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and "A Streetcar Named Desire"

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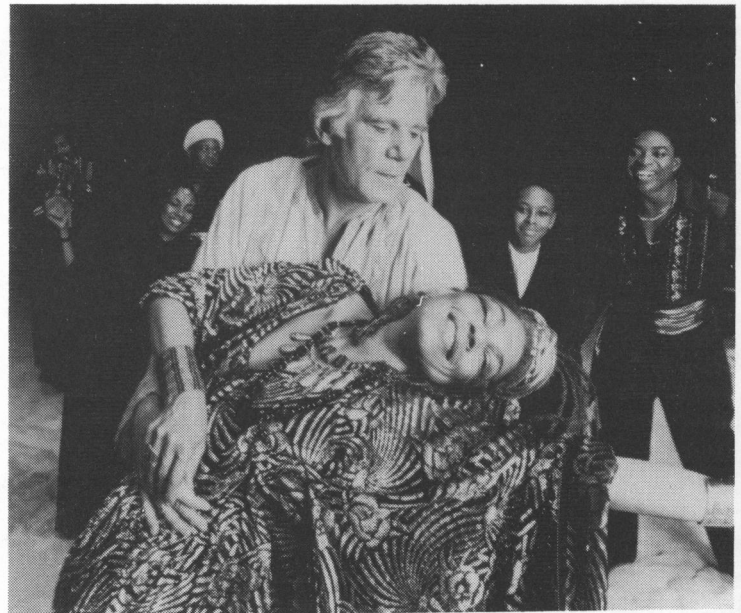
By Philip C. Kolin

Tennessee Williams was astutely aware of the theatrical neighborhood in which his work competed. He realized that the meaning of one of his plays could be deepened and enriched by another work being performed near it at the same time. When *Camino Real* was playing in New Haven in 1953, he recalled, "we opened directly across the street from a movie theater that was showing *Peter Pan* in Technicolor, and it did not seem altogether inappropriate to me." He went on to allude to the similarities between fairy tales and the "fantasies of *Camino Real*" (*Where I Live* 64). Five years earlier, when *A Streetcar Named Desire* premiered at the Ethel Barrymore, Katharine Cornell was starring as Cleopatra in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* down the street at the Martin Beck.¹ Opening on November 26, 1947, Cornell's *Cleopatra* ran for 136 performances (Leiter 22-23), or through the first part of *Streetcar*'s phenomenal journey of 855 performances on Broadway. When he was working on an earlier version of *Streetcar* in 1945, Williams wanted to cast Cornell as Blanche (Burks 27), though he later changed his mind because of Cornell's age (she was forty-eight). Possibly the casting of Jessica Tandy as Blanche was dictated by Williams' image of Cornell in the role. In any case, just knowing Cornell was playing Cleopatra on Broadway must have reminded Williams of how compatible she could be for the complementary roles of Blanche and Shakespeare's queen. The connection between the two tragic heroines has not been explored but deserves to be since *Streetcar* bears the unmistakable imprint of *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Williams knew his Shakespeare well. In a 1974 interview with Cecil Brown, he recalled: "I began to read him when I was a child. My grandfather had all of Shakespeare's works, and I read them all by the time I was ten . . ." (Brown 269). Many Shakespearean sources have been suggested for Williams' characters. As far as Blanche is concerned, however, she is far closer to Cleopatra than to the other Shakespearean model most often proposed for her, Hamlet. Esther Merle Jackson, for example, asserts that "Like Hamlet, Blanche DuBois reveals her inner nature by playing out her conflicted roles: school-teacher, Southern belle, poet, sister, savior, and prostitute" (84). Such association seems tenuous given the fact that, while Hamlet was a poet and possibly a savior, we can hardly claim for him the roles of teacher, belle, or sister. Following Jackson, Jacob Adler more recently argues that Blanche resembles Hamlet:

Neither Blanche nor Hamlet can bear the world as it is. Both are rejected for the role (king, wife) they want. Both have ideals which make meaningful action in an imperfect world almost impossible. Blanche loses her mind, and Hamlet at least pretends to. Blanche dreams of an ideal world of Southern aristocratic culture, as Hamlet has assumed and expected an ideal world of nobility. Hamlet and Blanche alike accuse a close female relative of giving up her principles for sex. (43)

Adler's comparisons seem more convenient than conclusive. Williams' Blanche owes a much greater Shakespearean debt to Cleopatra because the Egyptian queen's dual role of wily coquette and royal presence is also at the heart of Blanche's character. Like Shakespeare's Cleopatra, Blanche is a richly drawn, highly complex female character who is a composite of intriguing contradictions. Both women symbolize the "po-



Mitchell Ryan as Antony and Rosalind Cash as Cleopatra in Los Angeles Theatre Center's 1987 *Antony and Cleopatra*, directed by Tony Richardson. Photo by Chris Gulker.

larities of femininity" (Davidson 46).

In their role as the earthly Venus, Cleopatra and Blanche stand for desire, *Luxuria*; they have reputations for being sirens of pleasure. The desire both women project is associated with their narcissistic temperament. The beautiful Cleopatra is repeatedly adored or attacked for her vanity. At the beginning of scene ten of *Streetcar*, Blanche also displays her vanity as she adjusts her rhinestone tiara "on her head before the mirror of the dressing table" and a second later "lifts the hand mirror for closer inspection" (391).² The luminously suggestive painting of *Streetcar* by Thomas Hart Benton captures Blanche's fascination with vain desire by showing her gazing wantonly into a hand mirror as she combs her hair.

Because of their desire, the Egyptian queen and Blanche are frequently vilified as whores. I would point out, however, that Cleopatra has franker and less impressionable commentators on her behavior than does Blanche. For the most part, Blanche is her own commentator except when she must counter the relentlessly hostile witness Stanley or his protégé Mitch. In effect, there are more trustworthy expositors in Shakespeare than in *Streetcar*. Cleopatra is castigated by Antony as the "triple-turned whore" who is shamefully riggish, a gypsy whose lusts it is impossible to cool. Cleopatra's whorish ways are legion. To embarrass the Egyptian queen, Antony calls up a list of Cleopatra's amorous conquests "besides what hotter hours, / Unregistered in vulgar fame, you have / Luxuriously picked out" (3.13.120-22).³ If Cleopatra's lusts are unbounded, so too is Blanche's sexual appetite, according to the male characters in *Streetcar*. Like Cleopatra's sexual indiscretions, Blanche's

are bruited about. Blanche has been thrown out of a job, a seedy hotel, an entire town, and ultimately the world of the play because of her *Luxuria*. She is no "lily," affirms Stanley, and she is not clean enough for Mitch to bring home to his mother. She is branded as "Tiger-tiger!" (402) by Stanley, linking Blanche with a predatory creature associated with lust.

Cleopatra's reputation is built upon amorous sorcery; her deceptions cause Antony to give "his empire / Up to a whore" (3.6.68-69). The victim of Cleopatra's sorcery, Antony becomes the "noble ruin of her magic" (3.10.19). Not surprisingly, Cleopatra is often associated with magical charms. Pompey, Antony's honorable enemy, anticipates the dangerous effects of Cleopatra's sorcery on the Roman general: "But all the charms of love, / Salt Cleopatra, soften thy waned lip! / Let witchcraft joined with beauty, lust with both, / Tie up the libertine in a field of feasts . . ." (2.1.20-23). Forbodingly, Antony laments, as do his friends, that Cleopatra would fetter him, turn him into a "strumpet's fool," and, Circe-like, deprive him of his manhood. She herself recalls draping Antony in her garments while she wore "his sword Philippan" (2.5.22-23). Fearing the hold the Circean Cleopatra has on Antony, Enobarbus cautions his master: "Transform us not to women" (4.2.37). Finally convinced of Cleopatra's deceptions, Antony clearly stigmatizes the origin of her evil: "The witch shall die" (4.12.47).

Like her Egyptian counterpart, Blanche is branded a temptress, a deceiver of men, a Circe. But Blanche's Circean witchcraft is far less successful than Cleopatra's. In scene two of *Streetcar*, where Blanche reaches the apex of her Circean/temptress role with Stanley, she sardonically admits the powers of witchcraft women can use on men: "I cannot imagine any witch of a woman casting a spell over you" (279), though she herself, of course, has tried. A little later, she reveals the source of her Circean magic: "A woman's charm is fifty percent illusion" (281). Blanche's magic suggests a Cleopatran origin. Blanche shows her powers as the Cleopatran Circe with Mitch rather than with Stanley. She transforms Mitch into a well-trained bear when he is in her presence. During the quiet bacchanal Blanche orchestrates in the Kowalski bedroom during the poker night of scene three, she "turns the knobs on the radio and it begins to play 'Wien, Wien, nur du allein.' Blanche waltzes to the music with romantic gestures. Mitch is delighted and moves in awkward imitation like a dancing bear" (302). What the Roman soldiers feared in Cleopatra is exactly what Stanley and Mitch want to escape from in Blanche--that the temptress will "threaten one's masculinity and power" (Davidson 44).

As devotees of Venus, both Cleopatra and Blanche partake of the positive as well as the negative sides of the goddess of love--earthly and heavenly, whore and artist. The sensuous side of Venus' nature is clearly reflected in the sexual achievements of Cleopatra and Blanche, as we have seen. Less frequently emphasized, however, are the heavenly attributes of Venus that these two women possess. The heavenly Venus stood for art, aesthetic purity, fertility, and generation. The "heavenly Venus places the goals of life beyond the snare of this world and teaches men to love the permanent, eternal realities instead of immediate objects of affection" (Davidson 48). Renouncing the temporary pleasures of this world when Antony dies, Cleopatra looks to a future in a higher reality, a timeless world of love. Blanche, too, recognizes that "Physical beauty is passing. A transitory possession. But beauty of the mind and richness of the spirit and tenderness of the heart--and I have all of those things--aren't taken away, but grow" (396).

The most prominent parallels between Cleopatra and Blanche surface during their respective death scenes--act five, scene two for Cleopatra and scene ten for Blanche. Both women find themselves in similar tragic predicaments: awaiting the arrival of their executioners and, at the same time, readying themselves to meet their recently apotheosized lovers.

In Cleopatra's case, she fears that Caesar will make her his thrall and deprive her of regal status and freedom. But she vows through her death to defeat this paltry Caesar and then to be reunited with her be-

loved Antony and so attain a new heaven and a new earth. The true queen to the last, Cleopatra orders, "Show me, my women, like a queen. Go fetch / My best attires. I am again for Cydnus, / To meet Mark Antony" (5.2.227-29). A few lines later, Cleopatra's attendant Iras enters "with royal attire," and the great queen instructs:

Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have
Immortal longings in me. Now no more
The juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip.
Yare, yare, good Iras; quick. Methinks I hear
Antony call; I see him rouse himself
To praise my noble act. (280-85)

Shown like a queen, Cleopatra with her robe and crown cannot be portrayed as just the wily serpent of the Nile or the deceiving temptress. In her death scene, she invests her role as temptress with the solemnity and majesty of a higher office. Seeking endless life in death, she is transformed into the high priestess of immortal love. Her meeting death, in fact, is a ritual through which she metamorphoses herself and Antony into gods even as she physicalizes death's stroke "as a lover's pinch" (295) and views the Elysian Fields in vibrantly sexual terms: "Husband, I come!" (287). Free from the mortal passions that plague physical, earthly bodies while still glorying in those passions, Cleopatra gains everlasting liberty: "My resolution's placed, and I have nothing / Of woman in me. Now from head to foot / I am marble-constant . . ." (238-40). The queen Cleopatra thus can recapture an immortal Antony in timeless sleep. Telling Antony she is coming, Cleopatra signals her (and his) transcendence: "I am fire and air; my other elements / I give to baser life" (289-90). Even the prosaic Caesar recognizes: "Bravest at the last, / She leveled at our purposes, and, being royal, / Took her own way" (335-37).

Blanche takes her own way, too, in scene ten of *Streetcar* as Williams grafts Cleopatra's majesty onto her, incorporating Cleopatra's immortal longings into Blanche's wayward world. In this penultimate scene of *Streetcar*, Blanche is symbolically murdered--and then miraculously reborn in madness--through Stanley's rape. Blanche is no longer marginalized as a fallen woman, a temptress. Fancying herself at a grand ball (a symbol of death as when Allan Gray committed suicide at Moon Lake Casino), Blanche at the beginning of this scene has

dragged her wardrobe trunk into the center of the bedroom . . . and she has decked herself out in a somewhat soiled and crumpled white satin evening gown and a pair of scuffed silver slippers with brilliants set in their heels . . . [and] she is placing the rhinestone tiara on her head before the mirror of the dressing-table and murmuring excitedly as if to a group of spectral admirers. (391)

When Stanley returns home to await the birth of his first child, he eyes Blanche and mockingly asks: "And look at yourself! Take a look at yourself in that worn-out Mardi Gras outfit, rented for fifty cents from some rag-picker! And with the crazy crown on! What queen do you think you are?" To which Blanche can only muster: "Oh---God. . . ." Continuing his attack, Stanley ironically calls attention to the parallels between Blanche and Cleopatra, though, of course, the anti-romantic, anti-aristocratic Pole does not mention the Egyptian queen by name:

I've been on to you from the start! Not once did you pull any wool over this boy's eyes. You come in here and sprinkle the place with powder and spray perfume and cover the light bulb with a paper lantern, and lo and behold the place has turned into Egypt and you are the Queen of the Nile! Sitting on your throne and swilling down my liquor! (398)

Williams' symbolism here is transparently Shakespearean. Like Shakespeare's Cleopatra, Blanche, dressed in her queenly robes and crown, is preparing herself for the tragic encounter with a ritualistic death delivered at Stanley's hands. Of course, Blanche's Cleopatra is in a French Quarter style. While the purple sails of Cleopatra's barge may have been "so perfumed that / The winds were love-sick with them" (2.2.203-04),

Blanche uses the less grand, though to her no less romantic, perfume bought on Bourbon Street. While Shakespeare's Cleopatra drank at an "Alexandrian feast" (2.7.95), Blanche drinks to excess in a more banal setting; still, she romanticizes liquor, as when she asks Mitch to sample the wonderful elixir of Southern Comfort in the 1951 film version of *Streetcar* Williams helped to shape. Like Cleopatra, too, Blanche has her train of followers, though they are "a group of spectral admirers" (391) she addresses at the beginning of scene ten. Most significant of all, Williams emphasizes the symbolic correspondences between Cleopatra's regal attire and Blanche's. Like Cleopatra, Blanche wears ritualistic clothing: white dress, crown, silver slippers. As Cleopatra forsakes earthly passions, Blanche discards her "dark red satin wrapper" (297), a symbol of passion, for the "white satin evening gown" of purification.

Thanks to Blanche's own costuming and to the motto supplied by an unwitting Stanley, Blanche becomes the French Quarter emblem of Cleopatra. By so theatricalizing herself, she can retreat into history. Such escapes are consistent with Blanche's temperament and her English-teacher background. Earlier, in scene six with Mitch, she cast herself as the nineteenth-century *femme fatale* Camille. Now as Cleopatra, Blanche can be eternally linked to one of the great tragic heroines of all times--the Egyptian queen who lived and died for love. Striving for tragic closure, Blanche wants her life to be embedded in a larger, historical context. Again, Williams uses Shakespeare as his palimpsest to ennoble Blanche's tragedy.

As Shakespeare's Cleopatra anticipates meeting her newly redeemed lover Antony in heaven, Blanche in scene ten conjures up the image of Shep Huntleigh. If Stanley is Blanche's executioner, as Cleopatra believes Caesar is hers, then Shep Huntleigh, Blanche's old beau, is transformed into her immortalized Antony awaiting her in a Southern belle's dream of heaven. Shep is all the things Blanche fantasizes in a dream lover, as Cleopatra projects of her ideal Antony. Shep is "a gentleman and he respects me" (396). He is polite and well-educated, a fraternity man laden with classical honors, his ATO pin symbolizing the achievement. Shep is also a "millionaire" who has made his fortune (and reputation) in oil on this earth. A world traveler, like Antony, Shep comes from Dallas "where gold spouts out of the ground" (394). Shep's Dallas is Antony's Athens or Alexandria. Yet Shep can transcend this earth, which, for Blanche as for Cleopatra, becomes a "dull world, which in [his] absence is / No better than a sty" (4.15.63-64). In fact, Shep promises to take Blanche away from all the dangerous realities of her world by accompanying her on a Caribbean cruise. Dressed like a queen to meet her Shep/Antony, Blanche, like Cleopatra, must enter a higher world, a world where immortal longings are fulfilled. Appropriately enough, Blanche cannot reach Shep in this life; he will not answer the phone (399). She must go into the brave new world of madness to be escorted into paradise.

For Stanley, of course, Blanche in her white dress and rhinestone tiara is a tawdry figure; she is anything but regal for the crude Kowalski. In his opinion, Blanche swills liquor, wears fifty-cent clothes from a rag-picker, and looks foolish. But Stanley's viewpoint is not that of Williams, who kept Shakespeare's Cleopatra, I maintain, positively in mind when he wrote this scene. Stanley is anti-historical. In mocking Blanche, he mocks Cleopatra and vice versa. Because Stanley is incapable of seeing tragedy in Blanche's plight, he does not believe in Blanche's sentimental romance, and so he deconstructs her, her role-playing, and the amorous tradition Blanche taps for strength and salvation. While Stanley accuses Blanche of being a cheap replica of the "queen of the Nile," Blanche conversely tries to convince herself and us that she is a real queen of love, capable of radiating majesty and awe, as Cleopatra does in her last appearance in her play. Only if we accept Stanley's interpretation of Blanche is she a failed Cleopatra, her robe reduced to rags and her crown (the symbol of tragic thought) dismissed as crazy. Though worn, Blanche's costume befits her tragedy, an age-old tragedy based on suffering for love.

Her robe is suitable for the love-death dance symbolized by the Varsouviana that echoes in Blanche's head throughout *Streetcar*. Thus Blanche's striving to be Cleopatra is her gallant attempt to cling to the tradition of the high priestess of love, to find and keep the aura of love she desperately needs.

The correspondences between Cleopatra and his own Blanche indicate that Williams remembered Shakespeare's Roman tragedy of love very well indeed. In fact, a long line of Cleopatra figures can be found in Williams--feisty, aging *femmes fatales* far away from their salad days but whose vibrancy and sexual allure still radiate desire. Among the Cleopatra-like characters in the Williams canon are Serafina Delle Rose in *The Rose Tattoo*; the Princess Kosmonopolos in *Sweet Bird of Youth*; Lady in *Orpheus Descending*; and Maxine in *Night of the Iguana*. But pride of place among Williams' Cleopatras goes to Blanche DuBois. Williams certainly knew how his Blanche might evoke Cleopatra. But if he ever wondered how Cleopatra might evoke Blanche, all he had to do was walk down the street from where his *Streetcar* was playing and watch Katharine Cornell in her memorable revival of *Antony and Cleopatra* at the Martin Beck Theatre in 1947-48.

Notes

¹Not all the reviewers of Cornell's Cleopatra shared John Mason Brown's enthusiasm: Cornell plays Cleopatra's many roles "to an amazing degree . . . she walks with a panther's grace, a woman who has risen above her baser life, a queen herself" (25). Irwin Shaw found that Cornell was "perhaps a little too much the queen to be the raging female barbarian Shakespeare indicated he wanted" (34), and Eric Bentley found that Cornell "has nobility and charm and three or four other good qualities. The trouble is she would need two dozen more to put Shakespeare's Cleopatra on stage in her fullness" (27).

²All quotations from *A Streetcar Named Desire* are from *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams*, vol. I (New York: New Directions, 1971) and are cited parenthetically.

³All quotations from *Antony and Cleopatra* are from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington, 4th ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1992) and are cited parenthetically.

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