

SHADOWING CLEOPATRA

Making whiteness strange

Think on me
That am with Phoebus' amorous pinches black . . .
Antony and Cleopatra (1.5.28–29)

'Cleopatra wasn't black'
John Caird, Director, *Antony and Cleopatra*, RSC, 1992

Othello represents a site through which the problem of the black
body in the white imaginary becomes visible, gets worked through.
Barbara Hodgdon, *The Shakespeare Trade*, 1998

Images

Four black-and-white production photographs lie side by side on the library table. When they first turned up in the Royal Shakespeare Company archives, they took me aback. The earliest captures a representation of race so embarrassingly crude that it put me in mind of Al Jolson singing 'Swanee' in *The Jazz Singer*. It's an image that works a cruel retrospective exposure upon the post-war, post-imperial cultural moment in Britain that produced it. The only way I (whose racial consciousness reached adolescence in the summer of 1969, post-Kennedy, post-Martin Luther King, forced into thought by black power and student protest) could read this image without aversion was historically, as a witness of 'the way we were'. Later, though, dozens of similar images from subsequent productions emerged from the archives. Seeing in them newer versions of what I'd taken to be a redundant racial representation continuously re-inserted into contemporary performance, I realized I wasn't looking at 'history' but at politics – a politics of performance.

The production photograph is, of course, an odd sort of document, both a record and a non-record, for it violates two basic conditions of theatrical activity: that performance happens continuously, across time, and that performance is ephemeral. It's not supposed to last.¹ The photograph

delivers up performance to a later generation of spectators who see things differently. It is essentially distorting: it freezes single moments as if they were frames edited out of film footage, uncannily (for its conceit is suspended animation) capturing theatre's moving images and holding them in stasis. On the one hand, this allows us to pore over them, scrutinizing intensely; on the other, privileging those shots and what they select coerces, even over-determines, our looking. In the case of the four photographs lying on the table, though, such coercion is remedial. These photographs interrupt what performance blurs, stop us in our tracks.

All show Cleopatra and her 'girls'. The first datèd from 1953. Peggy Ashcroft's Cleopatra appears on the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre stage, regal in chin-high profile on her sunburst throne, her snake-clasp necklace winding round her throat, her features scored in the exaggerated stage make-up of the period, extending her hand to Caesar's messenger. Behind her stand Iras and Charmian, and to the right, another of her train, all in 'Egyptian' costume, with black wigs and heavily kohled eyes. The fourth girl, seated at the edge of the frame, backed right up against the proscenium arch as though she's peripheral to the scene, is the one who arrests my gaze. She is black – not a black actor, but an actor (Diane Chadwick)

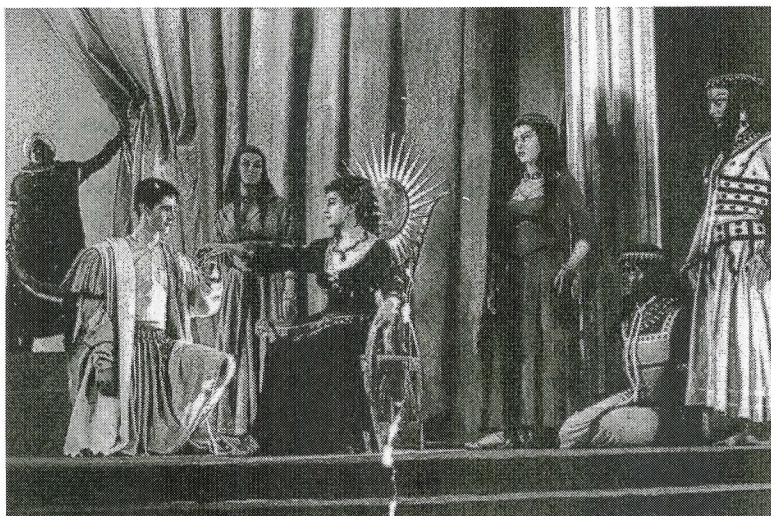


Plate 8 Cleopatra receives Caesar's messenger. Peggy Ashcroft and her court in Glen Byam Shaw's 1953 *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Source: Angus McBean photograph. Courtesy of The Shakespeare Centre Library, The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon. (The original print was torn by McBean to indicate it was not to be used.)

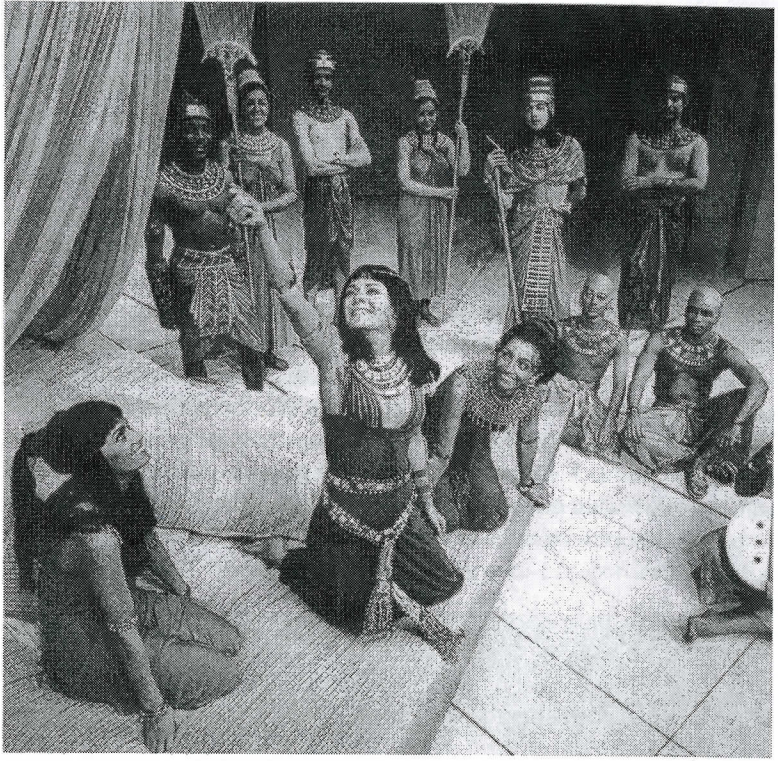


Plate 9 'Times, O times!' Cleopatra and her court. Janet Suzman in Trevor Nunn's 1972 *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Source: Reg Wilson photograph. Courtesy of The Shakespeare Centre Library, The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon.

blacked up so heavily that the stage lights bounce off the cosmetic surface. Upstage, another blackface Sambo, Mardian in a turban, holds back a curtain, looking in on the scene, blandly voyeuristic. In the second (1972), Janet Suzman, flanked by her women, kneels arms outstretched on a bed-sized cushion under an undulating canopy, remembering Antony. Behind her an 'authentic' pharaonic court – hairless eunuchs, superfluous kings, musicians, messengers, attendants with papyrus-leaf fans – play rapt audience to her theatre of memories. All are tawny. Her messenger is black. In 1982, Helen Mirren and her girls, again remembering 'Times, O, times!', roll, laughing, in a sensuously tangled heap on the floor. Charmian's blonde hair is plaited in piccaninny cornrows. Iras is black. In 1992, the three women crouch together, arms encircled, rocking, their

faces ugly in grief. Antony is dead, and they are 'for the dark'. Charmian is black. What links these images is the black body that shadows Cleopatra. Only once has Cleopatra herself been played black at the RSC and then, by default, not design. For one night only, in November 1992, in a production directed by John Caird, Claire Benedict (cast to play Charmian and to understudy the lead) went on for Cleopatra in one preview performance.

But as the photographs show, if black bodies don't play Cleopatra, they constantly play her sidekicks and servants, like the black boy in the Veronese-inspired opening of the 1981 BBC *Antony and Cleopatra* who tugs at Cleopatra's hounds, or the black Charmian opposite Vanessa Redgrave (Riverside, 1995) and the black Iras (again) opposite Helen Mirren (National Theatre, 1998). In Britain, only on the fringe, in non-mainstream companies like Talawa (Dona Croll, 1991), Northern Broadsides (Ishia Benison, 1995) and the English Stage Company (Cathy Tyson, 1998) is Cleopatra ever black. Elsewhere, though, the practice of annexing blackness to Cleopatra's whiteness turns out to have a history in the theatre traceable in production photographs to the beginning of the century. A blackface



Plate 10 'We are for the dark.' Cleopatra and her girls. Clare Higgins, Claire Benedict, Susie Lee Hayward in John Caird's 1992 *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Source: Malcolm Davies photograph. Courtesy of The Shakespeare Centre Library, The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon.

Alexas appeared in Oscar Asche's *Antony* tour of Australia and South Africa (1912–13) with Lily Brayton as Cleopatra, a blackface Alexas (1935) and Mardian (1945) appeared at the Memorial Theatre in Stratford.

In 1906, both Mardian and Eros blacked up. A photograph of that early production, Beerbohm Tree's extravaganza at His Majesty's Theatre, shows Cleopatra (Constance Collier) dead in a monument whose interior is written with hieroglyphics. These recall Hathor's temple at Dendera, to put on view her 'Ptolemaic' ancestors. All, in this representation, are black: the ancestral figures in the wall friezes, the animal-headed statues supporting her throne. This traffic in images conducted with narratives they ghost but never fully embody intensifies elsewhere, in the lavish souvenir *Play Pictorial* magazine compiled from Tree's production. In it, half-profile portraits of Collier illustrate the designer's concept of Cleopatra as 'neither Greek nor Roman, but Semitic', her 'authentic' semitism indicated not by colour (Collier's Cleopatra is white) but by the shape of her nose.² Elsewhere in the *Pictorial*, however, the two illustrations that frame Mrs Jameson's notes on 'Shakespeare's Cleopatra' (for Jameson, 'the real historical Cleopatra') work against Collier's pallid semitism to capture Cleopatra's image for blackness. One is a *faux*-hieroglyphic, drawn in profile like Collier's Cleopatra and, like Collier, crowned as Isis. But this 'real' Egyptian Cleopatra is black. So are her 'real' attendants, whose lithographic portrait appears lower down on the same page, bracketing Jameson's text. These five men (what Coleridge would have called 'veritable negroes') are dressed as noble savages (or wild animals), in gold collars, wrist and ankle bracelets, with leopard skins belted around their torsos, sitting stiff, gazing straight at the camera, the directness of their black looks arresting attention.³ Uncaptioned, unlocated in any context of Tree's production, the photograph has a shocking immediacy, for it asserts itself at a different level of representation from the hieroglyphic line drawing. It does so less in its content – though it is disturbing enough to figure exotic princes as captive slaves – than in the way it withholds black identity while conspicuously inserting into Beerbohm Tree's theatre authentic (in excess of his Mardian's faked) black presence.

By practising annexation, white theatre, it turns out, is simply reproducing the practices of white culture at large. In paintings, drawings and etchings from Tiepolo and Trevisani to Gérôme, Alma Tadema, Etty and Sandys, black figures crouch at Cleopatra's white feet; black figures pour her wine, hold her mirror, steer her barge, play her music and stare down at her from wall paintings.⁴ What these representations have in common with the production photographs is their artists' sense of the theatrical. The canvas or mural is a crowded *mise-en-scène* packed with

extras swelling the epic narrative, which Tadema locates boldly in the foreground, as on a forestage; Tiepolo frames it with a *trompe l'oeil* proscenium arch, registering the narrative as self-conscious artifice, a performance. What is distinctive, and what sensationalizes performative practice, is that while both media represent blackness, theatre of the period employs white bodies to represent the representation.

Films repeat the same trope, but employ 'real negroes': when Claudette Colbert salutes Caesar in de Mille's 1934 *Cleopatra* the shot captures the half-naked black slave standing behind her. When Elizabeth Taylor in Mankiewicz's 1963 kitsch epic *Cleopatra* undoes her Roman salute with a wink, again, the shot frames behind her one of the 'cast of thousands' massed in her black retinue.⁵ Indeed, this representational trope seems to have been in place for as long as white culture has been imagining Cleopatra white. Even the frontispiece to the 1680 *Secret History of the Most Renowned Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Essex*, which imagines Elizabeth, in the foreground, as Cleopatra kneeling before Essex/Antony, puts in the walled Roman garden behind them a black body caught in the act of looking.⁶

But if Cleopatra is never black in white culture, in black New York, black LA or black London, another Cleopatra leads an Other-cultural life that cites her history differently. She's the brand name on the beauty products black Joe Trace hustles door-to-door through 1920s Harlem in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*; the name Lorraine Hansbury gives to the black consciousness Beneatha discovers in 1950s *Raisin in the Sun*; the name the female Bond spin-off takes (along with her hip boots and .45) in the 1973 blaxploitation film, *Cleopatra Jones*; the name of the 1999 chart-topping black girl group from Manchester (who read Shakespeare, they said, backstage); the working name of the 'Fantasy Facilitator' who bills herself as 'a traditional independent Female Supremacist' at a Y2K website address whose logo features hieroglyphics, pyramids and the sphinx. Cleo Laine sings soul versions of Shakespeare's Sonnets: Cleopatra in the 'real' world of mass, not elite, culture is a black woman.⁷

This survey of exclusion, marginalization, and annexation helps me position my thinking on blackness – the black body, the trope of blackness – as a preliminary to exploring blackness in *Antony and Cleopatra* on the post-war British stage. I want to argue that Shakespeare wrote a black narrative at the centre of *Antony and Cleopatra*, a narrative marked by racial self-reference as explicit as Othello's. I 'am with Phoebus' amorous pinches black,' says the Egyptian, and the Moor, 'I am black.' This black narrative may have as little to do with 'real' Egyptian history as Richard Gloucester's hunchback has to do with 'real' English history, but it works, like Gloucester's, performatively, and draws upon the theatre's same logic of semiotic exchange.

Cleopatra's blackness has meaning in itself, but signifies beyond her single body to raise the ante in a play that turns out to stage a contest not just between Alexandria and Rome, east and west, male and female, Caesar and Cleopatra, but black and white, an imperial sweepstakes whose winner will write the future history of the world. Given that the theatre has regularly avoided this black narrative, the 'coincidences' of photographic representation I identified earlier document a project of denial in the white cultural imaginary whose effects are both ideological and theatrical, like stripping Othello of blackness, denial that distorts not just the performative but the discursive body.⁸ To map this avoidance, I revisit the RSC's archives to read as case studies three post-war productions that tell this story of black appropriation and exclusion across fifty years.

Thinking Black

I begin, though, with yet another photograph, this one of Helen Mirren in Adrian Noble's chamber-play *Antony and Cleopatra* (1982), set in the RSC's bare black-box theatre, The Other Place. Mirren faces the camera, kneeling, in a gauze shift that is tied at one shoulder and clings to her



Plate 11 Cleopatra observed by Iras – 'the black body behind'. Helen Mirren and Josette Simon in Adrian Noble's 1982 *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Source: Joe Cocks photograph. Courtesy of The Shakespeare Centre Library, The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon.

figure; her arms are stretched wide, her fists balled. Her head, thrown back, casts her blonde, Garbo-style hair off her face. Her eyes are closed. It's a study in whiteness: Mirren's body photographs in high definition against a dense blackness, a picture of rapture, of radiance. But it's also a picture that defines white Cleopatra against a dark Other. Behind one of Mirren's arms another face is just visible in the photograph: Iras, played by Josette Simon, who is black. I have shown this photograph to students, professional Shakespearians and archivists who've looked at it dozens of times. They don't see the black body.

Because the black face is both there and not there, because the image both constructs whiteness as based on blackness yet triumphantly foregrounds itself, this photograph offers an emblem for my search for black Cleopatra. This search traps me in the paradox Richard Dyer explores so brilliantly in *White*: to talk about black representation that registers only in absence or exclusion, I have to talk about white Cleopatra. Talking 'white', though, my project is to make whiteness strange, not by focusing on white representation, as Dyer does, but rather on what we might think of as white practice, the way hegemonic white culture casually, 'naturally', inserts blackness into white representation as a strategy for defining itself. For as Dyer observes, 'at the level of representation, whites remain . . . dependent on non-whites for their sense of self'.⁹ As my brief history of *Antony and Cleopatra* in performance so far has shown, reading blackness on to a text which the post-war contemporary theatre has 'naturally' constructed white, evidently serves some permanent white cultural interest. What does blackness signify that white representation wants to appropriate?

To address that, I need to theorize and historicize white representation of blackness (or rather, blacknesses) for white culture in Britain made something different of blackness in each of the years (1953, 1972 and 1992) I'm interested in. Equally, white culture in Britain, coerced by the civil rights and black consciousness movements in the USA, the post-war transition to self-government in India and Africa, and Britain's reassessments of its own colonialist/imperialist past, has, since 1953, been required to pay more urgent attention to recovering black history and learning to read its white narratives iconoclastically. In particular, it has had to reconsider the part black history has been required to play in the white imaginary, particularly in revisionist re-writings like Edward Said's *Orientalism*, that have forced western culture to rethink its historic understanding of how the West constructed the East as an Other that made sense of itself. But if blackness needs to be historicized, so does cultural theory, otherwise we apply it anachronistically. *Orientalism*, published in 1978, examined ideas in ways undreamt of in 1953 and,

twenty-five years later, helped to dismantle cultural orthodoxies that were the bricks and mortar of political policy in Elizabeth II's coronation year. It appeared too late to be of use to Trevor Nunn directing *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1972, but by 1992, it was mainstream. How could any director ignore it?

If Otherness can only be understood historically, it is nevertheless clear that some of what Herodotus 'knew' about blackness in the fifth century BC persists as common 'knowledge' in contemporary urban society. As Wole Soyinka has wryly observed, 'We all have our prejudices, of course, but some of these prejudices are the result of experience.'¹⁰ From this history that persists, then, it is possible to map a well-trodden *terra cognita* of blackness as a rough guide to the images, racial dynamics and cultural assumptions *Antony and Cleopatra* trafficks in, a map whose grid points – what blackness signifies – coincide with the play's major concerns: identity, sexuality and imperialism.

Race and racism as familiarly conceptualized and practised in contemporary London or Los Angeles are comparatively recent cultural inventions, introduced in the eighteenth and elaborated over the nineteenth century,¹¹ but there seems never to have been a time when blackness did not signify ethically or symbolically. As an idea its intellectual history begins in Egypt, where its earliest surviving records are wall paintings. One from 1200 BC depicts Queen Ahrus-Nofretari, crowned as Isis, holding her sistrum and mnet, her body conspicuously feminized, her skin painted deepest black, the colour of Nile silt. This body tropes fertility even as the figure constellates ideas of blackness, the sensual female and fecundity that are going to resonate for 3,000 years. Seven centuries later, Herodotus made similar connections. He knew the Egyptians as a black people and was fascinated by the idea of a land so fertile that it brought forth abundance effortlessly, copiously; a land permissive of easy indolence. Ever the imperturbable scholar, he recorded in academic detail the rituals that magically rehearsed Egyptian fertility, but, as we shall see, grew quite flustered when it came to documenting the Egyptian bacchanals, a female carnival of phallic licentiousness. It wasn't until the third century AD that blackness was 'blackened'. Origen, writing, significantly enough, from Alexandria, used darkness as a spiritual idea to allegorize Egyptian religious error against the light of Christian belief, instantiating dualistic thinking that produced the black/white binary western culture still cites, to trope not just morality and ethics but aesthetics and politics.

As Dyer argues, race is always about bodies, and white identity is bound up in precise body specifications: the 'white' body is a 'hard, lean body', a 'trained' and 'dieted' body held upright in an erect posture, its

movements 'tight rather than loose', its domestic arrangements and eating manners demonstrating 'abstinence' in relation to appetites. It is a civilized body, a rational, ordered body, a Western body. By the logic of binary thinking, the black body is Eastern; loose, sensuous, irrational, primitive, 'natural' – a lazy, lascivious body whose failure of abstinence figures savagery or incontinent sexuality. Inside the white body white identity is animated by white 'spirit': energy, discipline, spiritual elevation, intellect; in sum, 'enterprise' and 'will', 'a central value in western culture', traceable to Plato. 'Will,' writes Dyer, 'is literally mapped on to the world in terms of those who have it and those who don't, the ruler and the ruled, the coloniser and the colonised.' Moreover, this spiritual quality of enterprise is deterministic: it qualifies white bodies to lead humanity, direct destiny, conquer and construct dynasties, cities and empires.

Such ideas converge to rationalize racism as imperialism, what Dyer calls the 'will to power of the white race'.¹² Race operates as a spatial dynamic. One of the qualities that marks the 'native' as uncivilized is that he has no (white) concept of boundaries or borders: his space is 'the wild'. The white man maps human intervention on to the landscape: fixing borders, establishing limits, identifying frontiers and pushing them further and further back. Clearly, the fiction writer works as actively in this project as the geographer and cartographer. In terms of Africa, the white imperial imaginary fantasizes a dark continent (not just of the map but of the mind) that tropes the white man's dark imaginings, which he projects on to the black – 'obscurities of his own unconscious', says Dominic Mannoni, that he 'would rather not penetrate'. Hence, 'the image of Africa remains the negative reflection, the shadow, of the British self-image'.¹³ When the 'dark continent' is represented as a seductive woman whose 'dark' interiors white imperialism penetrates and searches even as it combats the 'dark' forces native there; when Freudian psychoanalytic discourse picks up a similar trope to make female sexuality an imagined 'dark continent': we are seeing an ancient triad of ideas – ideas represented in the Ahrus-Nofretari wall painting – reconfigured by obsessive white male anxiety.

These anxieties reach identity crisis when whiteness comes to reproducing itself, for whiteness can only preserve racial purity by mating with whiteness. But sex, figured as desire or as mechanical practice, isn't 'white'. It's 'dark'. And it's inimical to white 'spirit' – the control white minds must exercise over white bodies. In the dramas that test their white masculinity, men must resist and struggle to master the dark drive towards sex, must project sexuality on to blackness as a means, writes Dyer, 'to represent yet dissociate themselves from their own desires'. This

observation is certainly relevant to *Antony and Cleopatra*, for ‘dark desires are part of the story of whiteness’: they constitute the desires that whiteness must struggle against, for the whiteness of white men resides in the tragic quality of succumbing to darkness, or the heroism of resisting it. But here’s another twist, what might be called (after Cleopatra’s eunuch) the ‘Mardian factor’. For ‘Not to be sexually driven is liable to cast a question mark over a man’s masculinity’ – darkness ‘is a sign of his true masculinity, just as his ability to control it is a sign of his whiteness’. Living in a perpetual state of anxiety, the white man is always at risk from one side or the other, his ‘masculinity “tainting” his whiteness or his whiteness emasculating him’.¹⁴

I hear a synopsis of *Antony and Cleopatra* in this analysis. The play offers no one ‘whiter’ than the anti-sensualist, utterly sterile, imperialist Octavius; no one ‘darker’ than the constantly ‘becoming’ Cleopatra whose ‘infinite variety’, like the Nile’s, can’t be mapped, contained, bounded. Antony is most his white, western self when, beaten from Modena, he crosses the frozen Alps, enduring famine, his body hardened to adversity, a ‘white’ narrative which, projected from Octavius’s memory (or fantasy?), serves Roman political discourse. A companion projection wants to ‘negrify’ Antony, to imagine the lean, hard body softened with ‘lascivious wassails’ and inexhaustible erotic indulgence:

Salt Cleopatra, soften thy waned lip!
 Let witchcraft join with beauty, lust with both;
 Tie up the libertine in a field of feasts;
 Keep his brain fuming. Epicurean cooks
 Sharpen with cloyless sauce his appetite
 That sleep and feeding may prorogue his honour . . .
 (2.1.21–26)

The ‘East’ where ‘pleasure lies’ operates a forcefield of attraction and repulsion: the ‘space’ – Cleopatra’s body? – that is Egypt is the space of darkness (‘desire’, ‘dotage’, ‘lust’, ‘sport’, ‘appetite’), where Antony vacillates between Orient and Occident, duty and desire, bastard children and ‘lawful’ issue, space and empire, magnanimity and calculation, extravagance and measure, black and white, Cleopatra and Octavia.¹⁵

The story Shakespeare’s play has to tell of male identity, female sexuality, imperial conquest and the triumph of the West and western ‘whiteness’, makes a different kind of performative sense if Cleopatra is played as Shakespeare wrote her, black. But even where Cleopatra has been captured for whiteness, performance makes her whiteness strange by its fascinated association with bodies that are black.

Performances

Whiting Out Betty: 1953

Thirty-five years after she played Cleopatra, Peggy Ashcroft remembered the production – directed by Glen Byam Shaw and designed by Motley – for her biographer, Michael Billington, who'd been a mere schoolboy when he saw her 1953 performance. 'Wisely,' he writes, Ashcroft 'and her director decided to banish the serpent-of-old-Nile cliché and not present the audience with some bedizened harlot resembling Betty savagely deprived of Wilson and Keppel in the old music-hall sand-dance.' Her thinking about the role, Ashcroft reported, 'was much influenced by a picture in the old Temple edition that showed Cleopatra to be a Macedonian Greek, like Alexander, without a trace of Egyptian blood.'¹⁶

Clichés, of course, are elusive property, one generation's common demotic, the next generation's impenetrable code. What 'serpent-of-old-Nile cliché'? And who was Betty, that Byam Shaw should banish her? Betty bears thinking about. For she, with her alternative, the bizarrely juxtaposed 'Temple edition . . . Greek', turns out not just to have been Ashcroft's starting point but a trope for the production's ambiguous cultural work, its capture of Cleopatra for Shakespeare and for high 'white' culture.

Stratford's 1953 production was Byam Shaw's second attempt at *Antony and Cleopatra* and his second with Margaret Harris of Motley's design team. His first was a production he started planning as therapy at the end of the war, recovering in a British military hospital bed in the Far East, where, for him, pleasure did *not* lie. Back in London, theatre entrepreneur Binkie Beaumont offered to produce whatever Byam Shaw wanted to direct, and then became the victim of his own 'rather camp little joke' when, having facetiously offered Edith Evans the chance, at fifty-eight, to play Cleopatra for a second time, she accepted.¹⁷ Opening at the Picadilly Theatre in December 1946, that production read *Antony and Cleopatra* as an Elizabethan play. Pseudo-Elizabethan costume design put Egyptians and Romans alike in doublet and hose; the permanent set jutted forward like a flattened and enclosed Elizabethan 'heavens', with a tower on top for the monument. Most conspicuously, Evans' Cleopatra ghosted an English narrative that visually remembered the fag-end of female rule in a moribund Tudor dynasty, when 'infinite variety' read as querulousness and power as petulance. Her costumes were via Tiepolo, but her red wig marked her as Queen Elizabeth I.¹⁸ In production photographs she looks like a raddled 'Queen Betty', *c.* March 1603.

As this 'Betty' closed, another opened, ten minutes walk up Regent Street at the Palladium: a 'two shows daily' revue that featured, topping the bill, 'Wilson, Keppel & Betty' with their long-running (466 performances) music hall sand dance routine, 'Do the Egyptian'.¹⁹ For the estimated 800,000 theatre-goers who saw it, Wilson, Keppel & Betty – not William Shakespeare – defined the 'Egyptian'. These two Bettys – parody queen and music hall quean – may have been on Byam Shaw's mind when, in 1953, he returned to the play with Peggy Ashcroft (having scrapped everything from 1946 except a restyled red wig). Undoubtedly, however, the more potent representation was the one that circulated as 'common' theatrical currency in the post-war cultural economy. Low-brow Betty as 'bedizened harlot' dominated the cultural imaginary – and survived in reviewers' memories.

The alternative – at least for Ashcroft – was a Cleopatra from 'the old Temple edition' of the play, published the year before she was born (1906, the same year as Constance Collier's Cleopatra), a Cleopatra 'without a trace of Egyptian blood'. The face that gazes out of that Temple frontispiece is captioned 'Cleopatra: From a bust in the British Museum'. But if you went to the British Museum looking for Egypt's queen in the Department of Egyptian Antiquities you wouldn't find her. For this Cleopatra isn't Egyptian but Graeco-Roman.²⁰ She's certainly no low-brow Betty: three generations of experts mistook her for royalty. And no wonder: her nose is patrician; her hair, dressed ingeniously in exact ring curls laid in rows across her head and bunched to hang from the crown; her eyes, frank (from what we can see of them, for the sculpture has been turned, in the Temple reproduction, to look, not insignificantly, westward out of the frame). She is matronly, rather severe: a headmistress or an alderman's wife. Cut in marble, 'Cleopatra' is Pierian white. Cleopatra's whiteness, adopted by Byam Shaw and Ashcroft as her most conspicuous physical signature, consciously summoned absence (that 'trace of Egyptian blood') in order to exclude it. Critics saw what was erased, describing Ashcroft's Cleopatra as 'without tincture of the East, a whitely wanton . . . ghost pallid'; 'snowy skinned'; 'as English as Lily Langtry'.²¹

There were compelling cultural reasons, in 1953, for 'whiting' Cleopatra, detaching her from her low (English) music hall and (dark) eastern connections. In this coronation year, white queens were on the national agenda in a post-war, post-imperial, scaled-down Britain that had been working to reimagine itself inside boundaries certainly diminished in terms of geography but not of the imaginary. In redrawing this shrunken world map according to cultural co-ordinates, post-war British theatre played a crucial part; Britain's new-model imperialism would depend more on

cultural than political exports. Anthony Quayle, Enobarbus in Byam Shaw's first *Antony* (and, like him, a war hero) was now installed as Artistic Director of the Memorial Theatre and, in his second season in Stratford, in the process of revolutionizing the company and transforming Shakespeare into Britain's most potent cultural icon. Two years earlier, he had hit upon the idea of a history cycle – a Shakespeare tetralogy from *Richard II* to *Henry V* performed not just in repertoire but in sequence – to contribute to the Festival of Britain, and to the newly emerging narrative of the nation. By 1952, when Quayle commissioned Byam Shaw to direct *Antony and Cleopatra*, Stratford was being hailed as Britain's (unofficial) national theatre, its 'reputation gained since the war' making it 'the leading Shakespeare playhouse in the world.'²²

In February 1952, Elizabeth Windsor came to the throne. Her definitively English family name was, of course, a recent acquisition, invented by her grandfather in the middle of the previous world war to shed 'foreignness'. The coronation on 2 June came within weeks of *Antony and Cleopatra's* opening and, that night, the Memorial Theatre put the new queen on stage, holding the *Richard III* interval curtain to broadcast her coronation speech from the stage. As it did so, it acknowledged the traffic it was directing between real and imaginary things by begging the indulgence of 'patriotic patrons': the demon king, it assured them, would not contaminate this historic moment, for he would not be crowned until *after* the interval. Elsewhere, the media made connections, actual and symbolic, between this Elizabeth and the first. Pathé news reported that, 'Like that great Queen Elizabeth I', Elizabeth II 'was to be crowned as a sovereign', while the national press proclaimed a new, second Elizabethan Age. Citing the original Elizabethans was less a nostalgic reflex than an optimistic trope of recovery, mobilizing a national myth of abundance, a golden age of intellectual, spiritual and cultural energy, of expansion, achievement and acquisition, on which to map present austerities. Wartime rationing would not finally be lifted for another year.

Meanwhile, visitors from around the world, but particularly from the Commonwealth's so-called 'White Dominions' of Australasia, came in droves to celebrate not just the coronation but the latest victory of West over East. Japan's Emperor Hirohito sent his nineteen-year-old son, newly named heir to the throne and, like England's Elizabeth, another of the new generation, to represent his Hiroshima-burnt-out Empire of the Sun, only recently restored to national sovereignty. At the Shakespeare birthday celebrations in Stratford on 28 April, with *Antony and Cleopatra* the birthday play, Japan's flag was raised for the first time in Britain since the war. Stratford's mayor told reporters it was time 'to turn over a new

page in our relations with the Japanese',²³ a project made easier by Prince Akihito's fully 'westernized' appearance as the model of a model English gentleman, almost a dapper Wales to Ashcroft's Lily. Newspapers reported approvingly that he stepped off the London train in grey tweed, trilby and yellow gloves, and they itemized an itinerary for the state visit that was not quite a Roman triumph, but near enough: the British Museum, Oxford and Cambridge Universities, the Bank of England, Lloyd's, Lord's, aircraft, automotive and shipbuilding firms – and *Antony and Cleopatra* at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre – institutions that articulated British supremacy in materially authoritative terms.

Reviewing Ashcroft's 'whitely' Cleopatra, critics picked up the racialist terms of the performance's self-invention but, ironically, misread them. Failing to see Cleopatra as Greek (Macedonian or otherwise), they saw her as 'English', 'as English as Lily Langtry'; indeed, 'too English'.²⁴ Certainly, Ashcroft's excessive Englishness claimed Cleopatra – 'royal Egypt' – for high British culture, but for reviewers it likewise troped a lack. Ashcroft couldn't find Cleopatra-the-gypsy, Cleopatra of low art and low cunning, Cleopatra-as-Betty: 'patrons of the "deepies"', commented the *Wolverhampton Express*, 'would probably expect more for their money'.²⁵ *Time and Tide*, disappointed, noticed a 'certain lack of sheer sensuous abandon and raillery' in her Cleopatra. 'We miss the sluttish and unpredictable gypsy,' said *The Spectator*, while Philip Hope-Wallace asked, 'Is it such a hard part? Or is the trouble that the kind of English actresses who attempt Shakespeare usually have not the temperament, simply?'²⁶ The logic operating here moves from race ('whitely') to nation ('English') to nature – 'temperament' serving as a 1950s euphemism for libido. English 'girls' were too 'white'. And from certain angles, so was 'Shakespeare' (who figures as a conflicted double signifier lashing high-art status to low-art practice). The kind of actress Shakespeare needs to pull off a Cleopatra, Hope-Wallace implied, was one he was going to find hanging out with Wilson, Keppel & Betty round the back of the Palladium, not with the 'Hons' in the tea room at Fortnum & Mason. As *The Spectator* reminded readers, Cleopatra 'only dazzles us at close range'; 'Shakespeare never allows us to forget' that, from a distance, 'like a more recent ruler of her country' (*The Spectator* is thinking of the ubiquitously burlesqued King Farouk), she is 'a music hall joke'.²⁷

In a review headlined 'Cleopatra From Sloane Square', Kenneth Tynan, just down from Oxford and settling into the role Michael Redgrave, Ashcroft's Antony, had recently assigned him as 'next casting for the *enfant terrible* of the English theatre',²⁸ took these ideas even further:

There is only one role in *Antony and Cleopatra* . . . which English actresses are naturally equipped to play. This is Octavia, Caesar's docile sister: the girl 'of a holy, cold and still conversation' whom Mark Antony marries and instantly deserts: and if Shakespeare had done the modern thing and written a domestic tragedy about her disillusionment, generations of English ingénues would by now have triumphed in it. But alas! he took as his heroine an inordinate trollop, thereby ensuring that we should never see the part perfectly performed – unless, by some chance, a Frenchwoman should come and play it for us. The great sluts of world drama, from Clytemnestra to Anna Christie, have always puzzled our girls; and an English Cleopatra is a contradiction in terms.²⁹

Tynan's review offers a snapshot of cultural discourse in 1953 Britain: racism, nationalism, misogyny and paternalism map transparently on to each other as he aligns Englishness with western Octavia, naturalizes frigidity to 'our girls', and assigns sluttishness to a foreign Other. (Though if Tynan were headed for the Mediterranean to locate this Other he was reckoning – as we shall see, perhaps with good reason – on travelling only as far east as the *Côte d'Azur*.) Marking Cleopatra as 'inordinate', Tynan makes her excessiveness sexual, 'puzzle[ing]' to her cerebral English sisters. For them, tragedy is a kitchen sink experience – marital 'disillusionment' – not carnal, not epic, not devastating of political and emotional worlds. So in Tynan, racisms collapse into each other as the binaries that conventionally hierarchize British cultural elitism – high/low, English/foreign, continent/inordinate and, implicitly, white/black – are mobilized in the business of performance criticism, but disconcertingly inverted. That is, the great performance of Cleopatra requires the bad ('inordinate', 'French', 'slut', metaphorically, black) woman to perform her, while the very categories that mark English cultural elitism and racial supremacy produce theatrical defect. For Tynan, Ashcroft failed at Cleopatra as she succeeded at Peggy, and she would have needed to be, by Tynan's logic, a very bad Peggy indeed to make a good Cleopatra. As 'bad', perhaps, as the celebrated 'French' Josephine Baker whom Matisse had just painted as *La Nègresse* (1952), thereby elevating into a European icon the black American ex-pat who'd arrived as *l'art nègre* swept Paris, resexualizing the 1920s Parisian *monde* and, along with other black imports (jazz, cakewalks, gospel, *revues nègres*) had coloured 'the intelligence of modern man . . . nègre'.³⁰ When Tynan imagined Cleopatra French, the woman he had in mind came out of this cultural *monde*, a *monde* reviewers in 'white' England didn't want to visit

even as Antony-style tourists. Their 'whitely' Ashcroft remained for them mythologized as the best of all possible good girls, the 'loveliest Cordelia of her period'.³¹

And yet, they wanted Betty too. Astonishingly, Ashcroft had to hand material that just might have given them Betty – or a version of her they weren't expecting. For the same Temple edition that inspired her 'whitely' Cleopatra contains another Cleopatra, one whose representation exceeds the marble matron as extravagantly as Bakhtin's grotesque carnival body exceeds the classically closed body. One page over, on the edition's title page, set inside a florid frame that might have been designed by William Morris or Charles Voysey and looking *eastwards*, her back perpetually turned on the white marble Cleopatra, is a very different representation, neither a Hellenic patrician nor a music hall Betty. Drawn like a hieroglyphic in profile, flanked by papyrus flowers, wearing the ibis headdress and jewelled collar of Isis, and holding the asp curled voluptuously around her wrist, she is exotic, abundant, 'quicken[ing]', sensual, hot. This other Cleopatra is royal, Egyptian – and black.

Two prototypes, one of them putting squarely in view a black representation. Choosing to 'white' Cleopatra, it is inconceivable that, at some level of artistic instinct or cultural consciousness, Ashcroft wasn't denying the other, black representation. Of all actors on the British stage, she must have known what was at stake here, for as a twenty-three-year old in 1930, she had played Desdemona to Paul Robeson's Othello at the Savoy, a performance impossible on any stage in the USA and one that even in England activated racist comment. She heard audiences gasp when Robeson kissed her and remembered being bewildered, then appalled, when she learned he was not welcome at the Savoy Hotel. 'Rather unpleasant letters', whose racism ran along the same axis that polarizes Alexandria and Rome were delivered to Ashcroft at the stage door: 'East is East and West is West, and no more theatres where you play for me after this'.³² Was 'whiting' Cleopatra – banishing Betty – the price Ashcroft paid for recuperating Cleopatra from music hall travesty?

Yet, despite reviewers' emphasis on whiteness, both Ashcroft's performance and Byam Shaw's production did contain traces of 'colour'. Ashcroft lowered her voice half an octave for the part, darkening her vocal register as Olivier would to play Othello in 1964, and adopted a 'flamboyant' red wig that quoted Edith Evans's from 1946, but with a world of difference. Gathered into a lashing pony tail ('jaunty Chelsea', said Tynan)³³ this wig invoked (black) 'sass'. Repudiating the culture of the faded Queen Elizabeth, Ashcroft wore costumes that 'made the women in the audience gasp'. She was a 'queen who braved a clash with bright orange and purple robes', designed by Motley, who imagined

Egypt as an Other-coloured nation and backed the near-empty stage with a cyclorama that turned Egypt gold, blue, purple, magenta, orange – an exotic Eastern palette that, literally shocked western aesthetic sensibilities.³⁴ Rome, by contrast, was grainy-grey, as drab as post-war Britain. Most spectacularly of all (and here I return to the photograph that began my thinking), this production never really banished low-art Betty but simply moved her to the side of the stage, in the process supplementing, exaggerating her conventional white repertoire of low-cultural reference by colouring her black; in short, registering her symbolic function explicitly, a Betty in blackface. The photograph shows Diane Chadwick attending her queen yet peripheral to her audience, wearing the blackness that slides off Ashcroft's Cleopatra almost like a snakeskin. As the photograph documents, blackness is not excluded from this production; rather, it is invented for representation, an excessive artificial blackness whose very artifice draws attention to a whole range of signifiers.

Looking at the photograph forty-five years later, it is difficult to see Chadwick's 'black' Egyptian as anything but a crude proxy for ideas the production wanted banished from the space of the white royal body, but wanted circulated nonetheless, ideas that 'puzzled our [white] girls' but were 'natural' to the 'inordinate' black body – and that could be inserted via Cleopatra's mute attendant. Quite possibly, though, the actual 'meaning' of Chadwick's black is both more and less arresting. For to the middle-class, middle-England audience who patronized Stratford's post-war theatre in 1953 *it meant nothing* – at least, nothing that the political consciousness could read. For colour, while superficially legible when visible, was not yet politically inscribed in Britain, certainly not interrogated, and in any case was notional, not actual. 'Whitely' London, never mind the provinces, unlike Paris, had not, for the vast majority of the population, encountered black people. West Indians, 'imported' only five years earlier to supply Britain's crippling post-war labour shortage, were a novelty, and consideration of 'other races' was not only generalized, a comfortable mental habit residual from colonialism, but sited 'out there somewhere' on a map of empire that distanced the Other at a safe remove while locating white superiority so definitively in England that it did not even have to be discussed. England was colour blind because whiteness alone defined the collective racial unconscious. In these terms, 'race' was an unformulated question because 'difference' did not exist, and blackness was illegible because invisible. Where it was represented, as on Byam Shaw's stage, it served as set dressing, part of the furniture, décor that extended Motley's designs beyond exotic fans and feathered headdresses into exotic material bodies.³⁵ Looking back, the fact that

Chadwick's black meant nothing, precisely constitutes the political meaning of 'race' in 1953.

Yet, however tentatively, I want to suggest something more: that Chadwick's black body unconsciously marked out a reserved space, a space held in abeyance for theatre's future consideration. She occupied a 'watch this space' space. Barbara Hodgdon has acutely observed that white culture uses *Othello* – a play that twins *Antony and Cleopatra* – to perform particular white cultural work. '*Othello*,' she writes, 'represents a site through which the problem of the black body in the white imaginary becomes visible, gets worked through.'³⁶ I want to suggest that *Antony and Cleopatra* performs similar white cultural work, that it represents a site where the black body in the white imaginary reserves visibility, and where the work gets deferred. For all their hankering after 'foreign', non-whitely, non-English Cleopatras, not one reviewer in 1953 noticed the black body beside her or considered what empty space, in their desiring imaginary for this play, it might fill.

Racial Evasions: 1972

Almost twenty years later, and two weeks before Stratford's next *Antony and Cleopatra* opened in August 1972, Trevor Nunn was fretting. Not about his production but about politics, the theatre, and that late 1960s buzz word, 'relevance'. Anglo-American youth culture found radical politics on the streets in the summer of 1968 – for them, all art was political. Establishment culture responded by closing eyes, ears (and ranks) to revolution: Politics and Art were separate, and neither, radical. How should someone like Nunn mediate this dichotomy? Did Shakespeare belong to politics? Where were the dissident early 1960s political energies of Nunn's predecessors, young Peter Hall and Peter Brook, to be channelled, now that Shakespeare's company in Stratford was both 'royal' and subsidized?

On the face of it, the 1972 season, which brought together *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Titus Andronicus* to be played in repertoire in chronological, not compositional, sequence – so that Shakespeare's earliest tragedy came last, his last, first – looked 'political'. Structurally, it looked like the kind of season Anthony Quayle had put together in his 1951 history cycle or Peter Hall in his 1963 Wars of the Roses. But where Hall fiercely politicized his cycle as the story of 'England' by using the plays to examine the machinery of power politics, Trevor Nunn's Roman season seemed evasive of politics. These plays were about 'civilization', not politics, about – as RSC in-house publicity put it – 'the birth, achievement, and collapse of a civilisation'.³⁷

Nunn may have been experiencing something of a political identity crisis. He still looked like Che Guevara, but, at thirty-two, he'd hit the wrong side of youth culture's 'generation gap' and, as Artistic Director of the RSC, he was running a theatre whose directorate may have been leftist but whose governors were solidly Establishment. In April, members of his company, led by Buzz Goodbody, Nunn's feisty assistant, the first woman to direct at the RSC, sabotaged the Shakespeare birthday celebrations by staging a street demonstration against political repression in Greece. In total contrast, in July, a reviewer applauded Nunn for making 'no attempt to use Shakespeare's plays to put across a political message which isn't in the text.'³⁸

If only the sort of trenchant cultural analysis Terence Hawkes would be writing in the 1990s had been available in 1972, Nunn might have found it easier to frame the debate between politics and theatre, for Hawkes would have confirmed Nunn's worries that 'Art and Politics' are 'not just opposites' in British culture, but 'the organizing epicentres of two quite contrary discourses' separated by 'an unbreachable wall'. To propose any common ground 'is almost to sanction some illicit act of transgression in which a grubby "Politics" may be "dragged" across a threshold to sully the otherwise sacrosanct shrine of Art' or worse, Shakespeare 'be "dragged into politics".'³⁹ Still, while Hawkes' critique is an accurate enough analysis of the debate in 1952 and 1992, it would have told only half the story in 1972. In the wake of that extraordinary, revolutionary year – 1968 – when censorship was abolished and Nunn, a twenty-eight-year-old, took over from Peter Hall as Artistic Director after only three years at the RSC, the relationship between Art and Politics was up for grabs. 'Illicit acts', 'transgressions', and cross-overs between 'sacrosanct' Art and 'grubby' Politics (or was it 'grubby' Art and 'sacrosanct' Politics?) were explored in theatres like the Royal Court by anti-Establishment playwrights and directors like David Hare, Howard Brenton and John McGrath. Art and Politics were cut free from their traditional opposition and were attracted, not dragged, towards a common centre which, for a time, it seemed possible they could mutually occupy. Ironically, had Nunn been more committed to finding common ground for Art and Politics, he might have prevented the scenario Hawkes was resigned to twenty years later.

As it was in 1972, Nunn's views, as reported in the *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, were so conflicted as to be incoherent. 'I frequently fret,' he told the interviewer, 'about the dichotomy I feel between the kind of theatre company which morally and politically I have been impelled to form and the kind of company the Royal Shakespeare Company must be.' On the one hand, he insisted, 'Shakespeare is not a propagandist'.

On the other, because Shakespeare ‘does challenge us to examine our social and political views’, a director has to read a Shakespeare play ‘as if it is completely new and has just dropped through your letter box that morning. That means looking at it in the context of all that is happening in the world around you.’ But, he insisted, ‘You must use the most thorough scholarship.’ He doesn’t elaborate, but presumably scholarship that would privilege authorial ‘intentions’ and ‘authenticity’ over contemporary cultural engagement. It was this ‘original’ play, retrieved by scholarly practice and *ipso facto* conservative, which meant, for Nunn, that ‘it isn’t possible for the Royal Shakespeare Company to be a revolutionary company or a Maoist company or a Marxist company, because its house dramatist won’t respond to that.’ Here Nunn seems to take a deep breath before his bizarre double-think, built on double negatives, concludes by both advocating and repudiating politics: ‘But sometimes I have to stop myself from taking an intransigent position. Because Northern Ireland and Vietnam and the American elections are there it’s not enough to say “I care about all that but they have nothing to do with my work.” That is the worst kind of English liberalism.’⁴⁰

I am especially interested in how this interview frames a material context for Nunn’s *Antony and Cleopatra* and how it discloses his ideological strategy for dealing with that material. Quite simply, if Northern Ireland, Vietnam and the US presidential elections were on Nunn’s mind so, too, was their evasion. For, producing them as ‘matter’ that would be pertinent if *Antony and Cleopatra* were a new play he then deletes them (it isn’t, so they aren’t). Significantly, this same pattern of evoking what was to be evaded turned up later on stage. It is, then, worth recalling what Nunn had on his mind as he rehearsed a play whose topics were war, empire, sex and betrayal.

In Ireland, the previous twelve months had produced the worst catalogue of disasters in the Troubles to date: the first shootings of British soldiers by the IRA in Ulster in early 1971; the contentious internment without trial policy imposed in response that summer; the Derry protest in January 1972 that ended on Bloody Sunday with thirteen dead; direct rule imposed within weeks. At heart, the Troubles were about British imperialism; the rhetoric was framed in the language of political discourse – nationalism, separatism, republicanism, unionism. Unofficially, however, a racist discourse was at work, for the British not only saw the Irish as their native Other, but had brought the Irish to see themselves as Europe’s ‘niggers’.⁴¹

By the summer of 1972 the racist profile of America’s non-war in Vietnam was, after ten ignominious years, indisputably visible: the US military-industrial complex was white; so were the generals. But the

draftees from America's urban ghettos were black, and the enemy, 'gooks'. In Paris, delegates to the Peace Conference debated the shape of the conference table; in London, RSC actors protested against American imperialism outside the US embassy; in Washington, Nixon campaigned for re-election, his aides spin-doctoring the Watergate break-in that July. There followed lies, cover-ups, betrayal, the disgrace of the presidency, and ultimately, months later, Nixon's resignation.

Meanwhile, the miners' strike, called in January, brought daily power cuts across Britain; by spring, when a national state of emergency was declared, work on the complete technical refit of the RSC stage got further and further behind schedule. Pressure on labour relations, already in crisis, took a racist spin in August when Uganda expelled 40,000 resident British Commonwealth Asians, refugee victims of imperialism who flooded into Britain, swelling a 'black' tide already flowing out of India in the wake of the 1971 Bangladeshi wars. Enoch Powell's infamous 'rivers of blood' speech reverberated in public utterance as one-culture, white-culture Britain contemplated a multicultural future.

There was also another item on the agenda – feminism. By 1972 Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), borrowing black militancy's core trope, the castrated 'nigger', the 'nigger' eunuch, as its discursive starting point to analogize female suppression, was reaching a popular audience and raising women's consciousness across the culture. Greer's analysis of sexual politics and her radical social – and marital – programme made claims for women not just for equal employment and pay but for equality of aspiration, spirit, selfhood. Feminists challenged male supremacists as aggressively as immigration challenged white supremacists.

With the map of cultural Britain heaving and bucking underfoot, the opening of the fabulous King Tutankhamun exhibition at the British Museum in March 1972 served, as Elizabeth's coronation had twenty years earlier, to provide cultural focus and a respite from controversy. Coming to London fifty years after Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon, intrepid sons of empire, had opened the pharaoh's tomb, the exhibition nostalgically recalled that moment of penetration, possession, plunder. As mile-long queues lapped the British Museum, Egyptomania ran wild in everything from fashion to television documentaries to a commemorative 3p stamp. The sensation produced by the exhibition felt like an exhilarating aftershock from the age of empire, stirring memories of Egypt as a British protectorate, as dependent upon London as it was upon Rome at *Antony and Cleopatra's* close. Meanwhile, Trevor Nunn was in rehearsals. How much of what was in the news travelled into his production? Tutankhamun, obviously. The production's stunning opening

spectacle quoted the exhibition directly, reproducing in theatrical terms the experience of walking into the dark gallery where King Tut's gold sarcophagus lay. Nunn began with a full-company tableau: Cleopatra resplendent as Isis; Antony as Ra; their children, gold-robed, flanked by priests as jackal-headed Anubis and Horus, the hawk; musicians, bare-torsoed attendants, bald eunuchs. Such in-your-face glitz announced Alexandria's theatricality – 'the full MGM spectacle'; 'a sweep of great canopy . . . golden bird head-dresses, tinkling cymbals'; 'heavy with gold . . . decorated with blue scarabs' – while asserting authenticity. 'The costumes looked . . . borrowed direct from the British Museum'; 'Cleopatra's court has an authentic glitter that seems appropriate in the year of the Tutankhamun Exhibition.'⁴² Cannily, the souvenir programme invited double reading across this same theatrical/historical binary, setting out side-by-side character portraits of Antony and Cleopatra 'In History' and 'In Shakespeare'.⁴³ And in another 'portrait', this one textual, the programme historicized as 'authentic' the extravagant theatricality of the self-styled 'Illimitable Livers' by quoting Plutarch's father's eye-witness accounts of fabulous banquets, jests, competitive games of sex and dressing up. These tales illustrated one kind of insatiable appetite by recounting the famous story of Cleopatra winning a wager that she could outdo Antony in culinary extravagance by knocking back a priceless pearl she'd dissolved in vinegar; another, by reproducing a 'Fragment of a bowl made at about the time Antony and Cleopatra lived' that showed a naked couple athletically copulating.

Reviewers saw – clearly – that Nunn's production was about new-style sexual politics and – more dimly (because more dangerously?) – that it was about gender identity, exchange, fantasy, fluidity. Greer ghosted Janet Suzman's 'rather masculine' Cleopatra, 'the Ptolemaic equivalent of your modern emancipated woman' whom you'd 'expect to catch [. . .] reading *The Female Eunuch*,' not 'dallying with male ones'. Her 'touch of masculinity' made her 'an Egyptian Elizabeth I' or, in 'this age of Women's Lib', a 'gypsy tomboy' in 'unregal attitudes' who 'flopp[ed] around like a hoyden, legs wide apart'.⁴⁴ (Apparently, the constitutional 'sluttishness' reviewers read in the role in 1953 they re-read, twenty years later, as 'liberated' femininity.) Again, the programme framed spectators' viewing. A two-page spread laid out Antony's 'character' like a centrefold, illustrating it with images from a sarcophagus relief showing a riotous procession of goat-footed, priapic followers attending the chariot of (sprawling) Dionysus, one of Antony's avatars. Opposite, stood another, Hercules, in a full-page reproduction of a statue carved in Augustan Rome, a statue not representing him as the 'Herculean Roman'; rather, as Hercules made over by Omphale, in drag. His right

arm, raised above his head, holds a distaff, not his club. His woman's chiton, falling in folds that outline the penis, has slipped off one shoulder, teasing the gaze to look below it for the breast that isn't there, while the delicate hem is raised titillatingly⁴⁵ at one side, revealing – a nasty shock to punish our voyeurism – the massy naked leg beneath. The face under the headscarf has a beard. Where, in 1906, Beerbohm Tree's *Play Pictorial* portraits quoted allusions to Hercules to image Antony as the chisel-jawed, blue-eyed imperialist, Nunn's 'pictorial' proposed him as a happy (hapless?) transvestite, and 'Women's Lib' proposed the contemporary politics for locating that transformation.

What reviewers didn't see, or didn't acknowledge, was that this production was also about race. While they noticed Cleopatra's 'shiny, brown eunuchs' (Nightingale), 'negro eunuchs' (Lewis), 'genuine dark-skinned servants' (Chapman), they perceived them as set decoration.⁴⁵ Even the (Communist) *Morning Star* bunked politics, ignoring what its own metaphor put conspicuously in view when, having called Egypt 'prolific and sumptuous . . . a world alien to Rome in every way', it declined to unpack 'alien' as troping racial Otherness.⁴⁶ Nobody mentioned visible difference or the difference it made that Rome was white and Egypt, black – except, of course, for Cleopatra, described as 'dusky', even 'dark', in adjectives describing not her skin but her emotions. Reviewers read Suzman white, even as several, referring to her as 'the South African actress' made her literally the foreigner, and hinted, echoing Tynan on Ashcroft, that it would take a 'triumphantly wanton' foreign woman 'to break through the barrier of innate gentility that has separated so many of our girls from the essence of the character': alas, however, even Suzman 'does not quite make it'.⁴⁷ Reviewers, that is, read her 'white' in spite of the work the programme was (again) doing in the plot synopsis, titled 'Contest for the World', to construct Cleopatra not just as racially Other but as powerfully racially Other: 'hated in Rome, and feared as the queen of the East, an older, richer, more mysterious and still potentially greater civilization'. Her rivalry with Rome, 'the ultimate contest . . . between West and East', ending at Actium, ended in blunt hegemony: 'the West had won'. One page over, the programme split castlist down the same geo-racial axis, 'East' on one page, 'West' on the other.

In spite of all this pointing, not one reviewer mentioned the obvious: that Trevor Nunn's *Antony and Cleopatra* was packed with black bodies, more black bodies than reviewers had ever before seen on the RSC stage. Eight black actors were cast across the Roman tetralogy that season in a fifty-strong company. Moreover, Nunn required the entire 'white' Egyptian court, from Cleopatra, Iras and Charmian to Mardian and his *corps de castrati*, to make up tawny. The company used so much body

make-up that Guerlain cosmetics were credited separately in a programme note. This 'Felliniesque' 'whirl of voluptuous opulences' contrasted, for Michael Billington, with Rome's 'cold calculation and white knees',⁴⁸ presided over by an ascetic Caesar (Corin Redgrave), the archetype of 'whiteness'. His clenched, unbending body was impervious to appetite or instinct, his face drained of colour, his ambitions inscribed on the wall-sized map that backed his summit meeting in Rome, a plan of the yet-to-be-conquered empire, each territory's border precisely marked.

Why the universal colour blindness? Why the failure in review discourse to register Egypt as a 'coloured' court or to measure the threat an older, 'black' Egypt, an Egypt mysteriously 'wrinkled deep in time', posed to a white-kneed, boy-Caesared, pre-imperial Rome? Wasn't the 'authentic' black representation on Nunn's stage ('genuine darkskinned servants') doubly legible, historically and currently, since it pertained to the ancient world and to today's politics? Didn't blackness contest white, imperial hegemony, in Rome and Britain, in Egypt, India, Asia, Africa and Ireland?

To answer, I have to circle back to my reading of Trevor Nunn's political evasions. In terms of raw numbers, Nunn's casting policy was progressive: black actors in the late 1990s remember his early period at the RSC as the golden age of inter-racial casting. It was also theatrically shrewd. Responding to Britain's multiculturalism and to the sheer statistical facts of Britain's new racial demographics, Nunn put black actors on the stage, and on the payroll. But politically, he went on to betray the progressiveness of his own initiative, evading the racial issues those black actors materially evoked, for his casting didn't unsettle a single racial stereotype. Rather, it merely reproduced predictable contemporary stereotypes, and worse, represented them as historically 'authentic': black actors played servants and messengers in *Antony*, plebs in *Caesar*, Volsc barbarians in *Coriolanus*. Black performance was required to stage its own invisibility. No wonder reviewers missed it.

No wonder, either, that they missed the production's black Cleopatra, who turns out to have been Nunn's supreme evasion. For she never appeared on stage. She's in the souvenir programme, though (just as she was, ironically, in Beerbohm Tree's 1906 souvenir *Play Pictorial*) but not in the programme's text. Her character profile in the text, 'Cleopatra: In History', seems uncannily to quote Peggy Ashcroft disclaiming darkness: 'Cleopatra had no Egyptian blood – she was a Macedonian Greek, like Alexander.' The image placed alongside this text, however, sensationally contradicts that claim to white origins, reproducing, from 'a bas-relief carved at the time of Cleopatra in the temple at Deir el Bahri, Egypt', a representation of the 'real' Cleopatra. This 'real' Cleopatra is black.

'Passing' Cleopatra White: 1992

The same sense of *déjà vu* that links Nunn's production to Ashcroft's also connects it to John Caird's, for when Caird met his full *Antony and Cleopatra* company for the first read-through of the play in the autumn of 1992, he seemed to be reading from Nunn's programme notes. For openers, he said he wanted to 'get something straight right from the beginning': 'Cleopatra wasn't black. She was a Macedonian Greek. Like Alexander. She didn't have any Egyptian blood.'

Claire Benedict – cast to play Charmian – remembers Caird's opening shot verbatim because 'it was so bizarre'; 'it came out of nowhere'. Cleopatra wasn't black? Who said she was? Only John Caird, denying it. Benedict didn't think to wonder what Caird was protecting with his 'rather hysterical' disclaimer, for she was too busy deciphering what she took to be his coded message: 'I was the only black actor in the rehearsal room. Clearly, I wasn't meant to be playing Cleopatra. I was only her understudy.' Then Benedict exchanged looks with Clare Higgins, 'And I could see her thinking, "I'm not a Macedonian Greek, so who's John got to play Cleopatra?"'.⁴⁹

Benedict, of course, was wrong. Caird's comments did come from somewhere besides her specific black present and presence. They came from history, and they ghosted conversations with Shakespeare's text that Benedict knew nothing about. Undoubtedly, Caird's original instinct in quoting Trevor Nunn was to authenticate the politics of his own representational strategies. It's a pity, then, that, instantiating 'what Cleopatra was', he muddied things by opening up his actors' collective imaginary to what they hadn't seriously considered before – 'what Cleopatra wasn't'.

When Nunn echoes Ashcroft it feels uncanny; when Caird echoes Nunn, it reads like homework perhaps because, having started life at the RSC a decade earlier as Nunn's assistant director, Caird here was still the swot parroting the master. For starters, he cast Nunn's Antony in the title role. But twenty years on, Richard Johnson's Herculean Roman had deteriorated into self-parody, an 'ageing lecherous slob'; an 'elderly party who radiates the sexual magnetism of a retired magistrate'.⁵⁰ Next, Caird borrowed Nunn's spectacular opening tableau but relocated it, putting his 'breathtaking and faintly ludicrous' 'Egyptian parade' just before the interval.⁵¹ Finally, he quoted the *trompe l'oeil* effect of Nunn's monument scene but reversed it: Nunn's rose hydraulically, monumentally, out of the stage; Caird's – bizarrely – lowered the monument to stage level. Costumes, props, even Cleopatra's eunuchs looked like makeovers raided from Nunn's production wardrobe.

Caird borrowed elsewhere, too. From earlier productions: raiding the

heart-stopping moment from 1982 when Cleopatra (Helen Mirren), preparing for death, knelt on the floor in front of a basin and simply washed her face; Higgins, in 1992, tugged off her latest wig to reveal herself 'no more but e'en a woman'. From music hall: 'the opening set looks like *son et lumière* at the Sphinx,' said Malcolm Rutherford under the headline 'Oh! what a carry on up the Nile'.⁵² From film, specifically *Gone With The Wind*: 'at the end, the lovers are miraculously resurrected, and embrace in silhouette against a stormy tourquoise sky.'⁵³ From tradition: Higgins' Cleopatra embodied 'infinite variety' by changing wigs 'more often than she changes her mind' but finally settled – after the interval – for a frazzled version of the red wig that connected her back, via Judi Dench (National, 1987), Vanessa Redgrave (Haymarket, 1986), Glenda Jackson (RSC, 1978) to Ashcroft, Evans, and, ultimately, Elizabeth I.⁵⁴

If race – 'Cleopatra wasn't black' – was Caird's point of entry into this text, more recent theatre history accounts for his defensiveness. In the late 1980s the RSC was in trouble. An overview of the 1989/90 season from the always generous Peter Holland calls the work 'disappointing, as if the company had run out of ideas and energy: directional clichés and excesses substituted for real reinvestigation of the texts; glib concepts dominated without offering illuminating rediscoveries.'⁵⁵ By 1992, the company's best work was not being generated from the centre but bought in from outside by the Artistic Director, Adrian Noble, whose most nakedly Thatcherite PR stunt was that season's collaboration on *Hamlet* with Kenneth Branagh (a dry-run for his full-text *Hamlet* film). With the company's body and soul evidently deep in hock to the accountants – and corporate sponsors – the voice of the RSC ventriloquized market forces: 'The RSC,' Noble admitted, had 'lost' – some said sold – 'the right to fail'.⁵⁶ With it went the company's right, its duty as a maker of contemporary cultural meaning, to take risks, to be controversial, dissident, oppositional, avant-garde. The RSC had to play safe. So the most interesting work – innovative, radical and mainstream work – went on elsewhere. In, for example, Yvonne Brewster's all-black Talawa Theatre Company.

When Talawa's touring production of *Antony and Cleopatra* hit London in May 1991 Shakespeare hit the headlines. 'Theatrical history is currently being made,' said Michael Billington, in this 'first British Shakespeare production to combine a black company and a black director.'⁵⁷ Dona Croll, Cleopatra, was 'the first black woman to play the temptress of the Nile' on the British stage.

These two theatrical 'firsts' looked alike, but in fact staked out vastly different political territory for performance. An all-black production proved, wrote Billington, 'that Shakespeare is universal property and

that we have a sizeable corps of black actors who speak verse with ringing authority' (or, wrote Rick Jones, it proved 'the petty racism that forces a company like Talawa TC into existence in the first place'). But playing Antony black, Jeffrey Kissoon made no claim for a black Antony. Playing Cleopatra black, Dona Croll did.

Interviewed before the London opening, Yvonne Brewster was quite clear. 'Cleo' was a part Shakespeare wrote 'for a non-white woman', and Brewster compared the 'backstage battle to establish' Cleopatra as 'a black woman's part' to the 'British theatre's blindness to Othello's blackness', asking rhetorically, 'why is it so difficult to imagine a black man *as* a black man?'⁵⁸ Croll, too, was convinced of Cleopatra's blackness. She knew Cleopatra's father was Macedonian. But she pointed out that Cleopatra also had a mother – racial original unknown, but possibly Egyptian – which could account for Cleopatra's well-documented ethnic consciousness. She was the first and only Ptolemy to learn to speak Egyptian, and she embraced Egyptian religion – facts Nunn's 1972 programme noted but did not examine, along with her patriotic 'devotion' to a country her father 'had been willing to sell out to Rome'. Blackness literally mattered to Croll: it belonged, she said, to Cleopatra's 'earthiness and movement'. 'European actors' – white actors? – were physically disabled, 'not very good at using their bodies', but Croll's 'African side' equipped her to 'do these things'. Here Croll collapses the distinction of 'things' into racial categories that neatly remap black/white stereotyping to reverse it: 'White actresses play her as a sexy queen. I play the politics and power. Any woman who runs a country, turns it round from famine to feast and seduces Roman emperors is not a blonde bimbo. She is somewhere between Maya Angelou and Tina Turner.' Croll's words recall Tynan's, pitting 'our girls' against those Others. Now, however, all the signposts are reading back to front, Othering black English Cleopatra as jive-American.⁵⁹

By a happy coincidence, the same day Croll's Cleopatra arrived in London, so did Lucy Hughes-Hallett's: *Cleopatra: Histories, Dreams and Distortions* is a cultural history that accounts for the 'imaginary' as well as for the 'real' Cleopatra in representation. Before 1800, European writers and artists, writes Hughes-Hallett, 'were seldom preoccupied with her foreignness'. Some of them 'puzzled over the conundrum presented by her complexion', but her colour was a 'problem' that remained 'insoluble': no historical description survived to determine it. As a Macedonian, 'she may have been quite fair', but 'a few Western interpreters were haunted by the possibility that, as a north African queen, she might have been as black as Othello the Moor'. One was Shakespeare's contemporary, the playwright Robert Greene, whose 1589 Antony was 'enamoured of the black Egyptian Cleopatra'.⁶⁰

Hughes-Hallett did not argue Cleopatra's blackness (in history) nor did she track blackness (in the theatre) through Shakespeare's text, but she still helped support Croll's confidence in black representation by unpacking the cultural process by which Cleopatra, over the course of 'a thousand years', was whitewashed, 'represented by western artists as being western' and 'always described by writers according to their own canons of beauty' – that is, 'blue-eyed and blonde'.⁶¹ The key term was 'beauty'. Cleopatra, in western culture, had to be white, for her 'reputation for beauty, though unsupported by any historical evidence, was unassailable' and that made her 'a light-skinned European lady', since beauty, as distinct from sexual magnetism, was 'the prerogative of social and ethnic élites'.⁶²

Importantly, Hughes-Hallett put into the popular domain a version of Edward Said's revisionist cultural history, *Orientalism* (1978), and Martin Bernal's two-volume *Black Athena* (1987, 1991), books that dropped like bombshells on Anglo-American academia. Between them, they exposed the historiography of western culture as white racist mythography. Bernal had been, he wrote, 'staggered' to discover that the dominant 'Aryan model' of historiography, 'far from being as old as the Greeks themselves', was developed 'only in the 1840s and 50s', and that, far from fictionalizing, the ancient Greeks, Herodotus among them, knew what they were talking about when they wrote that Greek culture originated in black Egypt.⁶³ Like Bernal, Said looked to nineteenth century formulations to begin unpacking the system of ideas troped in that word 'Orientalism', which Europe had always found so useful in organizing its thinking about itself. And like Bernal, his analysis read race, power, and (western) cultural hegemony as intersecting discourses. Significantly, the inventory of racial traits attached to Orientalism – luxury, sensuousness, barbarity, exoticism, effeminacy, lassitude, abundance, irrationality, infantilism, voluptuousness and depravity – reads like a repertoire of 'blackness'.⁶⁴

After Said and Bernal – and the popularizing of Hughes-Hallett – Cleopatra could no longer be 'naturally' assimilated by European orientalist fantasy, could no longer 'pass'. Her past representation on the British stage from Tree onwards had to be re-read through the imperialist presumptions and projects they revealed, and her future representation, if it referred itself to 'what Cleopatra *was*' would, at some level, have to take on Said and Bernal.

Certainly, young black actors like Dona Croll were ready to force the issue. She saw her performance as a cultural intervention, wanting it to unsettle white attitudes, to be read politically, 'to cast a dark shadow over the whole Eurocentric portrayal of human history'. 'There is an unwillingness,' Croll told the *Guardian*, 'on the part of Europeans to acknowledge the contribution of Africa. The fable of the white Cleopatra

is just another way of bleaching out history, cutting the nose off the sphinx [as Napoleon was supposed to have done, objecting to its Negroid broadness]'. Her Cleopatra began the process of reading history black to make whiteness strange.

What she couldn't do, in Talawa's all-black production, was to charge Egyptian blackness with the ultimate signifying power Shakespeare assigns it, its racial difference from Rome. For that, she needed a white Antony, a white Octavius: only with white opposition in place would the black/white binary that maps what is really at stake in Shakespeare's text become visible in performance to show that where Shakespeare's *Battle of Actium* ends, Said's *Orientalism* begins.

From Talawa's position on the fringe of cultural production in Britain, one of Yvonne Brewster's hopes was that her casting of Croll would agitate expectations at the centre: 'No one ever thought of a black Cleo before.' Now, 'the next time they go to cast her [at the RSC, the National], that image will sweep across their brains. It might just be the beginning.'⁶⁵ As it turned out, what occurred was a 'beginning', but not the one Brewster had in mind, for whatever images swept across the collective brains of the RSC's casting department, they were discarded or repressed. John Caird cast Cleopatra white, Charmian black. That is, he reproduced casting practices dating back to the turn of the century to preserve, for Shakespeare's Royal Theatre, the space of white cultural iconicity even as he imperialistically annexed to it the darkness it both desired and disclaimed. What was new, however, was that white casting of Cleopatra was no longer tacit, no longer 'natural'. It could only be instantiated by denial, denial of black history, denial of black representation – 'Cleopatra wasn't black.' Flushed out by Bernal, Said, Hughes-Hallett, Croll and Brewster, Caird had to articulate the racism earlier directors could evade: Cleopatra's 'passing' narrative turned into Caird's 'outing' narrative. And whereas Nunn's evasion was made tolerable because he at least proposed political discourse, Caird's denial was a betrayal that evacuated the space of the political altogether as if, having quoted Nunn, his work (twenty years later) was done. What he produced in his echo-chamber *Antony and Cleopatra* was a theatre of decadence, an MGM spectacle of theme park nostalgia preoccupied, like so much in Thatcherite Britain, with the surfaces of things. Caird's glitz, unlike Nunn's (which could be read against King Tut at the British Museum as setting up, if only incipiently, the terms of an orientalist debate between white man's fantasies and real material things), was legible only in terms of Saatchi and Saatchi advertising hype.

What accounts for Caird's vehement denial of black Cleopatra? One answer comes from the Thatcherite marketing strategies displayed across the forty pages of his *Antony and Cleopatra* souvenir programme. Fifteen

pages cover the production from plot synopsis to critical 'obituaries'. The rest bulges with advertising, advertising that shows 'Shakespeare plc' aggressively in business promoting the RSC promoting its promoters: Royal Insurance, Jaguar, Mercury, British Gas, AT&T all have spreads in the programme.⁶⁶ Given the sponsorship tie-ups with big business and individuals alike evidenced in this marketing publicity, could Caird afford to do something so unsettling to mass white cultural expectations as, in Barbara Hodgdon's phrase, disowning 'dominant cultural imaginaries of desire' by casting their white icon black?

Meanwhile, another production, scheduled to play opposite *Antony and Cleopatra* that season, was cast. Terry Hands, directing, and Tony Sher, in the lead, auditioned Claire Benedict, Caird's Cleopatra understudy, for *Tamburlaine*, to play another Egyptian royal, Zenocrate, daughter of Egypt's 'sultan' (that is, pharaoh), and not in the company's main house but in the smaller (marginal?) Swan. As Marlowe's epic tale of sex, war, empire and betrayal has it, Zenocrate, taken captive by Tamburlaine, captivates him Cleopatra-like.⁶⁷ If anyone noticed that Egyptian queens were playing on alternate nights in playhouses standing side by side, they might have made something of the coincidence that cultural-outsider Marlowe's queen was black, insider Shakespeare's was one of 'our' girls, (lily) white.

Recovering Blackness

Authentic Marks

At the end of 1998 actors, it seemed, were queuing up to play Shakespeare's Egyptian queen. First in line was Antony Sher, who, interviewed between rehearsals for *The Winter's Tale* at the RSC, confessed to *The Independent* that 'the Shakespeare role he still most want[ed] to play on stage [was] Cleopatra'. So he'd asked the RSC for the part in the production planned for 1999. Adrian Noble turned him down; he 'said he'd be lynched by about a dozen leading actresses'. Here the interview makes an interesting lateral switch; Sher moves from cross-sex casting on to cross-race casting, almost in mid-sentence as though unconsciously revealing that categories of race and gender were collapsed in his thinking. About cross-sex casting, he'd been diplomatic, only implying, by setting his sights on Cleopatra, that it was time to end women actors' monopoly on women's roles. About cross-race casting, however, he was outspoken. 'The bar on white actors playing Othello' had to end. It was, Sher said, 'a terrible shame that all the great actors aren't given their Othello. It's tragic, and it's ludicrous.' And he asks rhetorically, 'Why should I, who's not

heterosexual, be allowed to play Leontes?'⁶⁸ (Kate Chedgzoy's shrewdly sophisticated *Shakespeare's Queer Children* gives Sher his answer.⁶⁹)

Within a week, Sher's fantasy casting, uncannily, materialized elsewhere. The *Guardian* reported – not insignificantly, on the 'Home News' not the 'Arts' page – that Mark Rylance, Artistic Director of Shakespeare's Globe, was to play Cleopatra in the theatre's next season: 'handing the role of the Queen of the Nile to a man is one of several recent examples of cross-casting, although it is more often in the reverse direction with women taking roles written for men. But while many cross-casting experiments are carried out in the name of quota filling, granting employment to actresses, or simply to satisfy curiosity, the Globe's decision has been taken in the name of authenticity.'⁷⁰

What did the Globe mean by 'authenticity'? The *Guardian* told us: 'All Shakespeare's plays were originally written for and performed by men, although the female parts were played by boys.' 'By contrast', the article noted, Rylance 'is 37'. So no 'boy' then? But if no 'boy', what happens to 'authenticity'?

That, of course, is one trouble with 'authentic Shakespeare'. As W.B. Worthen has comprehensively shown, it's a spurious idea, doomed to self-annulling compromise the moment it's announced as a production concept. Worse, it's a theatrically stagnating idea, for by staking so much on a nostalgic return to privileged early modern origins (an 'authentic' text and 'authentic' performance practices) it ignores theatre's primary business – in Worthen's phrase – of 'interpreting ourselves to ourselves'.⁷¹ Even so, the chimera of 'authenticity' dogs the British theatre: at the RSC, the Royal National Theatre, the Old and Young Vics and the Globe, directors of Shakespeare trot out 'authenticity' to legitimate whatever – particularly whatever 'dangerous innovation' – needs authorizing. In this way, the shock of the new – say, a male Cleopatra – is naturalized and validated as a return to the old, the authentic.

Sitting in the RSC archives over those same weeks in December when the *Guardian* and *Independent* articles were appearing, I found them dismaying in another way, because I was uncovering Cleopatra's hidden history and growing convinced that 'next casting' of Cleopatra had to play her as Shakespeare wrote her. But once (white, male, gay) actors of Antony Sher's stature and box office clout and Mark Rylance's (white, male) Globe-al authority set about claiming Cleopatra, the chances of recovering her blackness, of reversing the cultural hijack of the role, receded to vanishing point. The argument for recovery, then, grows more urgent. Let us, for one thing, be under no illusion that arguing 'authenticity' is harmless antiquarianism. Rather, it's a tactic of legitimation whose end is political, for it leaves Shakespeare in the sole possession

of white male actors, gay or straight, Shakespeare's only 'authentic' players. What this means is that at a time when Shakespeare in Britain is being opened up pluralistically in companies like Talawa, Northern Broadsides, Cheek by Jowl and the English Shakespeare Company to cross-race, cross-gender, cross-class and cross-cultural casting (and viewing), Shakespeare is likewise being claimed as the exclusive property of 'authorized' Shakespeare playhouses like the Globe and the RST: 'our Bill', it seems, must be located at the 'centre'. Although I will return to this issue, for now, I have to align with the 'devil's party' to argue tactically. For if Cleopatra's 'tawny front' stands a chance of being reinvented in mainstream representation, arguing her 'authenticity' is the imperative strategy for recovery: I have to legitimate my shocking 'new' black Cleopatra as a return to the 'old'. What marks of blackness, circulating in source texts, might Shakespeare have picked up to lay down in his play-text? To address the question of an authentic black Cleopatra, I want to situate Cleopatra's blackness historically, attempting what Terence Hawkes calls 'the insertion of texts into their material context' to reanimate the "conversation" that accompanies and finally constitutes the construction of cultural meaning'.⁷² That is, I want to remember some of the issues that circulated around the play's Jacobean moment of production, to see *Antony and Cleopatra* as a companion play to *Othello* and to Ben Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* and Cleopatra not just as a nostalgic homage to Elizabeth, a queen of 'infinite variety', but a tribute to yet another 'wrangling queen', Anna of Denmark.

Black Marks

For Joyce Green MacDonald, writing in 1995, Cleopatra is so obviously written black that 'the casting of white Cleopatras constitutes a denial of representation'. But just a year earlier Lynda E. Boose saw her 'only by the remotest suggestion represented as being Negro'.⁷³ Shakespeare might have made things easier for us; he might have imaged Cleopatra's blackness in *Antony and Cleopatra* as obsessively as *Othello* does the Moor's. What is there to mark her black beyond two scripted references to her 'tawny front' and her cheeks, sunburnt black 'with Phoebus' amorous pinches'? Most insistently, her name. For Cleopatra is 'Egypt', 'Egyptian', aphetically, a 'gipsy', and gipsies, popularly thought to come from Egypt and first appearing in England at the beginning of the sixteenth century, were, to English eyes 'black'. Almost immediately, white Albion wanted them excluded; a 1514 order 'agaynste people callynge themselves Egypcyans' ordained 'that no such persons be suffred to come within this realme'.⁷⁴ Certainly, Shakespeare always imagines his

gypsies black: wherever they're cited (in the text, never appearing on stage, and always as women), the point of their insertion is to contrast the 'black' with the 'fair', the white. So Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet* proposes 'Cleopatra a gypsy' as the mock-hyperbolic term of disparagement set against Romeo's peerlessly fair 'lady' (2.3.37). And Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* sees it as a symptom of lovers' frenzy to see 'Helen's beauty in the brow of Egypt' (5.1.11); their 'shaping fantasies' can turn bushes into bears, loathsome into fair, black into white, Helen (always 'white-armed' in Chapman's 1598 translation, as in Homer's original *Iliads*) into gipsy. Gypsies traditionally trafficked in the black arts: consider Cleopatra's fortune-telling Soothsayer in Alexandria or the charmed provenance of Othello's handkerchief, given by 'an Egyptian to my mother' (3.4.53). Through such linkages, racial darkness covers dark practices that trope dark sexuality: the Soothsayer's clients seek information about their future erotic history; the handkerchief that makes the hand that holds it 'amiable' magically 'subdue[s]' the lover's 'spirits' 'Entirely to her love' (3.4.57–58).

Cleopatra inhabits this scheme. She of the 'tawny front', which tropes her 'gipsy's lust', is by turns 'Egypt', 'great Egypt', 'royal Egypt', then 'foul Egyptian', 'false soul of Egypt'; a 'right gipsy' who, like a black devil, has, says Antony, 'Beguiled me to the very heart of loss' (4.12.28–29). 'Beguiled', 'heart', and 'loss' all carry double valence as images of sexualized black magic (potency undone as impotency) and of damnation. When Antony calls Cleopatra 'spell', 'charm', 'witch', 'spot', 'triple-turned whore', it is her metaphoric blackness, doubling back upon her dark sexuality, that is being imaged. But her literal blackness is also imaged in the allusive imagery of lines like 'Salt Cleopatra, soften thy waned lip!' where 'salt' certainly means 'lecherous' but also 'preserved', like fish laid down in barrels, gone hard and withered black. 'Waned' also moves imaginatively into black territory – the waned moon's dark sky – and travels towards the ideas clustered around Octavia (cold, chaste, pale as the moon) eclipsed by hot, sunburnt Cleopatra.

Fifteen years after *Antony and Cleopatra*, in his 1621 masque, *The Gypsies Metamorphosed*, Ben Jonson would assemble in one text all the elements that square the quadrilateral equation connecting Cleopatra, Egypt, gypsies, and blackness. In Jonson's conceit, the 'Ægyptians . . . nation' masses for its 'yearelie . . . musters' (however improbably) in Derbyshire. 'Queene Cleopatra' is called 'The Gipsyes Grand-matra', and the gipsy children, 'fiue Princes of Ægipr', are the 'ofspringe of Ptolomee, begotten vppon severall Cleopatra's in their seuerall Counties'. When, at the end, the gypsies are finally metamorphosed, the Epilogue glances at that old apothegm about 'washing the Ethiope white' to demystify the magic transformation:

. . . least it proue like wonder to the sight,
 To see a *Gipsie* (as an *Æthiop*) white,
 Knowe, that what dide *our* faces was an oyntment
 Made and laid on by Mr *woolfs* appointment,
 The Courtes *Lycanthropos*: yet without spellles
 By a meere Barbor, and no magicke elles,
 It was fetcht of *with* water and a ball;
 And, to *our* transformation, this was all . . .

(1479–1486)

Their tawny faces were cosmetic blackface, theatre ‘slap’.

A black gipsy Cleopatra would have come to Shakespeare via popular theology and folk custom: the medieval mummers plays traditionally made the King of Egypt by some bizarre quirk of paternity both the father of St George and black.⁷⁵ Blackness was popularly supposed to have been fathered in the world by Cham, one of Noah’s three sons, whose illicit copulation on the Ark produced an illicit son, marked as indelibly as Cain. So Noah’s sons, tasked with repopulating the world after the Flood, went out in three directions, into Europe, Asia and Africa (the same partitioning the Roman triumvir maps on to the world in *Antony and Cleopatra*, assigning the regions this time to Julius Caesar’s ‘sons’, Octavius, Antony and Lepidus). Chus, born black as punishment for his father’s disobedience, became the original parent of the black African Moors. It followed, typologically, that those black races would be represented at the birth of Christ by one of the Magi. So, as early as the eighth century, the third king, Balthasar, was, according to the Venerable Bede, represented black: ‘Tertius, fuscus, integre barbatus, Balthazar nomine, habens tunicam rubeam.’⁷⁶ Typologically, the Epiphany was anticipated in the Old Testament visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon: like the ‘black and comely’ beloved of the ‘Song of Songs’, she was represented black. So, too, were Marlowe’s African Dido, Queen of Carthage, Tamburlaine’s Zenocrate, daughter of the Egyptian ‘soldan’, and Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra, who claimed descent from Cleopatra and whose ‘history’ was played by Lord Strange’s Men (Shakespeare probably one of the company) at Philip Henslowe’s Rose playhouse on 9 March 1592. Here then is a line of black player queens anticipating Shakespeare’s Egyptian.⁷⁷

In court performance, too, Egypt was represented black. A ‘masking’ before Henry VIII in 1510 presented six ladies, ‘their heads rouled in pleasauntes and typpers lyke the Egipcians, embroudered with gold. Their faces, neckes, armes and handes, covered with fyne pleasaunce blacke [a lawn-like cloth] . . . so that the same ladies seemed to be

nigrost [sic] or blacke Mores.⁷⁸ A hundred years later, Ben Jonson would elaborate another court masque (which I turn to later), Egyptian in inspiration, danced by twelve court ladies – only this time, they would wear their blackness on the flesh. * *

The one place where Shakespeare wouldn't have found Cleopatra black was in North's translation of Plutarch's *Life of Marcus Antonius*, his closest source for *Antony and Cleopatra*, for Plutarch imagines Cleopatra as a Ptolemaic Greek, never as 'Egypt'; indeed, he rarely imagines her in Egypt, most of his 'big scenes' being set remote from Alexandria (Parthia, Cilicia, Cydnus, Actium). Plutarch's Cleopatra spends as much time in Athens as Alexandria, while in Shakespeare, no matter what the map says, the onstage space Cleopatra occupies always feels like Egypt. Plutarch's Egyptians, though, are most their Shakespearean selves when they are in Antony's company, not Cleopatra's, drinking and gourmandizing, going in disguise, 'ambl[ing] up and down the streets' with him as he 'would peer into poor men's windows and their shops, and scold and brawl with them within the house', inclinations that make Antony the true 'Oriental' of Plutarch's story.⁷⁹

Significantly, however, Shakespeare would have found Egyptian blackness in another Greek historian, Herodotus, whose *Famous History* of Egypt was translated into English by Barnaby Riche and published by Thomas Marshe in 1584.⁸⁰ For Herodotus, it was climate, the fact that Egypt was a 'lande . . . continually voyde of rayne', that accounted for 'the blacknesse and swartnesse of the people, couloured by the vehement heat and scorching of the sunne' (f. 75). On the basis of skin colour, he observed that 'The people colchi sprong of the Aegyptians' for 'both people are in countenance a like black, in hayre a like fryzled' (f. 96). And he marvelled at a country that 'hath more strange wonders then any nation in the world', not least its cultural practice of gender reversal:

In this countrye the women followe the trade of merchandize in buying and selling: also victualing and all kind of sale and chapmandry, whereas contrarywise the men remayne at home, and play the good huswives in spinning and weaving and such like duties Women make water standing, and men crouching downe and cowering to the ground. (f. 78v)

According to Herodotus as Riche translates him, 'the flower' of 'beauty' among the 'wom[e]n of Aegypt' is 'a fayre browne blew, tanned and burnt by the fyery beames of the sunne' (f. 85v) – an image Shakespeare may recall when Cleopatra offers the messenger her 'bluest veins to kiss'

(2.5.29). (Egyptian beauty regimes were famous in Rome as 'sovereign remedies', evidently, for curing blackness. Ovid in *Ars Amatoria* advised those 'that are more swarthy' to 'have recourse to the aid of the Pharian fish', that is, the Egyptian crocodile, whose intestines and dung, according to Pliny, were used by Roman women as a cosmetic to lighten dark complexions. The crocodile, it seems, constituted the original recipe for 'blanching the Ethiopie'.⁸¹) Marvelling at Egypt, however, Herodotus still found the country's Bacchic rituals lewd. To celebrate the feast of Bacchus, whom they associated with Egyptian, not Grecian, Hercules (f. 81), the women of Egypt out-did the Greek custom of wearing 'about their neckes the similitude of a mans yard named Phallum, wrought and carved of figtree' – a significant choice in a country that troped figs with carnality and obscene jokes: 'I love long life better than figs,' says Shakespeare's Charmian (1.2.34). The Egyptians, by contrast, flaunted immodesty, devising not just phallic objects but priapic machines:

small images of two cubites long, which by meanes of certayne strings and coardes they cause to mooue and stirre as if they had sence and were living . . . making the yard of the image (which is as bigge as all the bodye besides) to daunce and play in abhominable wise. Fast before these marcheth a piper, at whose heeles the women followe incontinent with sundry psalmes & sonets to ye god Bacchus.

Recounting Egyptian worship, Greek Herodotus seems struck suddenly with a 'Roman thought' worthy of Octavius:

For what cause that one member of the picture is made too big for the proportion & frame of ye body, and also why, that, only of all the body is made to moove, as they refused to tell us for religion, so we desired not to heare for modesty. (f. 83)

Most significantly of all, in Herodotus Shakespeare would have found a supplement to Plutarch's Egypt, a black nation managed by women whose frank sexuality caused grown men to blush: 'mine eares glowed to heare it', admits Herodotus, recording one final 'indecenty' (f. 82v).

If, searched for 'black marks', Shakespeare's playtext ultimately appears short on them, that absence might be accounted for by the fact that unlike *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra* pairs racial transgression with gender transgression, and the more potent in mobilizing white male anxiety (as both Lynda E. Boose and Joyce MacDonald argue) is gender. Gynophobia masks, even cancels, xenophobia.⁸² First, then,

Shakespeare's Romans fear Cleopatra as a 'strumpet' capable of transforming their general from 'Mars' to 'fool' to phallic puppet to mechanical sex aid, the 'bellows and fan' to cool 'a gipsy's lust'; second, as 'tawny front' (1.1.4–9). Of course, another explanation lies in the fact that Cleopatra's blackness is performative – constantly and conspicuously on view in the theatre. It hardly needs textual marking. Moreover, I want to suggest that the performative space Shakespeare's Jacobean Cleopatra was entering was already marked, and so sensationally that it needed no additional indexing. Cleopatra was not the first black queen to illuminate the English court of 'fair Albion' with darkness.

Black Masques and Foreign Queens

Did *Antony and Cleopatra* – finished by Shakespeare in late 1606 or early 1607 – play at court? Emrys Jones, calling it the 'most courtly of Shakespeare's tragedies', thinks it did, though no record survives, unless it's hidden among the nine unnamed plays listed in the Revels accounts as having been performed by the King's Men at court between Christmas and Shrovetide that season. This absence of information is all the more maddening since, in the previous two years, the Revels clerk had obligingly entered titles opposite payments, among them, *Othello*, 'The Moor of Venis'.⁸³

Paul Yachnin thinks so too, arguing the play's political topicality in 1606–1607 and reading Cleopatra as Shakespeare's nostalgic tribute to Queen Elizabeth, a tribute that functions also as a critique.⁸⁴ The 'old woman' troped cultural ideals that died with her (at least rhetorically), ideals of courtly 'libertas' and magnificence, retrospectively rejuvenated in Cleopatra to set against the 'measured', mercantile King James, the self-styled 'Augustus' who, ascending the English throne in 1603, consciously constructed himself as the new 'Caesar' presiding over the new empire, 'Britain'.⁸⁵ He ordered his coronation medal to be inscribed 'IAC : I : BRIT : CAE : AVG : HAE : CAESARUM CAE.D.D.' – 'James I, Caesar Augustus of Britain, Caesar the heir of the Caesars'.

Mapping one queen of 'infinite variety' on to another may indeed have served Shakespeare's original strategies of representation in 1606 – unsurprising, perhaps, only three years after Elizabeth's death, when, on the twentieth-century stage, the trope has survived with astonishing persistence, from Dorothy Massingham (1931) dying improbably in Egyptian headdress over Tudor coronation robes to Vanessa Redgrave (1995) in Elizabethan starched ruff and farthingale. Even at her most hieroglyphic, twentieth-century Cleopatras are Elizabeth to reviewers: Janet Suzman was deemed 'an Egyptian Elizabeth I' in 1972; Glenda

Jackson, famous to television audiences as *Elizabeth R* in 1972, was 'still Elizabeth I' under pharaonic headdress in 1978. Only Helen Mirren (1982) among recent mainstream Cleopatras escaped Elizabeth, but at the cost of being twinned with another royal, Elizabeth (II's) anti-type. Mirren's 'freshness', wrote one reviewer, 'could compete with the charming naivety of Princess Diana, racing from one emotional whirlpool to another like a barefoot Egyptian nymph'.⁸⁶

In 1606, Cleopatra may very well have stood nostalgic Elizabeth to James's aspirant Augustus. But I want to assemble a different set of historical conjunctures to speculate that she remembers another, equally intractable queen, much closer to home in the Jacobean court: Anna of Denmark, James's consort and Elizabeth's successor as Queen of England. I am not arguing derivation or even direct relationship so much as observing the circulation of ideas and their influence in court culture and among players and playwrights. As Yachnin reminds us, the London literary community in 1606 was tight-knit; theatres knew what the competition was up to. And beyond that, court news circulated freely, almost, it seems, instantly. John Chamberlain heard daily in St Paul's what was busying the shakers and makers in Whitehall, and passed it on to correspondents in the country, on the Continent, in diplomatic bags and by private carrier.

First, some dates. The Revels Office on 21 January 1605 noted payment to 'the K's players' for 'A play in the Banketinge house att whitthall called The Moor of Venis' on 'the first of Nouembar' 1604.⁸⁷ Within weeks, as Chamberlain wrote on 18 December, the Revels Office was casting about for more entertainment to occupy the King. He'd returned from his hunting lodge at Royston only days earlier 'but [was] so far from beinge wearie or satisfied with those sportes, that presently after the holy dayes he makes reckening to be there again . . . In the meane time here is great provision for cockepit to entertaine him at home; and of maskes and revells against the mariage of Sir Phillip Harbert and the Lady Susan Vere . . . on St. Johns day.' Also, the four-year old Prince Charles was to be created Duke of York, and Anna was devising 'a great maske' to follow the ceremony on Twelfth Night 'for which there was 3,000 li delivered a moneth ago' – in mid-November. Chamberlain finishes with court gossip: 'Yt is generally held and spoken that the Quene is quicke with childe.'⁸⁸

Anna, now thirty, was indeed 'quicke', her seventh pregnancy since the birth of Prince Henry in 1594. After Candlemas, she would retire from court until her confinement in April. The 'great maske' she'd commissioned employed the wordwright, Ben Jonson, and the showman, Inigo Jones, with whom he was collaborating for the first time. What she had

in mind for this entertainment was recounted in Jonson's preface to the 350-line printed text of 'these solemnities', the *Masque of Blackness*:

Pliny, Solinus, Ptolemy, and of late Leo the African remember unto us a river in Aethiopia famous by the name of Niger, of which the people were called *Nigritae*, now Negroes, and are the blackest nation of the world. This river taketh spring out of a certain lake, eastward, and after a long race falleth into the western ocean. Hence, because it was her majesty's will to have them blackamores at first, the invention was derived by me, and presented thus.

The conceit of *Blackness* is straightforward. Niger, 'in form and colour of an Ethiop, his hair and rare beard curled', tells Oceanus, 'presented in a human form, the colour of his flesh blue', his troubles. His daughters (described in Jonson's note as 'the masquers, . . . twelve nymphs, Negroes') thought their black was beautiful until they learned from 'some few / Poor brainsick men, styled poets' that, before hapless Phaeton ran amuck with his father's chariot and burnt the peoples of the equator black, 'Ethiops were as fair / As other dames.' (It is this myth of origins that Cleopatra remembers as her personal history, though she cuts the reckless boy and goes straight to the father/god Phoebus, whose 'amorous pinches' made her 'black'.) Disconsolate, the daughters have come in search of beauty's 'fairness', which, they've been promised in a vision, they'll find in a land whose name ends in '*tania*' and whose ruler, a sun, paradoxically reverses Apollo's programme. Because 'His light sciential is' and 'past mere nature' this sun is one 'Whose beams shine day and night, and are of force / To blanch an Ethiop, and revive a Cor's', that is, a corpse.⁸⁹ In *Britannia* they find their whitening agent, the sun king James. The masquers, thus introduced, come forth and dance – the main business of the masque and the night's extensive activity – then retire, the conceit closing (in the absence of the kind of quick-change transformation Jonson's 'meere Barbor' would perform with some 'water and a ball' in 1621), with instructions in a year-long blanching regime.

The masque's political flattery of James is transparent. And the consternation generated – in one spectator – by the masquers' appearance is both documented and often quoted. The queen and eleven of her chief female courtiers were dressed, said Jonson, 'alike in all . . . , their hair thick and curled upright in tresses, like pyramids . . . the ornament . . . orient pearl, best setting off from the black.'⁹⁰ Dudley Carleton, writing the following morning, thought the 'apparel rich, but too light and curtisan-like'. Worse, Anna hadn't followed court convention in

representing blackness with vizards or stocking masks; she and her women blacked up cosmetically, like common players – like Burbage in *Othello* at court in November. Carleton thought ‘Theyr black faces, and hands *which* were painted and bare vp to the elbows’ a ‘very loathsome sight’,⁹¹ and in a later account, written to the violently anti-Spanish Ralph Winwood, elaborated the repulsiveness of the night’s revels:

Their Apparell was rich, but too light and Curtizan-like for such great ones. Instead of Vizzards, their Faces, and Armes up to the Elbows, were painted black, which was Disguise sufficient, for they were hard to be known; *but it became them nothing so well as their red and white, and you cannot imagine a more ugly Sight, then a Troop of lean-cheek’d Moors* [original italics]. The Spanish . . . Ambassador . . . was taken out to dance, and footed it like a lusty old Gallant with his Country woman. He took out the Queen, and forgot not to kiss her Hand, though there was Danger it would have left a mark on his lips.⁹²

Carleton – the arch court sophisticate – sounds more amused than scandalized.⁹³ By contrast, the Venetian ambassador found the masque ‘very beautiful and sumptuous’. And a third writer, not a witness, nevertheless passed on observations to ‘discerne *the* humor of *the* time’: ‘a sumptuous shew . . . some dozen Ladyes all paynted like blackamores face and neck bare . . . strangely attired in Barbaresque mantells to *the* halfe legge . . . It cost *the* K. betweene 4. and 5000 li to execute *the* Q. fancye.’⁹⁴ This was extravagance on the grand scale, on a par, perhaps, with Cleopatra’s banquets (and just as vulnerable to exaggeration). Incidentally, the observers and their range of reactions predict another trio of spectators: Philo, Enobarbus and Agrippa (who, no eyewitness either, still comments upon Cydnus).

What interests me in Anna’s masque is the traffic the performance conducts between images of blackness and images of Egypt, traced in Jonson’s text and Inigo Jones’s costume designs, one of which survives. It illustrates a ‘Daughter of Niger’ and confirms Jonson’s directions so that Egypt allusively ghosts *Blackness* in stray visual details and marginal glosses that keep bringing it back into view. So, for example, the masquers’ hair was dressed ‘like pyramids’ and they carried fans inscribed with ‘a mute hieroglyphic’, chosen, wrote Jonson, ‘as . . . applying to that original doctrine of sculpture which the Egyptians are said first to have brought from the Ethiopians.’ *Æthiopia* appeared ‘*in a silver throne made in figures of a pyramis*’ [original italics], figuring the moon, whose horns, derived from Io and familiar in iconic representations of

Diana/Chastity/Elizabeth the Virgin Queen, originated with Isis. And 'Niger', of course, was another name for the Nile.

Given that the masque's conceit was hardly innovative, why did Anna commission *Blackness* then? Is it possible that Will Shakespeare's *Othello*, so recently at court, cued 'her majesty's will' and taught her to 'think black'? If so, she perhaps caught at the conceit because it troped for her a discursive network of ideas connected not to race but to religion.⁹⁵ I, however, am more interested in wondering not what provoked *Blackness* but what *Blackness* provoked. Did it teach Shakespeare to 'think black' in *Antony and Cleopatra*? London society, those, like Chamberlain, who exchanged daily 'news upon the Rialto', knew of Anna's blackface the morning after the performance. The players on the South Bank may have known about it in advance, given Jonson's open migration between the court and the public playhouses. By the end of the week, all London could have known, for according to Carleton, writing the following day, there was already 'a pamphlet in press' that promised the full story.⁹⁶

In Anna's *Masque of Blackness* Shakespeare would have encountered material to reshape in *Antony and Cleopatra*: the core narrative, a black queen from the East, identified with a river who tropes not just her nation but her bounteous influence, who challenges white imperial authority. *Blackness* asks whether the sun king, another Augustus, can bring the 'stranger' into conformity with his 'fair' rule by whitening out her difference, or whether she will elude effacement at the end. If Shakespeare remembered Elizabeth in Cleopatra ('her militancy, . . . her fiery temper, her fondness for travel in a river-barge, her wit, her immense charm')⁹⁷ he might equally have remembered Anna in *Blackness* in Cleopatra: her breathtaking extravagance, her astuteness in politicizing spectacle, her subversive wit, her rages and political relentlessness, her volatile relationship with the king, her stunts, played out on her own body, whose effect was to *épater les bourgeois* (and *le roi*), her female 'government' (Anna established at Somerset, later Denmark, House a female court, an alternative, even competitive household to the king's), her vulnerability to erotic betrayal and her machiavellian manoeuvres for making the best of it.⁹⁸ And, what found no example in Elizabeth, her fertility, her generative bounty. Like Cleopatra in Shakespeare's text, if not on his stage, Anna was surrounded by children, their usefulness as political counters ballasting their privilege, and their futures proving as mixed as Caesarion's, Alexander's, and the rest.

It is the queen's maternal abundance, figuring as a trope of 'government', that puts Anna, as much as Elizabeth, in the place of opposition to James, unsettling his aspirations to 'measured' Augustan

rule. I want to elaborate on this claim by bringing to bear Janet Adelman's acute reading of 'scarcity' and 'bounty' as the organizing metaphors that key the 'new psychic economy' Shakespeare imagines in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Shakespeare's Rome under Octavius institutionalizes scarcity as the basis of male selfhood, such that heroism equals deprivation. (Its definitive trial, starvation in a winter landscape, is narrated in the retreat from Modena.) Scarcity, writes Adelman, 'is the sign of the state from which the female has been excised.'⁹⁹ Egypt is Rome's opposite: Nile's slime quickens, priests bless Cleopatra 'when she's riggish', and progeny evidence an erotic history across three Roman administrations. Abundance offers itself in feasting ('Eight wild boars roasted whole at a breakfast'); in service ('superfluous kings for messengers'); in imagination ('I dreamt there was an emperor Antony'); in reputation ('For his bounty / There was no winter in't'). Cleopatra *is* bounty. Essentially abundant in herself, the agent of every one of Alexandria's scenes of extravagance, she dreams an Antony who is abundant in bounty, a vision that defeats any triumph of the 'scarce bearded' 'boy' Caesar by making that triumph 'paltry'. In short, Shakespeare's play constructs Caesar's political agenda of scarcity along the same lines as James's self-promulgated Augustan 'measured' rule. In this scheme, Anna figures as the feminized sign of 'bounty', Cleopatra to James's Octavius Caesar, with 'Britannia' as Antony, poised between two self-constructions.

Ironically, of course, James's 'measured' rule was more of a fantasy than the Antony Cleopatra dreams. Newly installed king in fabulously wealthy England (compared to 'paltry' Scotland), he began in Cleopatra-mode, distributing favours and largesse 'as yf,' wrote Chamberlain, 'this world wold last ever'. 'These bountiful beginnings raise all mens . . . hopes, inso much that not only protestants, but papists and puritanes, and the very poets with theyre ydle pamphlets promise themselves great part in his favor: so that to satisfie or please all *hic labor hoc opus est*: and wold be more then a mans worke.'¹⁰⁰ So it proved.

Within a year Whitehall was looking for economies, deliberating 'about ordering the houshold and bringing yt to the French fashion of bourd-wages', efforts frustrated by a king who, knowing that 'monie go low in the exchequer', airily wrote off the staggering debts of several wayward favourites. By 1610, London customs had dropped to £14,000 per annum, the king raising revenue by selling titles; baronetcies were going for £10,000. 'We have many bankrupts daylie,' groaned Chamberlain, as a commission 'to devise and project the best means for monie' began deliberations in August 1612. Only six months later, however, Princess Elizabeth's marriage was celebrated in an 'excesse of braverie' and 'dasell';

she wore a coronet valued at a million crowns, while one of her retinue was arrayed in 'a gowne that cost fifty pound a yard the embrodering'. Unsurprisingly, the royal coffers were empty in April and the king had to be rescued by the very favourite he'd fattened on largesse, Robert Carr, soon to be created Duke of Somerset, who, 'seeing the world . . . at theyre witts end for monie, . . . sent for some of the officers of the receyt, and geving them a key of a chest bid them take what they found there . . . 22,000 li in gold'. But in September, bankruptcy again loomed and 'all the ingeniers and projecters are put to theyre shifts how to supplie the present need without sale of land'. The king had no money to pay his post-men in December, but still meant 'to bestow 10,000 li in jewels' on Frances Howard's marriage to Somerset at Christmas.¹⁰¹

And so it continued, James's 'measure' producing 'scarcity' bred of irresponsible 'bounty' – his 'extreem cost' making 'us all poore'. Queen Anna died in March 1616. The exchequer was too poor to bury her: 'they are driven to shifts for monie, and talke of melting the Quenes golden plate . . . the commissioners for her jewells . . . offer to sell or pawne divers of them'. After the funeral, finally conducted in May, 'the King came to Greenwich' to take possession of Anna's estate. He was reckoned to be vastly enriched by her death: jewels valued at £400,000, plate, £90,000, 'redy coine 80,000 Jacobus peeces', 124 whole pieces of cloth of gold and silver, 'besides other silkes, linnen . . . hangings, bedding and furniture . . . beyond any Prince in Europe'. The following morning, 'the Quenes trunckes and cabinets with jewells were brought . . . in fowre carts, and delivered by inventorie'. 'The King perused them all.' And immediately began converting Anna's bounty into Augustan scarcity, bestowing 'some reasonable portion' on his latest favourite, the Duke of Buckingham, to whom he'd already given Anna's residence, Denmark House.¹⁰² Had he, or his councillors responsible for arranging his credit, I wonder, read enough Augustan history to know that, when news reached Rome that the treasure chests of Alexandria were conquered, the standard rate of interest dropped from 12 per cent to 4 per cent?¹⁰³

* * *

I want, finally, to move forward from this recovery of early modern blackness and performativity, to contemporary performance, to conclude with a final pair of photographs, a two-minute video clip, and two questions that travel back to the beginning of this essay to interrogate my own preoccupations. Does it matter whether Shakespeare wrote *Cleopatra* black? What difference does it make?

Blackness matters first, I think, to the structure of political meaning in the play. A black African queen who expertly manipulates a body politics that sensationalizes and sexualizes darkness even as she inhabits it, turning the fantasies that shape the desiring white imaginary back upon themselves as a strategy for evading imperial white-out, such a Cleopatra embodies the most potent sources of threat imaginable to the white male project of establishing a Roman empire. 'Her "black" skin,' writes Joyce MacDonald, 'and her powerful sexuality together work to define the nature of the political challenge she presents to Rome's designs in Egypt.'¹⁰⁴ Her blackness, registering difference from Rome and continuously representing the politics of that difference, registers, too, the ultimate futility of Rome's project to conquer Egypt. Even if Rome leads Cleopatra in triumph, stages her to the view, presents her greatness 'boy[ed]' by 'some squeaking Cleopatra', Rome cannot absorb Egypt into its imperial system and remain itself. Her blackness is unassimilable. The 'Ethiophe', as at the end of Anna's *Blackness*, is not 'blanched' but remains imperviously itself, and where the white mates with the black, as Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* delightedly gloats, holding up to staggered Rome white Tamora's 'coal-black calf', whiteness is erased, darkness dominates, the secret narrative that is meant to stay repressed surfaces to take over the story, to take white out. And here's a neat irony. Octavius cannot win, either, by resisting Cleopatra's blackness. For insofar as he disdains Cleopatra and (unlike 'Oriental' Antony, the white man who 'tragically' gives way to his dark desires) remains ascetically and 'heroically' impervious to her seduction, he dooms Rome to a different form of white-out. Caesar's 'scarcity' is sterility, yielding racial extinction.¹⁰⁵

But Cleopatra's blackness matters, too, to the subsequent politics of representation on the contemporary stage. Until white spectators encounter images of blackness where we don't expect them, we won't be impelled to examine white, hegemonic cultural assumptions or dismantle structures of spectatorship that have naturalized 'white looking'. To be sure, in the fifty years since Ashcroft's Cleopatra, we have disowned certain white practices – we've made some whiteness strange. Consider my final photographs, a pair that captures the same moment in *Othello* at the RSC in 1979, first in rehearsal, then in performance, with Donald Sinden playing the Moor opposite Suzanne Bertish's Desdemona. How strange the white man in rehearsal clothes looks, blacked up for performance in Jacobean doublet, the imperfect make-up around his eyes giving him the startled expression, ironically, of a raccoon. How strange, how unimaginable this theatre practice looks to us now, as distant and redundant, twenty years on, as Victorian gaslights.¹⁰⁶ Urgently, though,

SHADOWING CLEOPATRA



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we must disown other white practices and learn to open up the space of performance to other narratives of desire, other cultural imaginaries. Anna's *Masque of Blackness* and Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* did that work, I believe, in their time; recovering blackness, *Antony and Cleopatra* can do it in our time too. To show the way, as a sort of cultural audition piece, I offer a moment of radical viewing as instruction towards further performance, a two-minute clip from the 1999 Oscar award ceremonies in Los Angeles showing 'Queen Elizabeth' arriving on the platform to introduce 'her' film, *Shakespeare in Love*. Every jewel, every fold of ruff and farthingale is authentically in place, but the face under the white, plaster-thick cosmetic surface is unmistakably black, and the voice emanating from the 'Elizabethan' body is just as unmistakably Whoopi Goldberg's, raucously announcing, in a 'bad-ass' American accent, 'I am the African Queen!' So Goldberg puts Cleopatra finally in view as a palimpsest of white performance, embodied black – she is, of course, impersonating not just Judi Dench's film Elizabeth but Dench's stage Cleopatra too – a fusion of high and low, black and white, that does not erase but rather foregrounds these contradictory categories and, in a moment of high-camp celebration, works to explode them.

Plate 12 'I am the African Queen!' Whoopi Goldberg as Queen Elizabeth, 1999 Oscar Awards, Los Angeles (a). Judi Dench as Queen Elizabeth in John Madden's 1998 *Shakespeare in Love*(b).

Source: Miramax Films/Universal Pictures, 1998.