, like the organization of the ceremony by Antony, are not mentioned at all. On the contrary, Cavafy approaches the same historical event from a different angle; he presents the perspective of both Cleopatra and the Alexandrians. Cavafy becomes the director of this ceremony picking out the people who attract him and omitting the others. The poet uses historical figures in a symbolic way to send certain messages to the reader like knowledge, sensitivity, cohesion and the right to opinion and speech. The poet urges the reader to compare the events described to the contemporary ones in order to help him develop sound judgment and be able to tell the difference between what really matters and what is only superficial. In this way, the poem is not just about history but it becomes a medium through which the poet can talk about other things as well. Of course, everything is presented through the "Cavafy world", a world which is dark and confined and in which plotting is done surreptitiously, behind fake, impressive and sensational settings. In his world the heroes have a symbolic meaning and become puppets in the hands of powerful figures. Their fate is not discernible anywhere else but in the language the poet himself uses.

5. In your opinion, why is Cavafy's approach so different from that of Plutarch? In what ways does Cavafy express that?

It is because this particular historical event is just a pretext for Cavafy to present his poetic stance in a highly ironic way. Cavafy presents Cleopatra's perspective intentionally in order to highlight the fact that Cleopatra actually set up this dramatic event in order to make a certain political impression. No doubt Cleopatra plays the leading role in the poem, since she is the one who rules the area and puts her personal and her family's interest above her country's and people's interest. However, at the first glance, the reader is given the impression that her children are more important than Cleopatra: with Caesarion being the head of the ceremony, a large part of the poem – 4 verses in the 1<sup>st</sup> stanza, the entire 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza and 2 verses in the 3<sup>rd</sup> stanza – is dedicated to the children. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> verse of the 1<sup>st</sup> stanza Cleopatra is referred to as a mother and not as a queen. Besides, in the 28<sup>th</sup> verse emphasis is placed on the questionable paternity of Julius Caesar, something which Cleopatra used for her personal political reasons. This element of dispute arises from the way Cavafy chooses to place the following sentence referring to Julius in brackets: (*της Κλεοπάτρας υιός, αίμα των Λαγιδών* – *Cleopatra's son, blood of the Lagids*). In this poem Cleopatra is both a central and a tragic figure. She is overwhelmed by delusional fantasies of power, pursues Antony's ambitions and plans the ceremony, which Cavafy describes in his own unique way. Inevitably, she clashes with Rome. She can persuade neither the Alexandrians (verses 33 and 34) nor her opponents. Blinded by her vanity, she brings about the destruction of both her family and her country at the turn of the Hellenistic period for Egypt. In this way Cavafy ironically presents the negative aspects of power and politics, which corrupt people if a ruler's priority is not his or her people's best interest. Cavafy omits certain elements to show both sides of the same setting; the external one, which is attractive but fake and the internal one, which is absent and dramatic.

According to Cavafy, our historical past should not provide us with a "national, patriotic alibi" and a way of promoting a particular political ideology, something which holds true for other poets. On the contrary, our past should be a source of inspiration, thought and judgment leading to poetic creation. We notice that the heroes, who happen to be historical figures, are incapable of escaping their own fate, their own destiny. With his reference to the Hellenistic period, Cavafy presents the significance of the historical events, which serve as an omen of conflicts and twists, but remains uninfluenced by these events. At the same time, thanks to his poetic technique, the poem acquires some kind of aestheticism. Cavafy looks back to the historical past in order to express his own world. That is why his poems are didactic in their nature. For those who are drawn to his poetry, Cavafy's voice is very discernible even when certain facts are concealed. In poems like "Alexandrian Kings" this historical past is revived and the heroes assume a different identity, a more poetic one.

6. What is the role of Cleopatra's children in Cavafy's poem?

Cleopatra's children are mentioned in the poem selectively so that the poet can highlight their mother's vanity and her desire to boast about the political office she held, something which doesn't guarantee a happy ending for our heroes. It is clear here that Cavafy's intention is far from assuming the role of a historian. Moreover, the children are addressed by their names in the 1st and 2nd stanza, giving the poem an element of prose. Despite the fact that the children occupy a large part in the poem, they are just entities who lack willpower and have a part in a well-staged episode in which there are no signs of the impending disaster. In contrast to Plutarch, who is more analytical in his description of the children, Cavafy prefers (again in the role of the director) to just name them using the titles that were given to each one of them (8-9 verse):

*Ο Αλέξανδρος – τον είπαν βασιλέα  
της Αρμενίας, της Μηδίας, και των Παρθών  
Ο Πτολεμαίος – τον είπαν βασιλέα  
Της Κιλικίας, της Συρίας, και της Φοινίκης*

*Alexander – they declared him king  
of Armenia, Media and the Parthians.  
Ptolemy – they declared him king  
of Cilicia, Syria and Phoenicia.*

Caesarion, who is Caesar and Cleopatra's son and as such could have played a more decisive historical role in ruling Rome, is mentioned by the poet not only by his name and title, as is the case with his other brothers; his name is actually repeated in every stanza. He plays a more important role since in the 2nd stanza the poet dedicates eight whole verses to his detailed description (5-19 verse). Moreover, in order to stress Caesarion's unique appearance, Cavafy reverts to "katharevousa" (archaic Greek) whenever he refers to him. However, if we take a closer look at the poem, we will notice that it is not Caesarion's personality and inner world that are described but his external appearance. In this way, the poet tries to draw attention to the stark contrast between the glowing details of the clothing and jewelry and Caesarion himself, whose personality is non-existent. What we see is just an ostentatious display which cannot conceal the fakery of the ceremony or Cleopatra's intentions and which can hardly convince anyone, including the reader, who wonders about what is to happen next. The poet tries to show us the vanity of human deeds when people are confronted with their fate and the historical events to come. It could be assumed that Cavafy is particularly fond of Caesarion, because of the boy's young age and his tragic end; he is murdered by the soldiers of Octavian. In the 19th verse Cavafy uses the title "Βασιλέα των Βασιλέων – King of Kings" to refer to Caesarion and alludes to Dio Cassius and the title that was given to Jesus by the crowd before he was crucified. Thanks to this allusion the reader is led to guess the boy's tragic end.

7. How is aestheticism expressed in this poem?

Cavafy's detailed description of Caesarion (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> stanza, 27<sup>th</sup> verse) expresses his interest in this tragic hero who, despite his young age, becomes a powerful weapon in the hands of his parents for realization of their political ambitions. It is the description of elements of his clothing that makes the poem aesthetic. Such elements are not usually mentioned by historians. Another element of aestheticism is the use of the word "υάκινθος – hyacinth" (14<sup>th</sup> verse). This particular word evokes images of Hyacinth, one of the most beautiful young boys in the Greek mythology and thus allows the reader to make associations between this boy and Caesarion. When viewed as a gemstone, the hyacinth gives the description a special glow which is accentuated by other fine gems, like sapphires, amethysts and pearls, mentioned in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> verses. When viewed as a flower, the hyacinth, with its unique scent, gives the description a more sensual character.

8. What is the role of the Alexandrians in the poem?

While the central figures in Plutarch's work are Antony and Cleopatra, in Cavafy's poem it is the Alexandrians who are the focal point, since they are presented in the very 1<sup>st</sup> verse of the 1<sup>st</sup> stanza before there is any mention of Cleopatra and her children. This is contrary to the historical facts provided by Plutarch. In the beginning, the Alexandrians are presented as spectators, as a crowd of people who lack willpower and are indifferent to both politics and the ceremony itself (1<sup>st</sup> verse). A bit further down in the poem (20-21, 29-34 verse) the poet adds a national and cultural dimension to their identity, reminding that they speak Greek, Egyptian and Hebrew. This particular element shows that despite the fact that Alexandria, with its big harbor, is a multicultural and commercial town, it lacks the necessary social cohesion that would enable its inhabitants to have shared goals and pursue the common good. This crowd is impressed by the spectacle, they rush to see the setting, the ceremony and its protagonists (3<sup>rd</sup> stanza, 29-31 verse), realizing at the same time Cleopatra's fraud (3<sup>rd</sup> stanza, 20-21 verse, 33-34 verse). However, they remain apathetic without complaining about what is taking place. Coming from multicultural backgrounds the inhabitants of Alexandria lack national and political conscience and as such cannot understand that this ceremony is something that affects them directly and they should therefore react to it. Their indifference becomes an invisible weapon in the hands of Cleopatra, who doesn't hesitate to use it in order to achieve her goals. Yet, the ceremony itself, the strong impressions that are created and Cleopatra and Antony's impudence incite the fury of Rome, bring about the tragic end of our heroes and the decline of the state that will be eventually conquered by the Romans. With their attitude the Alexandrians are to blame for the tragic events and destiny of Hellenism and finally the decline of a dynasty and the Hellenic states. The point Cavafy is trying to make here is that we should be more politically aware and sensitized as citizens and we should play an active role in promoting the public welfare; otherwise, we might fall prey to the vanity and corruption of those who rule us and become accomplices in our tragic fate.



9. What impression is created by Cavafy's ironic approach to this significant ceremony?

In the very first verse Cavafy uses the verb "μαζεύτηκαν – turned out" in 3rd person plural to emphasize the ceremony and the fact that the Alexandrians, and not Antony or Cleopatra, gathered to attend a ceremony which is of no historical importance and doesn't play a decisive role in their town's history and their lives. Therefore, they don't have any feelings of pride, awe or even concern about this event. This clearly shows their indifference to what is taking place. Furthermore, despite the grandeur of the ceremony ("την λαμπρή παράταξη των στρατιωτών – before a brilliant array of soldiers", verse 7), Cavafy's verbal irony is reflected in the use of certain verbs, like "βγάζαν έξω – had been taken out" (verse 5) and "τον είπαν βασιλέα -they declared him king" (verse 10) including the use of the hyphen here. This hyphen, which follows the names of Alexander and Caesarion, makes the reader pause, suggesting that something important is about to follow. Eventually, the titles given to Alexander are used in association to territories Alexander the Great had conquered in the past and which didn't belong to Cleopatra. Actually, these are territories which Cleopatra herself was planning to conquer. In the poem, Cleopatra seems to reign over the area, distributing titles and territories to her children and believing that she will manage to rule a territory that used to belong to Alexander the Great. Sadly, her children are mere puppets in her ambitious plan, which is bound to fall apart a few years later, after the Roman domination and the ensuing captivity of her children, her own death and the murder of Caesarion. All these events, including the fake ceremony, give the poem a strong element of tragic irony. In this was Cavafy doesn't describe historical events, as a historian would have done, but what the Alexandrians experience and all those things that make an impression on them, like the royal titles.

The tragic irony of the poem ensues from the fact that Cavafy doesn't mention anything about the fate of the heroes who take part in the ceremony. It is clear that his goal is not to assume the role of a historian but to guide the reader to observation, thought and analysis. Another element of tragic irony is the thorough description of Caesarion's clothing (13-17 verse), which consists of extravagant fabrics, shoes and jewelry. However, despite possessing all these, which are mere symbols of fame and power behind which Cleopatra and Antony's ambitions are concealed, and despite the innocence of his young age, Caesarion cannot escape his tragic fate; his murder is inevitable. Finally, we could say that Cavafy's choice of heroes, their description, the use of punctuation, the atmosphere created by the behavior of the Alexandrians, who are aware of the fact they are attending a meaningless celebration, and finally the contrast between the heroes' goals and their tragic end are key elements of dramatic irony in this poem.

The poem "Alexandrian Kings" belongs to a series of historical poems of the Hellenistic period. Yet, it could be argued that the poem is historical only in its form. The Hellenistic world depicted in the poem is a world that is in decline

and history helps us realize the dramatic aspects of life, its vanity and the depth of human dignity. Despite the fact the poem is historical in nature, it abounds in philosophical and aesthetic features. The language the poet uses is mixed with elements of prose which may not conform to poetic conventions but give the poem a journalistic style. At the same time, the concealment of certain facts and the extensive allusions render the poem both tragic and ironic colouring. Finally, the use of free verse, with an uneven number of syllables and the iambic meter add to the ironic tragedy of the poem and serve well Cavafy's poetic art.

Стаття надійшла до редакції 2.10.2012 р.