Dame Janet Suzman | Cleopatra and the Boys

- [Wendy] And so I just wanted to say thank you. Thank you very much for joining us again.

- Okay, okay.

- [Wendy] Okay, welcome back and we are very much looking forward to your presentation on Antony and Cleopatra. Thank you.

- Thank you very-

- [Wendy] So I'm now going to hand- Yeah, pleasure. Thanks to everybody, you know, but a very special thank you to you. We've been looking forward to this presentation and I'm now going to hand it over to you.

- Okay. Can everybody hear me? I've been panicking a little here in my suffer kind of way because I couldn't get through to you, but am I audible?

- [Wendy] Oh, I'm sorry. Yes, yes you're audible, you are visible and we are looking forward to the next hour, thank you.

- Okay.

- [Wendy] I'm sorry about that. I dunno how that happened.

- I dunno how it happened either, technology, I mean, you know, it's terrible. So listen, I'm very happy to be here, Wendy, and thank you so much for like having me. I have a lot to say, so listen, I hope you will bear with me. It's quite a big subject. I must be mad, but here we are. I'm thrilled you've come. By the way, if there are any Shakespeare scholars amongst you, please have the grace to leave your convictions at the door. Would you please? So there were no actresses in England before the restoration in 1660.

This statement of fact has been taught to every school child when introduced to Shakespeare's world, every scholar concurs that in Puritan England, it was unthinkable for audiences to accept female performers because showing herself off to the public gaze was the work of the very devil. My contention here is that perceived history is being questioned and reassessed these days and that nothing is written in stone. So the first professional actress on the English stage was a certain Margaret Hughes playing Desdemona in 1660. Before that date, women were more or less a disappeared species. Though we found reports of certain aristocratic ladies at the court of King James, the first, and especially his wife, Anne of Denmark, who loved dressing up and fooling around in masks and having a hilarious time with various ladies of the aristocracy dressed as goddesses, this or that. Rather drunken revels according to most accounts.

Ordinary women though who came to Shakespeare's globe for a laugh and perhaps secretly dreamed of a stage career just had to lump it. Then in our time along comes Tom Stoppard, where a man of the theatre just as Shakespeare was, and he dramatised this sort of frustration, now quite marvellously in his film. Do you remember it, Shakespeare in Love? And he writes about a young aristocrat who sneaks herself with a little help from her friends onto the stage of the globe theatre to play Viola in Twelfth Night and to fall in love with young Shakespeare of course. And modern Sir Tom therefore addresses this thing called Burning Ambition, which happily, 20th century women can do something about.

Feminist movements were still miles away down the road of history. Queen Elizabeth herself spoke about her impatience with the disparity in between the sexes on more than one occasion. I may have the weak and feeble body of a woman, but I have the mind and stomach of a man. And more vivid delineations, which irritated the queen. But Shakespeare's awareness of the social straight jacket was very sharp, quite uncanny in fact. Those travesty parts, those cross-dressing characters of his: Viola, Rosalyn, Portia and so on, forced to dress as a boy for self-protection, could convey on the stage the heady freedoms of a man. Their adventures powered by love must have spoken loud and clear to those women in his audience who were open to fresh and forbidden ideas.

Cross-dressing roles to contemporary actors, most of us wear jeans, so you know, that's easy. Happily we have those male freedoms by now though we might struggle a bit with these old-fashioned codes of honour, or those fiercely guarded chastities, for example. The actor's credo though, never stand in judgement on the character that you're playing. A classic. What is it? A classic is a classic, because it speaks afresh to each succeeding generation. The only reason for broaching a 450 year old play is to find out what still resonates in our world. Frustration at the limitations women must put up with so often bursts out in these characters at a peak point. An angry Beatrice, an enraged Cleopatra, when a furious queen confronts Antony with I would I had thy inches. Thou shallt know there were a heart in Egypt. I know for sure, she's my soul sister. A brief history now perhaps just to set the scene a little. Shakespeare's acting company, called Lord Chamberlain's Men was an all male ensemble.

And significantly all the members were equal shareholders in the company. That gave them the incentive to work hard and to work together. The ideal of an ensemble acting company in England was born with the Elizabethan theatre companies and then pretty much, pretty much died out over the next 400 years, until Peter Hall established in 1964 the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford, which is where I first started. All over Europe, there were ensemble companies, maybe there still are, except the plague has probably wiped them out, I don't know. But Hall's era at Stratford with those plays, was a golden time in remaking Shakespeare into a powerful contemporary voice. Hither to, he was considered much more of a revered poet, often rather cringingly dubbed 'The Bard'. Probably Hall's best achievement was to restore the meaning more than the music to the verse. And to show off the collective strength in a company of peers, just like Shakespeare's, given to the stories. Sure stars took the leads in Stratford, but around them were strong players.

They say no small parts in Shakespeare, only small actors. They say that, it's true. The overall power that Wars of the Roses cycle of plays was pretty unremarkable. In his own time, Shakespeare was a hardworking company member, an actor writer, writing hit after hit like Twelfth Knight, which played before the Queen, Elizabeth in Middle Temple Hall in 1602. A year later almost she was dead and James came to the throne and Shakespeare's company became the official royal troupe known as the King's men in May 1603, just in time for the onset of the plague when all the theatres were closed. Sound familiar? So while the men's companies in England thrived without petticoats, actresses were very busy in the Catholic countries across the channel, notably Italy and Spain, both producing rich, dramatic literatures.

The female roles weren't especially great, more types than believable flesh and blood, but they were lively enough. And those foreign troops often visited and played in Puritan England. Well, from time to time anyway. With Will Shakespeare churning out plays, the women's roles began to morph into 3D human creatures. Expressive, passionate, witty, comical. Beings you could almost recognise. Almost. Characters say things that sometimes you would give your right arm to be able to articulate. So expressive are they of feelings which you are unable, maybe unwilling to develop yourself, recognisably human, but always in extreme crisis. Maybe that's why he's popular in prisons where crisis is the norm, language at that level is empowering.

And in spite of this astonishing leap forward, there is no intellectual, metaphysical, or emotional equivalent in the female roles to the philosopher kings say in the history plays. No spiritual tussle equal to Lear's, no malignant manipulator like Iago, no sustained comic equivalent to Malvolio. No giant mischievous life force like Falstaff, no dark regicides like Macbeth. Above all, there's nothing to measure up to Hamlet belonging to no one but himself and speaking for every age because he is so much himself. These men make the going, the drive, the play. They have agency. Neither in life nor in art were women permitted any social or legal agency. Until we get to Ibsen's groundbreaking duo of the Dolls House and Hedda Gabler, right at the end of the 19th century. When out of the blue, the plight of a woman's chattelage to her husband, her pathetically narrow parameters in life, were fleshed out. Received history has largely obscured contributions by women, we know that now.

Not deliberately, perhaps, but I don't know, out of a kind of disinterest. Women are still basically peripheral. Sorry ladies, but there you go. But exceptional characters break accepted rules to seek adventure or education. For instance, an officer serving in the British army during the world war gets wounded and shock/horror, under the uniform, she turns out to be a woman. Disguise, the only way women could experiment with physical independence and test their own metal, as men can do. Think George Elliot and the Brontes, having to mascarade as male writers in order to get published. How much more gumption did you have to have to strut your stuff in full public gaze on the stage, out in the marketplace? But somehow, impatient, spirited, gifted women have always found the courage to break the patriarchal rules.

And I suspect there was one around by Shakespeare. Women in drama belonged quite legally

to a male as I guess they did in life. Called wives, mothers, sisters, daughters. Petruchio may overlard his marital powers for laughs when he crows my ox, my ass, my everything to an irate Kate. But it's a perfect summation of the status quo. I once tried, I remember in the seventies, to get an insurance policy of sorts into my own name instead of my husband's and had a long and very silly fight to do so. When an act was passed in 1976 only, giving women the right to her own income tax return, the presiding judge said the last vestige of women's chattelage to man has been removed from the statute books. Harrah. We were no longer an ox or an ass. Although Shakespeare has written more and better parts for women than other writers, still only 16% of his output, his whole output, offers up major female roles.

He wrote 37 plays and all of his women rely for their life and their ultimate fate on a male character. In Shakespeare's time, only the queen herself possessed the power to be taken seriously. The real Cleopatra the 7th, seems to have had much in common with the first Elizabeth. Her manipulative genius, a fluency in Greek and Latin amongst other languages, courtesy of their fathers who saw that their daughters were properly educated. Their astute state craft and above all, their sharp instinct for good PR. Each cleverly choosing an iconic self-image, Queen Elizabeth as the Virgin Queen and Queen Cleopatra as the goddess Isis. It looks as if Shakespeare emulated the talent of his own Elizabeth to make his fictional queen clever enough to be well aware of how to juggle the twin dangers of having a brain and seeming not to. Sir Thomas North had translated the first century historian's Plutarch's the lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans.

And Shakespeare had read them and found much to chew on in his life of Marcus Antonius. That immortal barge speech in the play, you know that golden barge, taken almost word for word from North's Plutarch and then transformed into a work of genius is part of the magic that we must consider. Delving into North's Marcus Antonius leads Shakespeare straight to that barge and its fabulous occupant. The play that emerged out of this delving is not called Marcus Antonius, though, the sequel as it would be to Julius Caesar. It's called by two names of equal weight. Who then was in his mind for Cleopatra, I wonder. In his acting company, he had already made leading actor called Richard Berbage, not for Antony. We stand up peerless, boasts Antony in scene one of the play. I can't see a boy as a peer, try as I might.

The great Berbage would be just as fine as eponymous Antony, but what magical boy could match him as eponymous Cleopatra? Just doesn't make much sense really, does it? The late great scholar, Harold Bloom's seminal book on Hamlet sums up the Shakespearean achievement as no less than the invention of the human. Well, that hits the nail right on the head. As I must tell you this little story by the by. I was once invited to speak to a friendly coterie of Hamstead psychoanalysts one fine Sunday afternoon. You know Hamstead in London, that's where Freud lived, so you know, psychoanalysis. And they gathered on the last Sunday of every month regularly to analyse everyone of Shakespeare's characters as if they were real patients. So an airing in Shakespeare's psychological instinct.

Anyway, back to Harold Bloom, who died last year. But in 1917, Bloom published four neat

books being his thoughts on the four creations in the canon that for him had an independent life outside of fiction, so original and alive do they seem. Lear, Falstaff, Hamlet and Cleopatra. He calls them his personalities. I quote from his book called Cleopatra, I am Fire and Air, Scribner December, 2017, the publisher by the way. Shakespeare, he says, would've known that women performed on the Roman stage ruefully. He must have chafed at the legal restrictions that boys impersonated women characters.

I have always wondered, he said, how even a skilled Jacobian boy actor could have successfully performed the role of Cleopatra. Well quite, because dear Mr. Bloom, I have wondered, too. In thanking Harold Bloom for sending me a copy of his fire and air book. He wanted my picture on the cover and a girl can't help being flattered by that. I wrote to him, I will have to approach your view of Cleopatra with a slow and respectful caution because although I can see at a glance that you are deeply under her spell, as a man should be, I as an actor could not approach her in the same way. She and I had to be comrade in arms rather, and up to each other's sisterly tricks. I was entirely intent on taking her side in all things, even when she perfectly well understood that she was being impossible.

But always true to herself in her honest assessment, both of herself and of Antony. But I confess, I finished by writing: It is gobsmacking to me that Shakespeare could have known so much about the how this tricky creature operated. Harold Bloom replied to me, humbly and sweetly, nice. And gentlemen in the audience, please don't take this amiss. Harold Broom wrote, only Shakespeare can rise above the limitations of being a male. Well, only a man is able to say such a thing and happily for me, it instantly renders my instinctive conviction less dismissible. And what is this conviction that Shakespeare probably wrote Cleopatra with a woman actor in mind? I am well aware that in sharing with you my thoughts on a tried and tested masterpiece of world literature, I do need a bit of a fact to back up my thesis and thus for, I have just one to flourish, written by a certain Thomas Coryat, a travel writer, said to be the first Britain to have made the grand tour of Europe, often on foot, who made a trip to Venice in 1608 and went one night to the theatre there.

He wrote this in his journal, 'Saw women act, a thing I never saw before, though I have heard that it hath been sometimes used in London. And they performed with as good a grace, action, gesture and whatsoever convenient for a player, as ever I saw in any masculine actor. Sometimes used in London, eh? Where? When? By what company? In what play? Sometimes implies more than just the once. A few times, many times? That mysterious sentence merely a casual entry into a journal clangs bells down the centuries. You see, all of Cleopatra's scenes are perfectly balanced and eminently actable. While some of Antony's and other subploty bits in this gigantic play are eminently cuttable, why are her scenes so achieved, I ask myself.

He writes his Cleopatra in the full expectation that whoever his actor will be, has a sensibility alive to her shifting subtleties of intention. His lifelong fascination with appearance and reality with what seems and what is explored in so many of his plays seems here born out in her person. If I were to try to choose what most defines her modus operandi, it is the seamless

veering from speaking truth to belying that truth with a blast of inventive imagery. Her becomings, as she says astutely calls them. Act one. Scene three, line 19, if you're curious. Some commentators with a cruder knowledge of survival tactics may call it manipulation. Well, doesn't everybody try to get what they want? Of course they do.

The actor's main job in playing her is to go with her constant ebb and flow to feel in the instant when she's telling the truth and when she's not, when she's revealing and when she's concealing, when she's being politic, and when seeking an honest response. Look at the simplicity and guilt so exquisitely mixed in her when talking to Enobarbus, act three, scene eight after the shaming of Antony at Actium. So I take Harold Bloom's insight on the nature of Shakespeare's transcendent empathy, as a sort of corroboration of my lone attempt to propose that an actress and not a boy might have been in Shakespeare's mind. There's no record of a performance, but performed the play had to be somewhere, sometime because it's far too good not to have been road tested.

Bloom wouldn't possibly suggest that a woman may have played her, though he implies as much, because thus far it is unprovable. Now that doesn't mean it never happened. Academics on the whole don't approve, but amongst theatre colleagues, I believe I'm not alone in this view. You experience, how can I put this, certain truths on a stage that you can't deduce from a page. If you stand up and speak this stuff out loud, you connect with a text, not just with your voice obviously, but with your body. And lo and behold, a character starts to form itself. As the great John Barton, look him up, look him up, always told us, text is character. So a little brief history of my enmeshment with the play, in case you're wondering, I played it at the RSC both in Stratford and in London. And that production by Trevor Nunn was also filmed for TV.

You can find it on YouTube if you're curious. I was 34 at the time, near enough to her age. Cleopatra died at 38. 40 years passed before Kim Catrell, a delightful Samantha of Sex in the City and an extremely fine actress, asked me if I would direct her in it. Would I just, I lept at the chance to examine the part once again through her and to come at it with certain untried ideas jostling around in my mind. Like Harold Bloom, once bitten by Shakespeare's glories, he won't let you go. I'm over 80 now and I'm still wondering. I know the play. I mean like biblical know it from the inside out and from the outside in. Only by exploring every second of our stage life, speaking and listening, silent and moved, do you realise what Shakespeare aims for, though I doubt it's impossible really to encompass the creature's whole gamut in one go.

I can vouch for the fact that she stretches your poor talents to the limits. Some of you might remember Marlon Brando doing a famous 'friends, Romans, countrymen' speech in that film. That charismatic Antony is quite gone by the time we see him again at Cleopatra's court, as our play begins. Unlike many plays which have very expository beginnings, this starts off with a bang. A Roman officer, stationed at the garrison in Alexandria called Philo, starts the whole play off with a nay, like a starting gun. His indulgence has reached the end of its tether. Here's Philo's speech. 'Nay, but this dotage of our general's o'erflows the measure: those his goodly eyes, that are the files and musters of the war have glowed like plated Mars. Now bend, now turn the office

and devotion of their view upon a tawny front, his captain's heart, which in the scuffles of great fights have burst the buckles on his breast. Reneges all temper and has become the bellows and the fan to cool a gypsy's lust. She's tawny fronted, see?

And that instantly makes her a foreigner, an exotic. In actual fact, she was the daughter of Ptolomeus, a Macedonian captain of Alexander's who had been rewarded with Egypt. Her mother might well have been Egyptian. We just don't know. Shakespeare though, makes her the other. Not just foreign but brown-skinned. A threatening presence. Two opposing civilizations are thus established. Antony is to be torn between his passion for foreign Cleopatra and his Roman loyalties. Shakespeare wants strife and conflict. Drama is conflict. Mozart's voray in envoray. I want to and I don't want to, all in one breath. Yeah, wow. That's dramatic conflict. So act one lays out the parameters of this tumultuous relationship.

A messenger from Rome brings disturbing news. The Queen ever led to disasters, provokes a boasting, boozy Antony to get on with the politics, back to the abandoned wife when he comes to ask for her leave in scene three of act one, ready to fix his cracking Roman world. His mouth-made loud vows of love don't fool the queen, they enrage her. She takes the abused wife's part. So contemptuous is she of Antony's betrayal of his marriage vows, she goads him to anger like a matador with a bull. As the play rolls on- Excuse me. She watches him make mistake after mistake. As if, I don't know, like watching a car crash in slowmo. He marries Caesar's sister, misjudges Caesar's powers and loses to him in a sea battle.

All Cleopatra's fault. She flees to her monument, eager to save herself and her country, and sends a lying message to Antony saying she's dead. She's not to be trusted, you see. Here's the conundrum of the play. We never really know how deeply she loves him. On the other hand, he is enthralled with her from start to finish. Even as eventually he is brought to breathe his last in the arms of Cleopatra, his self-deception remains at full throttle. A Roman by a Roman valiantly vanquished, he boasts, covering his anguish. And she, about to lose this giant layabout forever, begins to realise too late how much she loves him. He dies. She goes unnervingly silent at the realisation of what she has lost. It's a huge turning point for her, in the last act of the play. Metaphorically, she holds hands with King Lear for a revealing moment.

She like him becomes yet another poor forked animal, realising her own frailty. No more but in a woman and commanded by such poor passions as the maid that milks and does the meanest to chairs. The authority of a crown is nothing. Achingly self-aware, her language becomes elevated into greatness and the play becomes a tragedy at that moment. You remember these lines? 'I dreamed there was an emperor, Antony'? The famous dream? Inside her hidden hiding place, her monument, a swat team of Roman soldiers surprise her and her women. She tries to stab herself. She's brutally disarmed. Dolabella, a more senior officer, arrives to order the others out. Drained, disarmed, desperate, dreading the mockery of the shouting viletry of censuring Rome. She distances herself from him, seeking refuge in a sort of fantasy.

She speaks yearningly of a golden time when first they met and fell for each other, under each

other's spell. Her dream describes not so much the noble Roman she first loved but a demigod. She aggrandizes his image to a giant presence, striding the world. Her grief at his lost feeds the myth to match her sense of desolation and betrayal. You laugh, you laugh when boys or women tell their dreams. "I understand not, madam." says Dolabella. "I dreamed there was an emperor, Antony. Oh, such another sleep that I might see but such another man. His face was as the heavens and there in stuck a sun and moon, which kept their course and lighted the little earth. His legs bestrid the ocean. His reared arm crested the world.

His voice was propertied as all the tuned spheres and that to friends. But when he meant to quail and shake the orb, he was as rattling thunder. For his bounty there was no winter in't, an autumn twas that grew the more by reaping. His delights were dolphinlike. They showed his back above the element they lived in. In his livery walked crowns and crownetts, realms and islands where as plates dropped from his pocket. Like small change." Philo told us at the beginning of the play about the flesh and blood general so loved by his men. And we never see that one. And we never see this dream lover either, except here in her mind's eye.

In the last act after his death, the queen, transforming her human feelings to fire and air, prepares to meet the Antony of her dream in heavens. "Husband I come,", she says, as she dresses for a spectacular royal death. At last, she's ready to marry the Antony she first caught in her strong toil of grace at Cygnus, before their passion soured. This Octavius Caesar, the man who precipitated her exquisite suicide and proceeded after to rule the then known world for the next 45 years. He it was who said, "I found Rome brick and left it marble", ordered his spin doctors after her death to trash her reputation, propagate slanderous stories, vulgarise her history and deface her statues. I've had been told there's a defaced pillar or scrap of carving somewhere in the British museum cellars where she looks a bit like Barbara Streisand.

That makes sense. Jolie d'aire. That figures, loads of allure. The celluloid image of the famous Burton-Taylor glamour, cast a sort of filmy glow over the play, giving the general impression of a mature, mutual passion at full tilt. Whereas the play is, in fact, I don't know, a huge rangy poem about the slow crumbling of a once titanic alliance. The astute royal operator who entranced two great Romans and ran the most efficient theocracy in the ancient world is arranged, arranged completely. The patriarchy as ever rewrites history and wins hands down. Hence this attempt to put in question the view that a boy will have played this character. Am I to think that Shakespeare didn't care a jot if what he imagined in his head couldn't be thrillingly fleshed out on the stage? Every playwright, alive or dead, wants to see his play done justice to by first rate actors. Every composer, living or dead, wants to hear his music played or sung to the greatest possible advantage.

Look at Mozart challenging those Viva girls with his most thrilling of arias. Artists have their muses. I bet you a million, Shakespeare knew someone who was up to the challenge. I once saw a no actor play a shiveringly seductive Medea in a fabulous production by the great Japanese director, Yukio Ninagawa. That was in 1989. And the low actor I saw was feline, elegant, understated, emotionally veiled, feminine. And although stylized, never camp. He used

his own flexible tenor voice without ornament. He avoided the cliche of adding false breasts or an elegant figure hugging gown, and merely hinted of the sexual predator as his chilling pursuit of vengeance unfurled. Out of all this exquisitely judged understatement, that incomprehensible soul of Medea seemed to be fully revealed. It was remarkable acting.

And a serious no actor has to start with an early apprenticeship at six or seven in the company and a rigorous training for life ensues. Hamlet's little eyases started early, but reports of a rigorous training are lacking. Those boys would've picked up tricks and techniques and some of them must have been remarkably gifted at copying. I've seen men play 'As You Like It' with a sweet touch of comedy, but I have not seen British actors play a tragic female role. It would take an uncanny degree of psychological and physical immersion in the opposite sex to do that. I've never come across an uncanny boy. Basic common sense tells me that men played those very grown up women of his, the Countess for Lumnia, Mad Margaret, Paulina, Gertrude, the sad queens and the histories and so on. Odd isn't it, that we know so little about who played what.

If by any chance there were 30 female players knocking about the place, they would remain unrecorded as a matter of necessity. In a police state, you quickly learn to be discreet, lest you be hauled before the thought police as I once was, it would've been courting disaster to make a written report of absolutely everything in a police state. So we returned to the silence about the playing history. For the sake of argument, let's say that the play was first performed in a private house with a trusted invited audience. Such an audience would enter into the conspiracy and agree gleefully to Chatham house rules. It's always exciting to be asked to keep a secret. Those who have survived the idiocies of a police state know to stay strong, do we not?

By the time I was at university, I was as devoted to shutting up as the next person. All of us held bent on not betraying our friends. The campus and the University of the front when I was there, was well supplied with police paid students spies. Shakespeare lived in even more dangerous times. You could find yourself with your head on a pike staff in his day. In mine in South Africa, just a few sore skulls from a police baton from time to time, if you weren't already arrested. I wasn't, but I had friends who were. Am I then surprised that so very few written records of journals exist from Shakespeare's time? Not really. Those itinerant actresses from Spain, from France, from Italy, across the channel from time to time- I dunno, some Sophia Loren, some budding Bernhardt.

Who is to say Shakespeare wasn't inspired by one of them to embody his tawny fronted queen. The least English of parts. Young Elizabethans will have reached puberty rather later than they do now due to food and healthcare. So a scholarly young Portia striding into a court of law would be thrilling. A young Kate in a full-blown adolescent rebelliousness would've been well within reach of a lad. Boys are touching. There's an openness of heart in a boy. I like the purity of a boy's unbroken voice, which is very affecting. But they can't do everyday deception and burning passion and convincing lies and stupendous anger and deep irony for the simple reason that they've had no need for the survival mechanisms of a woman.

Casting this peerless pair is nightmarish at the best of times, Antony is at her beck and call except for one scene, act four, scene 14, when he tries and fails to kill himself. In sum, Antony is a magnificent failure. No actor likes the sound of that. Actors are not used to playing so-called second fiddle to a woman. This is a mature late play and by the time he wrote it, Shakespeare knew quite well what a boy could manage and what he could not. There's a fascinating paper, Boys Becoming Women in Shakespeare's Plays by a Juliet Dusinberre, scholar.

She says writing for boys gave the dramatists a flexibility in relation to the representation of gender on stage, which could only occur because the sexual identity of the actor was erased in the act of performance. But I guess our gender fluid age is exploring the same thing. However, she further argues that she herself would've preferred the real thing, just as his audience might have. Because Cleopatra's sexual allure is so fiercely written up in the play, she can hardly be a sexual fiction. So Dusinberre makes this further point on the subject. Her physical presence becomes central to the dramatic evocation of sensuality in a way that the boy actors could never have been. She's concurring with Harold Bloom, you see.

The following observation is perhaps the most important when considering what a boy actor might accomplish or not. And she writes this, the relation of the boy actor to the extra expression of strong emotion is not, even in the most gifted of youths, a given. They simply don't have the experience of life and certainly not the technical expertise to exercise restraint, which is the actor's chief tool in containing and expressing strong emotions. Shakespeare must have been sometimes concerned that the boy actor would ruin everything with a burst of amateurish and immature passion. Quite so. Actors need not cry real tears, but must know how to make you cry by holding back their full power so you feel their unexpressed pain. The performer must be in control. You remember Hamlet's exultation to the players?

That speech, which implores no overacting, still stands as a benchmark for modern actors. So evidently, we in this age have more in common with our Elizabethan colleagues then the stretch of centuries between us would imply. Is the abyss between a then-audience and a now-audience greater? I wonder. I wonder. This may be a crucial point. Setting aside the religious convictions of the day, human behaviour doesn't change. If you prick us, do we not bleed? So now I come to the one passage in the play on which all scholars hang their boy actor hat. It is the go-to textual defence offered up in favour of boy actors. An imprisoned Cleopatra pictures being mocked in Caesar's triumphal procession through the streets of Rome to celebrate the utter defeat of Egypt. Caesar has visited Cleopatra hiding in her monument and before he leaves, has promised her our care and pity is so much upon you that we remain your friend. And so, adieu. He goes, smug as a bug. What a prize.

She is not fooled. She is very angry. "He words me girls, he words me." She sends Sharmeen away to arrange for the death she's so carefully planned. She turns to the younger girl. "Now, Iris, what thinks thou?" Thou an Egyptian puppet, she'll be shown in Rome as well as I. She continues to scare young Ires stiff and remember, he's also a boy actor. By describing the humiliations they will suffer, Antony shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see some

squeaking, Cleopatra. Boy, my greatness in the posture of a whore. Here, say the scholars, is secure textual proof that a boy would be squeaking his way through the role of Cleopatra. Let's turn it on its head. Boy is here used as a verb, to boy, to make little, diminish, a deliberate antithesis to greatness. Shakespeare quite often uses nouns as verbs. Also, to boy paints the picture of masculinize. Won't suit her. He could so easily have written show, which scans nicely, show my greatness in the posture of a whore.

Even the choice of posture implies an inadequacy of expressiveness as if just the crude outer shape will do. A boy actor would have to approximate his notion of how a whorish female might hold herself by copying some oh, I don't know, loitering in cheap side, let's say. Actors are always observing the shapes and ticks of other human beings. When my son was small, I took him to London Zoo one day, I remember. And I came across an admired actor, quietly observing the chimps in the monkey house with the close attention of a zoologist on a field trip. Turned out, he was preparing to play the fool in King Lear. What he wanted, I don't know exactly, but something relevant grabbed his imagination in watching the behaviour of those animals. Anyway, so back to that scene, "Some squeaking Cleopatra, boy, my greatness in the posture of a whore." Iris, her young attendant, cries that she'd rather tear out her eyes than see such a thing. Why? That's the way Cleopatra applauds her spirit.

And then moxies his intended triumph as a most absurd intent. So yeah, absurd. It is surely to paint a picture of boys mocking boys doing bad acting at this moment in the play. Just where the Queen of Egypt envisages total humiliation. Doesn't make sense. Rosalyn's epilogue in As You Like It tells us that women were unmistakably present in a contemporary audience. No women worth her salt would take kindly to being buoyed. And surely there must have been quite a few women worth their salt watching the plays. Why on earth would Shakespeare, with his unerring eye for the right tone in a drama, write an alienating interview where two boy actors purposefully rubbish boy actors? How ill-judged would it be to take an audience out of the thrall of tension at this point in the play? I mean, how does an actor carry an audience along on her suicidal journey if the audience has been encouraged to snicker?

So, I don't know. I read the quote about squeaking Cleopatras as a sort of message in a bottle from Shakespeare to the world. If you want to see a great queen belittled before your eyes, watch our boy player. What is an actor's chief instrument of expression? In films, the eyes. In dance, the body. On the stage, the voice. So as to squeakiness, a youthful voice in danger of breaking, as mine is, can't be trusted. It's a long and arduous play. Above all else, how does an immature instrument fully express the emotions of a mature soul? You tell me that. Having written a part which needs strength, rightfully and Shakespeare would know the drawbacks of a breaking voice. And another thing, there are enough jokes scattered through the play about ageing, to make it visible for a youngster to pull them off with any conviction.

Now I feed myself with most delicious poison. Think on me, that am with Phoebus' amorous pinches black and wrinkled deep in time". Or "My salad days, when I was green in judgement : cold in blood, to say as I said then!" Or the high comedy, when a messenger blurts a

nerve-wracked guess at Octavia's age. "And I do think she's 30" is met by a glare and murderous solace, both high comedy and high tragedy in one song. Fear of losing her allure, a teasing temperament inserted into her commanding demeanour, irony and self-mockery. All these are pretty tall order for a mere lad. For a very young man, however talented and seeming he would be, absolutely incapable of these deeper deceptions. One final point, Shakespeare entrusted the last act of this enormous play to the female protagonist. That structure is quite unprecedented in dramatic literature.

The player who took on Cleopatra must have been someone who Shakespeare knew could hold the house's attention in the palm of her hand right to the end. Shakespeare, a man of the theatre to his marrow, has surely have had one hell of an actor in mind for the part. Harold Bloom's right. She's oceanic. Cleopatra's part is shorter and sharper than Antony's. Perfectly written, thrillingly conceived as the most complicated, untrustworthy, alluring presence in all of dramatic literature. She fights for life to the finish, finally embracing the snake to her breast only when she knows there's no way out. She dies beautifully. Triumphantly, fiercely in charge of her own fate. Hedda Gabler would applaud. For both, death is better than a life without freedom. Liberty or oblivion, as long as it's done beautifully. Whoever the dark lady of the sonnets was, Shakespeare's fascination with another dark lady is here manifested. Far too large a commitment for the fledgling soul of a boy, I say. Thank you.

- Janet, thank you very, very much. Are you- That was outstanding. Thank you for that fantastic presentation. Are you going to, are you willing to take questions?

- I guess, yes, why not? Yeah. Will you read them to me?

- So I think Trudy's going to do that. Trudy Grohl.

- Okay.

- Trudy, Trudy, you there?

- [Trudy] I'm there, yes, I'm there.

- Yes. I'm going to hand over to Trudy now. So thank you, Janet. That was awesome.

- [Trudy] Janet, that was absolutely amazing.

- Hello.

Q&A and Comments:

- [Trudy] And I'm going to read the questions to you. There's a question here. Is there any resemblance to the historic Cleopatra in Shakespeare?

- Well, I think I told you quite a lot about that.

- Yes, I think you did. You've answered that one, haven't you?

- Yeah, I think so. Yeah. Yeah.

- A lot of compliments for you. And this is from Ellie. Thank you, Janet, for an enlightening presentation. Gal Gadot, the Israeli actress, was cast as Cleopatra in an upcoming Hollywood production. And then-

- Fantastic.

- You're getting a lot of, not a question, just a thank you. Wonderful talk, what else?

- Oh, great, fantastic.

- Is it asking too much of an audience to accept a Cleopatra who is physically ugly? That's a strange question.

- Well, there's no such thing. If somebody has inner spirit, you can't be ugly. You just can't be. That's why I mentioned Barbara Streisand. You know the, the French have a wonderful jolie l'aire, the British don't have the grace to describe it that way. But I mean, you can be ugly pretty and be irresistible. We all know that.

- Of course, of course. I'm just seeing if there's anything- Ah, yes. This is from Linda. Thank you for a beguiling theory. Are you suggesting that Shakespeare had a woman in mind for the part and then would've settled for a young man? Given what you have said, this is hard to believe. That's from Linda.

- Linda who? You have to listen to my .

- Linda, Linda Hamps, Linda Hampson.

- Oh, darling. Tell Linda Hampson I took great pains to describe that.

- Yes, I thought so. And then again, Norman Kirsch. Brilliant, bravo. Mariam Bruce, a privilege to see you again. Again, Rosgold Farber. A huge thank you. This is from Karen Silmon. What a magnificent analysis by a clearly magnificent person. Thank you. I took a course with Professor Michael Moran, who is a director/actor in the Bay Area, and would love to connect the two of you. We studied Hamlet, Coriolanus and Lear plays in the time of the plague, and so watch how they relate to our time. You have so many fans. Totally fantastic.

- [Host] Trudy, there's also one from someone called Vivian. Dear Janet, you may recall me. I am the Vivian that nominated you for the Freedom of the City and chaired the cultural committee. I now chair Guild Hall School of Music and Drama. Thank you for this marvellous, enlightening talk. So pleased to feel that Shakespeare wrote for a woman in this most wonderful part. Hope you are well, and we meet again soon, perhaps at Keith's. Best wishes. And that was from Vivian.

- Fantastic. Vivian, thank you. Thank you, thank you. How nice.

- Have we got any- I can't, have we got, I think that's it actually. Anyway, Janet, that was such a fabulous perform- It was a performance, but it got us all thinking. It's marvellous.

- That's good.

- A strong woman talking about women, I love it. So thank you, thank you from Sussex.

- My pleasure.

- I hope it's not too bad for you down there. I mean, London is a nightmare.

- It's just a misty cold day down here, but it's okay.

- But I think-

- We're the lucky ones, aren't we really?

- Oh, yes we are, and I think-

- Because it's a savage thing going on out there.

- Oh, it's terrible. And I think this, it's so good of you to talk to the lockdown university because I think everybody's wanting the contact now. So a million thanks.

- Yes, we all need it, don't we? Yeah, yeah.

- We all need it. It's a tough time, but we will come through it. So again, Janet, thank you, it was brilliant.

- Well, it's a great honour to be asked by you, so thank you.

- And for me, it's a great lady. Fabulous performance, fabulous presentation-

- Thank you.

- And a million thanks.

- Okay.

- And to all of you who are with us tonight, night-night, and for those in the States, enjoy the rest of your day.

- Thank you.

- Good night everyone.

- Thank you, Judy, as always. Bye-bye.

- God bless.

- Bye.

- Thank you.