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Shakespeare and the Mediterranean • 3

Antony and Cleopatra

Edited by Cristiano Ragni

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The Actor's Point of View

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Did Cleopatra Squeak?

Janet Suzman

Abstract

This essay will deal with the interiority of the character of Cleopatra, which is often ignored in my view. That of course is bound up with the notion that a boy could not possibly have managed to portray what Shakespeare asks of the part.

Keywords: *Antony and Cleopatra*; Cleopatra; interiority; boy actor; acting; sexuality

It's unusual to rely on the physical experience rather than the theoretical in matters of Shakespeare scholarship. Actors sometimes contribute to the discussion but seldom leave a visible mark. An inspired moment is gone before you can say 'That's it!' So I'm putting some thoughts into print and I hope it's helpful to somebody sometime. No best interpretation, merely what is consistent with the times and the text. It's as well to remind ourselves that first and foremost Shakespeare was an actor. Poet yes. Playwright yes. But actors and acting he understood in his bones; he writes like an actor feels. All the hints at unspoken motives lie there on the page winking at the actors.

You experience certain feelings of rightness, of emotional truth, by getting up on your feet and speaking out loud what you cannot deduce while sitting at a desk glossing text. Every now and then I have pondered the mystery at the centre of this play - the disjunct between what I read as Cleopatra's enticing contradictions and complexities, and the general acceptance of it having being a boy achieving all this. I believe this character was not written with a boy in mind because no boy, however talented, can get anywhere near that level of maturity; it's too nuanced and it's too difficult.

Besides which an immature young male creature as the queen of Egypt would insult the credibility of an increasingly perceptive audience, maturing as Shakespeare matured, and unused to being sold – literally – a pup. It might have been a man who played her I hear you say. Maybe. But I don't think so because Englishmen never take impersonations of women, a frequent activity in which they are comedically accomplished, into the tragic stratum. In Cleopatra I see a spiritual awakening into high seriousness as being an unavoidable element in the character's growth in this great play. Forgive me, though, if I fall short in this exercise. Instinctive creativity is hard to put into words.

Audiences in Puritan England were deprived of female performance because showing yourself off to the public gaze was the work of the devil. That was the law, but the assumption that only documented truth is the whole truth is a naïve one; singular individuals throughout the ages have dared to take steps to improve their lot and inject interest into their circumscribed lives. Mary Sidney was such a one in Shakespeare's time, aristocratic, cultured, and a brilliant person to know. There were other individuals feeling the pressures.

Agnotology (from *agnosis*, i.e. 'not knowing') is culturally induced ignorance, so that women have become 'missing matter' as it were. Not that a boy growing up in London's mean streets and earning a penny in one of the boy's companies would ever be aware of such a lop-sided state of affairs. Presuming his sister hadn't learned to read as he had, he'd probably just give a well-that's-life shrug. Even with a great queen on the throne, and a mother ruling the kitchen at home he wouldn't be fooled into thinking women were running his little world.

At last though, buried female history is slowly being unearthed. In literature, in the sciences, maths, physics, medicine, space engineering, palaeontology, portrait painting, you name it, and even often secretive contributions to a prominent husband's work, figures hitherto obscured in the long shadow of male power are being revealed. I have a feeling there was a maverick soul knocking around for Shakespeare inspiring him into writing up such a marvellous creature.

Is it a pervasive disinterest, or a gut fear of women that gets them blanketed under Time's dust? It's difficult to grasp just how threatened men must feel by their contesting presence. So women remain depressingly peripheral, even expendable, while the West tries its best to unenforce the dozens of levelling-up laws that are passed and then inevitably ignored or rescinded so that abortion becomes a victim of ignorant debate instead of an absolute right. Far too little practise at being in command come the way of ambitious women. For the rest most of the world's women have a miserable time of it.

At the court of James I, led by his wife, Anne of Denmark, certain aristocratic friends of hers loved dressing up in masques and having a hilarious time as goddesses of this or that. Meantime those ordinary women who came to hear plays at The Globe – Rosalind's Epilogue tells us they were there – would have enjoyed watching, not tipsy goddesses, but warm-blooded heroines offering up charmed possibilities to their restricted lives. Why go to the theatre unless you crave a glimpse of other lives, other worlds?

Shakespeare's awareness of the social straitjacket worn by women was very sharp. Viola, Rosalind, Portia - forced to dress as a boy for self-protection - conveyed on the stage the heady freedoms enjoyed by men. Their adventures in the plays, powered by love, must have spoken loud and clear to those women in the audience who harboured forbidden ideas of liberty, and of marriages forged more by love than expedience.

Tom Stoppard – a man of the theatre as Shakespeare was – dramatised these little dreams quite marvellously in his film, *Shakespeare in Love*. Remember that? He writes about a young aristocrat who somehow sneaks herself onto the stage of the Globe Theatre to play Viola in *Twelfth Night,* and the young Shakespeare finds himself falling in love with this new boy actor who enchants him by playing a boy playing a girl playing a boy unnervingly like a girl playing a boy.

Such playfulness is a far cry from our present hectic debates. We live in more literal times which demand clear definitions for unclear physical states of being. Shakespeare and Co didn't seem to be bothered with restrictive binary and non-binary definitions but seemed to take life's anomalies as they came.

There's no reason to revive a 450-year-old play other than to bring out what still resonates in our world. The subject of women – especially post-Me Too – continues to warrant the close attention of modern actresses. Where there are hints that Shakespeare is also paying attention to those matters is seductive; frustration at the limitations women put up with so often burst forth in Shakespeare's female characters at a peak point, an angry Beatrice, an enraged Cleopatra. But I tell you, when she confronts Antony with: "I would I had thy inches, thou shoulds't know / There were a heart in Egypt!" (1.3.41-2).[1] I know for sure she is my soul-sister.

How on earth a mere boy could have felt any similar frustration beats me. I find that grown men to this day display only a limited awareness of the drawbacks hindering free choice in a woman's life, either fictional or for real. And that presents a reason why The Serpent of old Nile remains not much more than an enticing sex-pot in most minds. On the whole male directors don't look closely at her motives, but I have found that Shakespeare's version of her examined through the prism of his curiously original mind, displays a fascinatingly different sensibility.

Let's assume that the youth who allegedly played Cleopatra was not yet a full-grown man, whereas an adult woman would lack those inches as a matter of course. The casting then as now would need to offer up a 'peerless' pair. Richard Burbage, the company's leading heroic actor and probably the Antony of the day, would hardly be happy playing opposite a giant gangly boy overtopping him in stature. "We stand up peerless" boasts Antony (1.1.41). I just can't see a boy as Burbage's peer, try as I might. I'll try to explain as I go.

Queen Elizabeth I herself spoke about her impatience with the disparity between the sexes: "I may have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the mind and stomach of a man" (Marcus, Mueller, and Rose 2000, 326). There are other quotes for the taking. In spite of Shakespeare's inspired empathy for women, and his great leap forward in humanizing characters, yet there is no intellectual or metaphysical equivalent in his female roles (a mere 16% of the full canon) to the great male roles. Women didn't run the world then and they don't now, so no surprise there. He is

1 All references to *Antony and Cleopatra* are from Shakespeare 2012.

simply holding the mirror up to nature. He is emulating the world in his plays as it presents itself to him in life. Shakespeare tuned in to foreigners and strangers however and wrote with profoundly empathetic feelings for them; in that sense Cleopatra joins Shylock and Othello as a mega-outsider. His all-embracing sympathy for the other, the exotic, the outsider, is a hall-mark of Shakespeare's non-judgemental position on the subjects which today are often so toxic. He is not a racist nor an anti-Semite nor a misogynist. As in the real world his women depend for their life and its ending on a male character's whims. With the exception of Cleopatra who chooses to remain in charge of her own fate right to the triumphant end.

Not till Ibsen's ground-breaking duo of *The Doll's House* and Hedda Gabler at the end of the 19th century, was woman's chattelage to a husband and her pathetically narrow parameters in life fleshed out. In all of European drama, Hedda is the sole female character who is onstage throughout, presenting the actress with the unique chance of a thrillingly immersive acting experience, (which is why, I suppose, it's been called the female Hamlet). Both characters, one fictional, one historical, are powered by an unquenchable urge for personal freedom. That is how I, a contemporary actress, see them, and that is precisely the point, because if I could not find in either of those texts supportive evidence for my views, I would have to stand down and go quietly.

Shakespeare never wrote at length about his queen, it being far too perilous an undertaking, but he found the two had much in common: manipulative genius, a fluency in Greek and Latin amongst other tongues – apparently Cleopatra could speak demotic Egyptian too, unusual for Pharaohs. Both queens were popular in the street, were well educated courtesy of their fathers, both came to a throne while young, and both developed an astute flair for statecraft. Both had a distinct flair for good PR, cleverly adopting an iconic self-image to inspire awe: Elizabeth as the Virgin Queen, and Cleopatra as the goddess Isis. Both possessed personal charm, honed to an art to get what they wanted in a male world, and both learned to juggle the twin dangers of having a brain while seeming not to.

North's translation of Plutarch's *The Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* was Shakespeare's source material, and his *Marcus Antonius* led Shakespeare to that famous barge, copied almost word

for word from Plutarch's journalese and transmuted by the poet into glorious technicolour poetry as he describes Cleopatra's grand plan to acquire for herself a useful consort. Shakespeare would have been in his element playing with a cinecamera, I feel. However, the play that emerged as the sequel to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, is not called Marcus Antonius, but rather two names of equal weight, both complex, wily, duplicitous grown-ups. Cleopatra was in her prime at 38 years old, Antony a good 14 years older. Not another female character in the whole canon is at the mature height of her wits, her reign and her powers as she is. Who, then, was in Shakespeare's mind as Cleopatra? The silence surrounding all this doesn't help, does it? Whereas I think it's productive, allowing room for doubt.

Certain reasons for the enveloping silence come to my mind, but more of that later. The late great scholar Harold Bloom's seminal book on Hamlet *The Invention of the Human* sums up the huge Shakespearean achievement as regards complexity of character. In 2017 Bloom published four neat volumes, being his final thoughts on the four vividly alive characters that for him were so original they almost seem to have an independent life: Lear, Falstaff, Hamlet, and Cleopatra. He calls them his "Personalities". Bloom observes in his book, *Cleopatra. I am Fire and Air*: "Shakespeare would have known that women performed on the Roman stage. Ruefully he must have chafed at the legal restrictions that boys impersonated women characters. *I've always wondered how even a skilled Jacobean boy actor could have successfully performed the role of Cleopatra*" (2017, 117, my emphasis). Just so. I have wondered too. By 'boy' I mean a male youth up to the age of – what, 18,19? Anyway, before his voice has broken, I suppose.

In thanking Harold Bloom for sending me a copy of *Cleopatra. I am Fire and Air*, (he wanted my picture on the cover of it and a girl can't help being flattered by that), I wrote: "I can see at a glance that you are deeply under her spell as a man should be, though as an actress I could hardly be seduced in the same way. She and I had to be comrades in arms and I was entirely intent on taking her side in all things, hyperbole, bare truth, mendacity, magnificence and all. But I confess, it is gobsmacking", I wrote, "that Shakespeare could have known so much about how this tricky creature operated". Harold

Bloom replied to me by return – humbly, sweetly - thus: "Only Shakespeare can rise above the limitations of being a male". I may have thought it but so relieved he wrote it because my hunch that Shakespeare wrote his Cleopatra for a woman to play becomes less dismissible with him on my side.

In 1664 Margaret Cavendish made this observation: "One would think he has been metamorphosed from a Man to a Woman for who could describe Cleopatra better than he hath done . . .?" (246). Virginia Woolf concurred, she thought he had an androgynous mind, a "man-woman mind" (1929, 99). Carol Symes, a historian at the University of Illinois writes: "The seemingly embodied understanding of women's positionality and plight just shines through those plays amazingly" (qtd in Winkler 2023, 267). There are others who see an ineffably female take on dramatic situations in Shakespeare's characterisations, not often picked up on. With all the many mysteries and secrets still undiscovered in Shakespeare's life I see enough space left for a performer's legitimate curiosity. After all, why should one assume that recorded truth is the whole and complete truth? Like Mary Sidney I doubt the assumption that documented history is the whole history.

There is only circumstantial evidence to flourish but what a relief to find written evidence that anomalies were abroad in the London of the time. Thomas Coryat a travel writer, said to be the first Briton to have made a grand tour of Europe apparently on foot, took a trip to Venice in 1608 and went one night to the theatre. It's thought *Antony and Cleopatra* was written in about 1606-8 or thereabouts. He wrote this in his journal: ". . . saw women act, a thing I never saw before, *though I have heard that it hath been sometimes used in London*, and they performed with as good a grace, action, gesture and whatsoever convenient for a player, as ever I saw in any masculine actor . . ." (1611, 247, my emphasis). "Sometimes used in London": hey? Where? When? By what company? In what play? "Sometimes" implies more than just the once. A few times? Many times? That mysterious sentence, a casual entry into a journal, clangs a bell which seems more sonorous for being written by a tourist not a playgoer.

In Puritan England the men's companies thrived without petticoats, while paradoxically actresses were accepted in the Catholic countries notably Italy and Spain, both producing rich dramatic literatures. The female roles weren't especially great, types

more than believable flesh and blood, but they were lively enough. Italian troupes of actors and actresses quite often crossed the channel and played both for the Court and for popular audiences. London was a seething place.

When Antony in 1.1 of the play tries to soothe a fired-up Cleopatra with: ". . . all alone / Tonight we'll wander through the streets and note / the qualities of people. Come, my queen!" (53-5), one just knows that's exactly what William Shakespeare used to do in his seething London and where he might have seen foreign actresses at work.

It is odd that all of Cleopatra's scenes are perfectly balanced while some of Antony's – including great swathes of sub-plot in this gigantic play – are eminently cuttable. This play was surely road-tested somewhere, perhaps in a private house with an invited audience? An audience invited and known so that an honourable silence could be entrusted to them, what nowadays we might call Chatham House rules, i.e. no blabbing about what you have heard outside the front door. It is always an honour to be entrusted to keep a secret. There's still an unspoken rule in England to this day that one does not reveal any part of a conversation with the monarch. So very English.

Only by living through every second of her stage life, speaking and listening, silent and watching, do you comprehend what Shakespeare has asked of his performer: a trajectory of anger through to high comedy energized by a jealous passion (I simplify) through to tragic self-realisation and on to an ardent spiritual epiphany. I doubt it's possible to encompass the creature's whole gamut in one go, and if it stretches a mature woman, as it did me, how in heaven's name can an unlived-in young man get there?

Show me a composer who writes his best arias for someone who can't sing them? Mozart composed his most sublime arias for those Weber girls. What's different for a playwright? Pinter and his muse Vivien Merchant; Athol Fugard and Yvonne Bryceland, Hitchcock and Tippi Hedren, Picasso and Dora Maar, Brahms and Joseph Joachim? What is the point in raising the bar high unless what is written can be fulfilled? For the greatest writer of all time how much more crushing to conjure up a creature whose vividness would be doomed to stay flat on the page for want of an actor up to its demands?

Why should this mature play with its demanding centrepiece be exempt from judgement? Shakespeare knew perfectly well the limitations of boy actors. Just remind yourself of Marilyn Munroe's radiant vulnerability and ask yourself how a boy, however gifted, could convey that? That Monroe gleam, caught by the click of a camera, belies the fragility of someone of singular beauty triumphing over a damaged life. Could a boy express that wounded vulnerability lurking behind the smile? (Mind you, I'm not proposing Cleopatra was a beauty, because there's no mention of that in the play). Boys can manage so much and no more, is all I'm suggesting. Boys are OK with straightforward things: adolescent sulks, innocence, mischief; they can do wicked sprites and frustrated heiresses, they can do candid honesty and the delicacy of extreme youth, but what they cannot do is the nuanced machinations of a mature woman who has spent her life learning to survive with dignity in a man's world.

To elaborate: boys can't do understated sexual power just by standing there, because they can't present being *unaware* of that power. Male power is different from female power. They would *have* to be aware of it to simulate it. They can't do the inner burn of sexual allure. Adult men with a camp flair for it can demonstrate *overstated* glamour, bosoms, eyelashes, wiggles, and all, but untried boys can't act outside of their own experience. They can offer a *postured* version, a simulacrum, a pretence of it. *Posture* is a word which Shakespeare very deliberately plants when he clarifies his attitude to boy actors in 5.2 of the play. William Shakespeare knows what proper acting requires and it's not posturing. Re-read Hamlet's advice to the Players.

John Barton in his famous text classes in Stratford would say 'Text *IS character'*. The jobbing actor in Shakespeare the writer drops acting tips into the text itself. Examine it closely for clues and the character begins to shape itself. (By the bye, Oxfordians never consider on-your-feet company work. Mark Twain, Sigmund Freud, Auberon Waugh, and other illustrious folk have never done a rehearsal that's for sure. Try to keep a company of actors quiet).

A brief history of my enmeshment with the play in case you're wondering. After playing Cleopatra for the RSC at Stratford and then London in 1973/4 forty years passed before Kim Cattrall – the delightful Samantha of *Sex in the City* – out of the blue asked me if I would care to direct her in the part. Would I just! I leapt at

the chance to re-examine the play through her with certain untried ideas in mind. Her liberated Samantha in *Sex in the City* signalled to entrapped womanhood worldwide that it was ok to enjoy sex and steer clear of marriage. Another soul-sister for Cleopatra, although unlike Samantha we know of only two reported lovers in Cleopatra's life, Julius Caesar and Mark Antony.

The great thing about working with Kim was that she wouldn't have to bother presenting the 'sexy' Cleopatra because she just is, plus she also has a lovely comic talent. Which left us free to explore Cleopatra's less obvious assets, the politic mind and her fierce dynastic ambitions.

In sum, by playing it, filming it (it's easily found on YouTube), and directing it, spanning both the 20th and the 21st centuries, I can say I know the play – much like the Biblical '*knowing*' it – from the inside out and from the outside in. I'd take a large bet no male scholar can intuit by glossing what I know by experience. Hence this paper. Like Rosalind, I can live no longer by thinking.

In the first 'Kim' production at The Liverpool Playhouse, I cut it to a more playable length and elided some characters because no-one can afford such a huge cast, and I deliberately cast a young man both as a most touching Eros and a wounded Octavia. It showed me how sensitively and movingly a young actor could achieve the wronged woman in himself. Octavia, though, is a far cry from Cleopatra. Our Antony was a splendidly heroic Jeffrey Kissoon. In the second 'Kim' production a year later at The Chichester Festival Theatre we had to cast a new Antony and Michael Pennington, who was much older and less manifestly heroic, was in my view closer to the Shakespearian view of the famous couple.

The celluloid images of Burton and Taylor cast a Hollywood glow over the story giving the impression of a mature mutual passion at full tilt, whereas the play itself is a huge cinematic poem that helicopters through the painful crumbling of a once titanic alliance, zooming in for intimate close-ups.

Some of you might have seen Marlon Brando in the film of *Julius Caesar* doing the "Friends Romans countrymen . . ." speech? That dangerously charismatic and clever Antony is softened by luxury when we see him again at Cleopatra's court. Men are as vain as women are said to be, so you won't find many an actor prepared to

show himself as a magnificent failure, for that's what Antony turns out to be. Casting this 'peerless' pair is nightmarish at the best of times. Casting Romeo and Juliet is mere doddle.

Many plays have expositionary beginnings, but this one starts off with a bang. Philo, a Roman officer stationed with the Alexandrian garrison, starts it off with a "Nay" sharp as a starting gun (1.1.1). His patience has snapped as he describes Cleopatra's court to a military messenger fresh from Rome. Here's Philo's speech:

> Nay, but this dotage of our general's
> O'erflows the measure. Those his goodly eyes
> That oe'r the files and musters of the war
> Have glowed like plated Mars, now bend, now turn
> The office and devotion of their view
> Upon a tawny front. His captain's heart
> Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst
> The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper
> And is become the bellows and the fan
> To cool a gypsy's lust . . . Behold and see.
> (1.1.1-13)

We are now primed to see a diminished Antony doting on his tawny-fronted lover; old soldiers don't lie. She is *tawny-fronted*, mixed-race, an exotic creature. Roman racism glares at us. In actual fact she was half-Greek, the daughter of the Macedonean Ptolemaus, one of Alexander's generals who was rewarded by him with Egypt. Cleopatra's mother was very likely an Egyptian, we don't know for sure. But Shakespeare follows Plutarch and makes her 'the other'. Not just foreign, but brown-skinned - always a threatening presence to white Europe, as it, unforgivably, still is. West versus East. The dilemma resides to this day. I chose to play the tawny version, Kim chose the Greek version.

Anyhow two opposing civilisations are thus established. Antony is to be torn between his passion for exotic Cleopatra and his Graeco-Roman loyalties. 1.1 lays out the parameters of the tumultuous relationship: the lovers joust with words, he declaring his love, she skipping sideways to keep him hungry. A messenger from Rome brings disturbing news. The queen, alert to disasters, urges a boozy Antony to get with the politics and attend to the crisis; hoping

to provoke him into action him by flagging up both the youthful Caesar and his wronged wife Fulvia as powerful threats to young Pompey's usurping force.

But Antony, slightly hung-over as he himself later admits, is full of braggadocio and insult: "Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch / Of the rangéd empire fall! Here is my space!" (1.1.34-5). Think an American five-star general in his cups yelling "F*ck the Constitution!" at a Buckingham Palace tea party. Imagine the messenger's eyes popping and the tea-cups rattling.

With the shaming news that his wife has died on a battlefield, Antony sobers up. Now ready to go fix his creaking Roman world, in 1.sc iii. he comes to take leave of his queen. A complicated scene to play. A simplistic view could call her behaviour 'manipulation', but she is focussed on delving beyond the usual miasma of white lies. It would be unnatural for a boy to comprehend female survival tactics, but Mr. Shakespeare does; to provoke laughter at the man's expense.

If I were to try to choose what most defines her modus operandi it is veering from speaking the plain truth to belying that truth with bathotic, sometimes ironic, twists of inventive imagery. How is poor beleaguered Antony meant to know if she means it or not? Shakespeare captures the eternal puzzlement of the male psyche confronted by the female. She astutely calls these accesses of vulnerable playfulness her 'becomings'. They are everyday currency to a woman, but to a boy?

And how unexpected that even the queen-goddess Cleopatra, supreme ruler of all Egypt, mother of his children, should feel herself a mere mistress, secondary to the wife. The strength of marriage as an institution has lessened only slightly since Tudor times, in that fewer young women in the West choose to get married, but now as then legitimacy holds the cards.

1.3 is the most packed scene between the lovers, due to the dangerous way she handles the shock of Fulvia's death. I hope you won't mind if I gloss this scene a little to show how very hard it must be for a boy to have followed the twists and turns with any cogency. She deliberately plays to her ever-present peanut-gallery, bright Charmian and the retinue, willing witnesses to the first of many humiliations that come Antony's way. She wrong-foots him

at the start of the scene pretending to be ill, and then turns the deliberate comedy to a blatant accusation of his disloyalty, turns that to defending Fulvia's adulterous fate, then to fury about herself being made a dupe too: cheat on one, cheat on another. Fulvia, a constant threat to Cleopatra, she unexpectedly adopts as her close ally, and so becomes a most unlikely advocate for all of wronged womankind: "Now I see, I see, / in Fulvia's death how mine received shall be" (1.3.64-5). Vows of love and loyalty – 'mouth-made' vows – vows without heart – lead Cleopatra to prod the open wound of his adultery. The path lies open to deride what Antony – all Romans – hold most dear, honour. (Oh, the disdain expressed in "A Roman thought has struck him", 1.2.88). She shows him up as feigning his true feelings like a bad actor. His vows of loyalty seem empty to her ears. While poor Antony means every word, she's going to tease him witless. "So Fulvia told me" (1.3.76) is an unkind cut close to the bone, so he gets very angry. It's working. The teasing ups a notch or two: ". . . Look, prithee, Charmian / How this Herculean Roman does become / The carriage of his chafe" (84-6). To retain any dignity in this onslaught of raillery, he barks: "I'll leave you, lady" (87) – all restraint dropped. Quick as a flash she stops his exit with: "Courteous lord, one word" (88). He must *want* to be stopped. Everyone knows that walking out in the middle of a row because you can't cope, is a bad move. He has heard the twang of sarcasm on the word "courteous". Though still wary, he is caught. He stops and waits.

She changes her tune: a chilling quietness gentles the air between them. With a Petrarchan formality she attempts once, twice, to speak a simple truth: "Sir, you and I must part, but that's not it; / Sir, you and I have loved, but there's not it. / That you know well" (89-91). The transparent simplicity of her tone makes you hope at least for peace between them, at most a declaration of love. However, the caesura affords her space for a wicked U-turn; that's what caesuras are for, to take you by surprise: "Something it is I would –" (91). Is the boy still with me? How can a young lad imbue that broken phrase with unexpressed memories of lust and longing? Or are we just to rely on the audience doing his job for him? I get the impression that the pro-boy brigade think that is what might have taken place. I can't think why.

Antony lingers, hopeful: *would* she go on to say that her heart is still as it once was – all his? Fat hope. She hasn't finished with him yet. His 'Roman thoughts' have expediently kicked aside their passion more like a squashed beer can than a legendary idyll. She turns the heat up a notch, kicking the can further along the road, as if 'I too shall forget what we once were, just as Antony has already forgotten me': "O, my oblivion is a very Antony, / And I am all forgotten!" (92-3). In case there are doubters about this reading, you have only to look at Antony's furious reply to her: "But that your royalty / Holds idleness your subject, I should take you / For idleness itself" (93-5). It is always useful to look at a character's riposte to a speech if there's any doubt about the intention preceding it. She pushes the envelope even further. Again, she speaks simply and truly, revealing her soul for an enticing two lines: ". . . But sir, forgive me; / Since my becomings kill me when they do not / Eye well to you" (97-9).To admit her "becomings" – 'histrionics' if you must – shame her if Antony can't see through them, is to invite Antony's forgiveness, but that would be too easy. "Your honour calls you hence . . ." (99). She grabs at the caesura again to inject a wry tone as in 'silly little me', and then dangerously invests his shiny Roman 'honour' with a faint tarnish: "Therefore be deaf to my unpitied folly / And all the gods go with you!" (100-1). Another twist of the knife, disguised as a formalised farewell speech in the high Roman manner: "Upon your sword / Sit laurel victory and smooth success / Be strewed before your feet!" (101-3). The repeated assonances sound a prolonged hiss of derision, and a sardonic obeisance to the laureate will nicely rub salt into the wound. She is not in the forgiving vein. Boys, are you with me?

For a further clue to the wounding edge of her speech, look at Antony's curt: "Let us go" (103). If she had been delivering a transparently sincere farewell, why would he offer so wounded a cut-off? But his warm heart intervenes, he can't bear to leave her so coldly: "Come" (103). Nor she, running into his arms for a last embrace, all quarrelling shelved under the stark stare of separation. Three lines of intense intimacy whispered in her ear makes up for all that has gone before. Razor's-edge stuff. This embrace is a last view of the lovers together for a long stretch. I defy any boy, however gifted, to accomplish her super- sophisticated twists and turns, true

feelings disguised as mockery. Mockery is easy, but feelings are not. The pain of prolonged separation dictates this scene. I would fear that a boy trying his best to mark the movements would reduce it to a worrying simplicity.

I would also fear a boy's control of the high comic scenes that intersperse Antony's Roman sojourn, where, for the amusement of her courtiers she wildly exaggerates both his glories ("The demi-Atlas of this earth, the arm and burgonet of men", 1.5.24) and her own ("wrinkled deep in time", 30) vulnerabilities. She melodramatises not only his frustrating absence, but as queen her underlying impatience at the loss of executive power which his absence exacerbates: "That Herod's head I'll have but how when / Antony's gone through whom I might command it?" (3.3.4-5). She displays a sobering nobleness of spirit, revealed in a regretful mini-soliloquy to the audience when the terrified messenger has fled: "These hands do lack nobility that they strike / A meaner than myself, since I myself / Have given myself the cause" (2.5.82-4).

Self-knowledge in two nutshells. It's a rare moment when Cleopatra gives us a glimpse into her very human heart. Both she and Antony lead public lives, and *are never alone*, a perpetual audience watches their every move. Charmian's daring repartee, and Enobarbus, as Antony's "considerate stone" (2.2.117), both shine a light into the inner natures of their charges. As to the comedy: a young man mourning his wrinkles? It's a stretch. Cleopatra was 38, exactly the age you start to worry about them if you're the real thing. I was 34 when I played it, and I confess four years later I would have been much more on top of it. It's said you're only old enough to play Juliet when you're too old to play her. That's clearly the experience of women who have felt the depth of emotions Shakespeare has written into that part. Treble that for a wilier, more opaque, and much more mature Cleopatra.

While Antony is absent, we learn how Julius Caesar still takes pride of place in her hidden Pantheon, thanks to Charmian's penchant for teasing it out. We should feel the danger in this queen able to "unpeople Egypt" (1.5.81) if she so chooses. Tempestuous when crossed, her people patrol nervously. Wounded to the quick by news of Antony's marriage to *dull* Octavia, she becomes violently enraged with the hapless messenger to a quite shocking degree.

Charmian's corrective to "keep herself within herself, the man is innocent" (2.5.75-6) is bang on point. She is beside herself with anger.

As to the physical demands, if a healthy stripling were playing Cleopatra, he would have to be ultra-careful not to hurt his fellow player when he/she attacks the hapless fellow and *hales him up and down*, cursing him to perdition. Lots of fight rehearsals here. Lots of control needed, and huge U-turns of emotion required throughout all three of those scenes.

Antony, the master-dumper of women (first Fulvia, then shock/horror Cleopatra herself, and finally, fatally, Octavia) is 'nodded' back to Egypt by a Cleopatra on the war-path. He can't help it, he is drawn to her, enthralled and helpless. He continues on his tumultuously wrong-headed path by misjudging Caesar's powers and throwing away the decisive sea battle. He stupidly ignores Enobarbus' and Scarus' soldierly pleas to fight by land by acceding to the airy braggadocio of a Cleopatra wilfully exerting a newly-restored power over him. Far worse, though, than his military misjudgement is the irrecoverable shame of following after her fleeing ship at the height of the sea-battle. I can't blame her. It must have been horrible out there on heaving seas with blood and death and screams all around you. I'm sure she is shocked that he followed her fleeing ship.

In 3.11 when she painfully approaches him to beg forgiveness her guilt is palpable, she feels shame. Her heart goes out to her humiliated lover. She can find no other words than a naked "Pardon, pardon" (68), so vulnerable here. Shakespeare's instinct for heart-breaking simplicity is matchless. After the distant tumult of 1.3, this is only the second time that we see the lovers physically close: "Fall not a tear, I say; one of them rates / All that is won and lost. Give me a kiss!", says he, "even this repays me" (69-71). I don't know if boys were kissed on the lips. Shakespeare is always very clear about when he wants to see a stage kiss. This one, I would say, is unavoidable. Could it be possible for the Queen of Egypt to be so besotted with Antony that she is unaware of his misjudgements? That would be the legendary story. I took another path. The dynastic queen with heirs and a country to defend to my mind takes precedence over the lover queen in the second half of this play. When Thidias, Caesar's subtle messenger, attempts to persuade her to 'pack cards' with

him, diplomacy and political necessity bubble up to take precedent. Quite deliberately she charms Thidias "to kiss the tender inward of [her] hand" (Sonnet 28, Shakespeare 2005) where lie the *bluest veins*. Egypt is quite ready to play the game of *real politik* with Rome.

Antony is more than justified in raging against her. She vehemently denies her duplicity in a speech of monumental hyperbole. She's playing for her country's future. As queen of the most efficient theocracy in the ancient world, she needs to placate her Roman consort, she needs him, and of course she loves him, warts and all. But are her overlarded declarations of loyalty and devotion, her threats to discard her offspring, genuine? Quite a job for a boy to convey both sides of her problem.

When he is dying, he calls her by her true name: "Egypt" (4.15.43). He knows perfectly well he has despairingly loved a whole country in her. After that violent Thidias scene (3.13), she sees Antony make mistake after mistake as if watching a car-crash in slow-mo, mesmerised but unable to stop it. She reveals her terrible doubts about his judgement in those four huge words: "That head my lord" (19). To my mind this is central to an understanding of Cleopatra. I once had a conversation with the great actress Peggy Ashcroft, who felt it is one of the great inexpressible love poems of the whole canon, but I can't agree that this is the appropriate place to declare your love, quite the reverse. I wonder what a boy could possibly come up with if asked about it?

Here's how that line happens: Antony, defeated, bitter, snarls to the Soothsayer, his go-between: "To the boy Caesar send this grizzled head / And he will fill thy wishes to the brim / With principalities" (17-19). The queen watches that intemperate "head" (19) just asking for trouble, hence her cryptic admonition murmured more in sorrow than in anger. That "head" has lost its mojo, that "head" is making a big mistake.

When, after another victory and another defeat, Antony turns on her violently screaming he will tear her eyes out and worse, she flees in terror to her palace where a panicked Charmian tells her to hide herself away in her monument, "and send him word you are dead" (4.13.4), a terrible and fatal lie is perpetrated. Is she a stranger to lies? She, who so often seeks the truth? All acting decisions a boy must make. Do we blame watchful, devoted Charmian for stinging her

into this whopper? Note how quickly Cleopatra grabs at the lie and instantly embellishes it with a director's note to Mardian instructing him how to play the false message: "Say that the last I spoke was Antony / And word it, prithee, piteously. Hence Mardian / And bring me how he takes my death . . ." (8-10). I take my hat off to Mardian, slyly apeing his duplicitous mistress with a brilliantly executed description of 'How Cleopatra Died.' Acting medals all round.

So then, how much did she love him? We don't really know. She keeps us guessing till the end. She keeps him guessing too. He, on the other hand, is enthralled with her from start to finish, just as he's enthralled with himself and his own reputation. Is he the only great classical hero who dies for love? Is he the female Phaedra of Jacobean drama? When at the last he is carried, fatally wounded, into the arms of Cleopatra, his self-deception does not lessen as the blood drains from him: "A Roman by a Roman valiantly vanquished" (4.15.59). It was young Eros who was valiant. He never really knows himself. She by contrast is about to know herself better than ever he did. The reality of his death strikes gold in her: "Oh, see my women, the crown o'th'earth doth melt" (64-5). Love rushes in. Five lines of unmatchable poetry pour from her. Then, quite suddenly she falls utterly silent, still as an hieratic statue carved in stone. Most editors insert a stage direction: "She faints", or "She swoons" and shhh . . . most editors are male. It's what mere women are expected to do in extremis, isn't it? But, says I, she's not the fainting type. Her silence, her stillness scares her serving women badly and they panic. Young Iras weeps, Charmian calls for her to return from that unreachable place. It is during that silence that she profoundly comprehends the size of her loss. When she speaks it is like one who is transfigured by a startling revelation and not the least like one who wakes from the confused nothingness of a fainting mind. I wonder if a boy could truly understand what is happening here? Or is the boy brigade quite content to let him squeak his way through such remarkable poetry? For a moment she holds hands with King Lear, like him fully realising her own frailty –metaphorically, poetically. Like him, she becomes merely another poor forked animal: "No more but e'en a woman and commanded / By such poor passions as the maid that milks / And does the meanest chares . . ." (77-9). The authority of a crown is as nothing. She is no different to a simple milkmaid. Her

language achieves greatness, and the play becomes a tragedy. For a boy to reach towards those heights and insights is asking for too much. But Shakespeare wrote with intent, of that I have no doubt. He wished us to understand a profundity in his Cleopatra that we might think missing were those words not there.

From this point she continues her journey into a desolation made bearable by a growing realisation of what is left to her in life. With Antony gone, she starts to see death as an enticing resolution: "Then is it sin to rush into the secret house of death ere death dare come to us?" (84-5). One might say that her path is lonelier than Antony's. She has so entirely invaded his being that he cannot exist without her. Believing her to be dead he can do only one thing: seek his own so they can meet again in Elysium "where souls do couch on flowers" (4.14.52). His poetry becomes unbearably beautiful as if Shakespeare would wish to transmute his generous and blundering soul into something rich and strange.

Sheltering in her monument her new-found freedom from the proscriptions of a reigning queen, a sense of proportion, nay, of choice, seems to liberate her being. In 5.2 she explores more deeply an isolation both physical and spiritual which hones her courage by giving her agency. Her journey towards death is less the lover, more the cornered animal. Sheltering in her hidden place – her monument – she is badly frighted by a SWAT team of Roman soldiers who suddenly invade, surprising her and her women. Her courage detonates. She makes to stab herself. As an Egyptian expecting death round every corner, of course she secretes a dagger on her person.

Brutally disarmed, she confronts her enemies with a blazing obduracy and pride: "Sir, I will eat no meat, I'll not drink, sir . . ." (5.2.48), and builds to a desperate reach for her own death: ". . . rather make my country's high pyramides / My gibbet and hang me up in chains" (59-61). Tears and anger burn through this speech and a searing sense of self-worth; this is a proud Egyptian queen proclaiming defiance. Yet another huge stretch for a mere boy. Dolabella, a more senior officer arrives to take command. She instinctively trusts this soldier. [Just a note here: Even as he dies, Antony, as usual got it wrong: "None about Caesar trust but Proculeius" (4.15.50), he had warned her. He meant Dolabella, but it

is she with her finer instincts who noses that out.] The dense little scene with this officer becomes absolutely central to her destiny as she seeks for the unadorned truth. Desperate, exhausted, she seeks refuge in a romantic fantasy, aggrandising Antony's image into a mammoth presence striding the world. This is the Antony of legends. This, for the very first time in the whole play, is where the awesome size of their initial passion is re-discovered. We so often only realise the full value of someone when he is gone. Please tell me how an unlived-in young man can know this?

> CLEOPATRA I dreamed there was an Emperor Antony
> O such another sleep that I might see
> But such another man.
> . . .
> His face was as the heav'ns, and therein stuck
> A sun and moon which kept their course and lighted
> The little O, th' earth.
> . . .
> His legs bestrid the ocean: his reared arm
> Crested the world: his voice was propertied
> As all the tuned spheres, and that to friends
> But when he meant to quail and shake the orb
> He was as rattling thunder. For his bounty
> There was no winter in't: an autumn t'was
> That grew the more by reaping. His delights
> Were dolphinlike, they showed his back above
> The element they lived in. In his livery
> Walked crown and crownets: realms and islands were
> As plates dropped from his pocket.
> (5.2.75-91)

That slip of a boy must transform into an exhausted and desolate woman reaching for a golden time with a dream lover in another life. That fabulous dream lover is at best only sporadic in this play.

At this stage in my argument, I find myself having to offer this observation: in England I have never beheld a male actor taking on a female part who is capable of achieving tragedy – comedy, yes, tragedy no. I have seen a most delicately played *As You Like It* with an all-male cast, full of careful charm and humour and puppy love.

I have seen lush evocations of glamour in outsize women (Danny La Rue) and admired the burlesque chutzpah of camp drag. I have seen comical old trouts from the snobby heights of Lady Bracknell (David Suchet) to the mundane depths of household comedians in hair-rollers. I've seen be-bosomed pantomime dames by actor chappies (Ian McKellen). I have seen Mark Rylance's famous wind-up dolly of an Olivia (who stole the play from Viola) and I've met the weird little- girly alter-ego of the artist Grayson Perry. Amongst stand-up comedians my favourites will always be Pieter Dirk Uys from South Africa, sharply political in content as big-haired Mrs. Evita Bezuidenhout playing Nelson Mandela's personal political adviser, while Barry Humphrey's grotesque Dame Edna Everidge stays tops for social comment, like a giant purple cuckoo chucking people to their deaths. Hilarious and cruel humour. Dressing up as sirens or harridans is clearly an Anglo-Saxon obsession.

As for tragical female figures the nearest I have ever seen was the mature Noh actor in Ninagawa's astonishing production of Medea in 1989. Tokusaburo Arashi did not seek to vulgarise his acquired femininity by wearing false breasts but wore a slim and elegant gown. Arrestingly sinuous, he conveyed that strange creature's chilling vengefuness with astonishing economy. I am told Noh actors start their training for specifically female roles at 6 or 7 and they continue for a lifetime, yet I have heard of no such training for Shakespeare's "little eyases" (Hamlet, 2.2.354). As I say, a young man capable of discovering mature self-knowledge in his female persona, with no frills, no pretences, no attitudes, no self-commentary – I have never ever seen. It would take an uncanny degree of psychological and physical immersion in the opposite sex to do that.

Films are replete with marvellous child actors because the close-up does the work. The stage and its spaces need to be filled with a presence. Boys and youths might be talented, gifted, even moving, but yet with depths unplumbed. Boys don't have depths; everyone has to acquire depths by living a life. Grown men can play comical women, vulgar women, burlesque women, glamorous women, marvellously well, but tragic ones, no. My view is that women are for laughing at in the British psyche, fondly perhaps, but not to be taken too seriously.

With that in mind let us return to Cleopatra and Octavius Caesar, the man who precipitated her exquisite suicide in 43BC. Thereafter he continued to rule the known world for a further 45 years. Cleopatra's son by Julius Caesar, Caesarion, who would have stood in his way, he murdered and he ordered his spin-doctors to trash her reputation, propagate slanderous stories, vulgarise her history and deface her statues. A woman had humiliated Rome and Rome's heroic general, Antony. Her reward, a kind of oblivion. But we owe Cleopatra her place in history. Plutarch attests to a low voice, to "the persuasion of her discourse" and of her "irresistible charm" (qtd in Spenser 1991, 227). The spirit of the woman, not just the outer show is what's required. Boys can do outer but not inner.

Common sense tells me that men will have played those very grown-up women of Shakespeare's perfectly adequately: the Countess, Volumnia, Mad Margaret, Gertrude, the sad queens in the histories, the warm and vulgar Nurse, the whore Doll Tearsheet, feisty Paulina and so on. But why is there such a silence on performances? Perhaps there were things to hide?

Let us suppose, by some chance, there were furtive female players knocking about the place, most likely from the Continent. Remember Thomas Coriat's hearsay? Those performances would most probably remain unrecorded *as a matter of necessity*. In a police state you learn to be discreet lest you be hauled before the enforcers, the secret police, as I once was – the 'Greys' we called them in South Africa. In Elizabethan London it would have been courting disaster to make written reports or to keep diaries or logs. It was a virtual police state rotten with spies, hence the centuries of silence about the playing history of England's most active theatre.

Those of us who survived the idiocies of a real police state learned to stay silent. The campus of my University in Johannesburg (Wits) was well supplied with police-paid student spies, rather like Shakespeare's London teeming with Catholic hunters, so I guess that Londoners did what we did. Does human nature change that much?

There's an openness of heart in a young boy so how can they possibly possess the same vulnerability with seamless deceptions, convincing lies, conscious irony, faux humility, biting humour and a million other female ploys. They cannot, for the simple reason that since babyhood they have had no need for the daily survival

mechanisms of a woman. A young male in a man's world is blithely unconscious of the strictures that lie in wait in a woman's daily life, nor can he feel the ways in which a woman has to manage her world. Shakespeare knew what a boy actor could and could not manage.

There is a fascinating paper, "Boys Becoming Women in Shakespeare's Plays" by Juliet Dusinberre, who argues that she herself would have preferred the real thing, just as his audience might have, because Cleopatra's sexual allure is so fiercely written up in the play, so she could hardly be presented as 'a sexual fiction'. Dusinberre makes this further point on the subject of Cleopatra: "Her physical presence becomes central to the dramatic evocation of sensuality in a way that the boy actors could never have been" (1998, 13). The following observation is the most salient when considering what a boy actor might accomplish: "The relation of the boy actor to the expression of strong emotion" (18) is not, even in the most gifted of youths, a given – they simply don't have the experience of life, and certainly not the technical expertise to exercise restraint, which is the actors' chief tool in containing and expressing strong emotions: "[Shakespeare] must have been sometimes concerned that the boy actor would ruin everything with a burst of amateurish and immature passion" (ibid.). Quite so; actors need not cry real tears but must know how to make *you* cry, by holding back their full power so you feel their unexpressed pain. The performer must be in control.

Hamlet's speech which instructs no over-acting, no untruthful gesture, still stands as a benchmark for modern actors. Evidently modern actors have more in common with our Elizabethan colleagues than the centuries between us would imply. I'm bound to wonder if a 'then' audience and a 'now' audience is all that different? Setting aside the new secularity, human behaviour doesn't change that much does it? Why do we still do these plays? The characters and their dilemmas ring true, that's why.

So now I come to the one passage in the play on which all scholars hang their boy actor hat. An imprisoned Cleopatra pictures being mocked in Caesar's triumphal procession through the streets of Rome. As Caesar leaves her presence, he tries to soothe his captive queen: "Our care and pity is so much upon you / That we remain your friend; and so adieu" (5.2.187-8). He

leaves her, smug as a bug – what a prize! She is very angry: "He words me girls, he words me . . ." (190). She sends Charmian off to bring in the snake-man with her death writhing in a basket, all carefully planned. Egypt's fascination with "ways to die" (4.1.5) and the ceremonial of a Pharaonic death would be a far cry to a London boy surrounded by random street brutality, wouldn't you say? Cleopatra asks her young attendant (a boy): "Now Iras what think'st thou? / Thou, an Egyptian puppet, shall be shown / In Rome as well as I" (5.2.206-8). After describing the humiliations, they will suffer she comes to the point:

> Antony
> Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
> Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
> I'the posture of a whore.
> (217-20)

Here, say the scholars, is secure textual proof that a boy would be squeaking his way through the role of Cleopatra. Let's turn it on its head: "boy" is here used as a verb, to "boy" – to make little, diminish, a deliberate antithesis to "greatness". Shakespeare quite often uses nouns as verbs. Also "to boy" underlines the picture of a masculinised queen, hardly the one we have known hitherto.

Shakespeare could so easily have written "shew", which scans nicely. 'Shew' "my greatness / I'th' posture of a whore" . . . The choice of the word "posture" implies an inadequacy of expressiveness, as if just the crude outer shape will do. Shakespeare could have chosen "habits" or "image" or "movements" all of which scan. But "posture" is pointedly expressive of what 'drag' does, it postures the female body, it exaggerates the feminine gesture, parodies it. A boy actor would have to approximate his notion of how a whorish female might hold herself by, say, copying a prostitute loitering in a London street, and then superimposing his idea of how his very own Queen Elizabeth might insinuate herself into his gestures. Crude 'posturing' in effect. Queens and whores: the generalised idea of women all trussed up by an observant young lad.

Back to that line: "Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / In th'posture of a whore" (5.2.219-20). Iras swears she'd rather tear

out her eyes than see such a thing. Cleopatra applauds her spirit: "Why that's the way" (223) and mocks Caesar's intended triumph as a "most absurd intent" (225) – 'a posturing boy as ME? How absurd'. Well, quite.

Timing is everything. As an actor I ask myself why, with his unerring eye for the *moment critique* in a drama, why, I say, would Shakespeare choose to write an alienating interlude at this moment in the play where two boy actors rubbish boy actors? To take an audience out of the thrall of tension would be ill-judged. How is a Cleopatra to carry an audience along on her suicidal voyage if the audience is being encouraged to snigger?

The snake-man scene deliberately seeks comedy as the classic comic prelude to the tragedy of her death. But in-house laughter, self-referring commentary? I can't see it. The moment the snake man is dismissed Cleopatra will transmute her "immortal longings" into "fire and air", banish earthly fears and terrors by introducing unexpected notes of spirituality, of high seriousness, of poetic aspiration, of passion, while she is formally enrobed for death. An actor totally in charge of mood and pace and feeling must rule the stage.

I'm tempted to read this quote about a "squeaking" Cleopatra as a message in a bottle from Shakespeare to the world: 'If you want to see a great queen belittled before your very eyes, watch a boy play her'. The voice is an actor's chief instrument of expression. How is a youthful voice in danger of breaking, still unsettled, to be trusted with a long and arduous play? How can an unformed voice breathe forth power as Enobarbus attests, tell me that? Having written a part which requires an immersive strength of feeling right till the very end, Shakespeare would rightly fear the drawbacks of a fragile vocal instrument. Cleopatra's very grown-up attributes are a tall enough order for a mere actress. However talented in 'seeming', a youngster would be emotionally incapable of deeper deceptions. Nuance is not the stuff of youthful sensibilities. Even Beaumarchais insisted that a woman should play Cherubino in the Marriage of Figaro, because, he said, young men can't do 'nuance'. Adolescent Cherubino matched with our very evolved Queen of Egypt, I ask you! Last but by no means least: Shakespeare entrusted the final act of this enormous play to the female protagonist. That structure is unprecedented in dramatic literature. The player who took on

Cleopatra must have been someone who could hold the house's attention in the palm of her hand right to the end. A star, the peerless other half of the peerless pair.

A man of the theatre to his marrow, Shakespeare must have had one hell of an actor in mind for this part – Harold Bloom uses the word 'oceanic'. An oceanic boy? Do me a favour.

Cleopatra's part is arguably the most complicated, alluring presence in all of dramatic literature. She fights for life to the finish, and when there is no way out, she grasps death to her breast with all the sensuality of which she is the mistress. As the venom seeps into her, she becomes a mother suckling "her baby at her breast" (5.2.308). Shakespeare has drawn the most archetypically feminine of images as we watch her nursing her own death. She dies beautifully, triumphantly, fiercely in charge of her own fate. Hedda Gabler would applaud. For both, death is better than a life without freedom. Liberty or oblivion – done beautifully.

Whoever the Dark Lady of the Sonnets was, Shakespeare's fascination with yet another Dark Lady is here manifested. Too large by far for the fledgling soul of a boy. Like Beatrice, I too can see a church by daylight.

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