# “Her Infinite Variety”:
# Shakespeare’s Cleopatra in Science Fiction

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**Contents**

# CHAPTER 1: A CERTAIN QUEEN (INTRODUCTION)

Four hundred fifty pages into Emery Robin's Cleopatran space opera *The Stars Undying*, the assassins of Caesar come calling. Gracia, the main character and Robin's Cleopatra equivalent, is visiting space Rome on political business; now she greets Cátia Lançan, who plays the role of the assassin Cassius in a plot modeled after the historical Julius Caesar's stabbing. Cátia reveals that she has discovered Gracia's true purpose: to help the Caesar figure, Ceirran, attain immortality by building him a supercomputer the size and shape of a pearl, meant to contain his memories and mind after his death. Gracia bluffs: it is an ordinary pearl; she has never seen it; she is unimpressed. In response, Cátia drops the supercomputer into her glass of wine to watch it erupt. Gracia, who expected to be extorted, realizes she has misjudged the situation: Cátia has come to her fresh from Ceirran's murder.

Any reader may well be rocked by this scene. Nevertheless, a reader familiar with Cleopatra's mythos might pick up the additional tail of cultural legend: that of the pearl. It is one of the few stories about the Egyptian queen that Shakespeare, in perhaps the most influential depiction of Cleopatra, completely ignores: Pliny's *Natural History* claims that Cleopatra once dissolved a massive pearl earring in wine, then served it as an aphrodisiac to Mark Antony.

Pliny's story is false—garden-variety, non-computerized pearls do not dissolve in wine[1]—but it encapsulates the aspects of the queen's legend that preoccupied the Romans and continue to preoccupy modernity: Cleopatra's voracious sexual appetite and her "exotic" "Eastern" luxury. Only a grotesquely wealthy woman would be so careless with her jewels, and only a grotesquely lustful woman would go to such great lengths to seduce a man. Robin's rendition turns the tale on its head. The pearl exists because of Gracia's devotion to

[1] Stacy Schiff, *Cleopatra: A Life* (Philadelphia, Pa: Free Library of Philadelphia, 2010).

Ceirran—qualified by their differing political goals, but still present; it is a gift with no expectation of a sexual reward. And it is Cátia, not Gracia, who destroys it. Cleopatra's luxurious carelessness becomes Gracia's frightened vulnerability. The scene does not encourage the reader to gawk at or lust over Gracia but to sympathize with her: the audience, too, has finally learned of the death we expected; we, too, feel both grief and, at last, a release of tension. And, if we know enough history to understand the reference, we feel perhaps a sense of excitement—at our own ability to grasp the intellectual wink; at the book's cleverness in adapting one of Cleopatra's most iconic stories. This is a moment of high drama and intensely visual prose. "Rust erupts" with violent immediacy across the computerized pearl, "brown and scarlet and dark as a kiss on someone's neck,"[2] and the image of the queen with her wine glass, vivid and poised right before her next move, lives on.

Cleopatra VII has spent a long time living on. As a historical figure, her narrative is sparse. Unlike one of her famous lovers (Julius Caesar's account of his Gallic military campaign stretches eight books), she has left little in the way of source material: nothing written in her own hand; a scattering of coins that may or may not display her face.[3] Nevertheless, since her death in 30 BC, she has been a cigarette, a cartoon, a costume, an operatic role, a seductress, a witch, a lover, a tragedy. In the 2020s AD, she has also become something unexpected: a science fiction protagonist.

## NEW HEAVEN, NEW EARTH: CLEOPATRA GOES TO SPACE

Science fiction and William Shakespeare are well-acquainted. In *Shakespeare and Science Fiction*, Sarah Annes Brown catalogs the Bard's frequent appearance as a character in

[2] Emery Robin, *The Stars Undying* (London, UK: Orbit Books, 2022), 451.
[3] Schiff, *Cleopatra*.

time travel and alternate history stories, as well as the presence of his work in fantasy and science-fictional settings (as prohibited literature in dystopian settings, for example, or as proof that even alien cultures find his work universal). Science fiction writers seem determined to prove that Shakespeare was *not* of an age; he was truly for all time, and all of space, as well.

Brown pays substantially less attention to the repurposing of Shakespeare's plots and premises—despite the fact that, as I intend to suggest, it is more than possible to read his work as proto-science-fiction. Even when Brown and other academics frame the plays through a genre fiction lens, certain plays draw more attention than others. The most frequently reimagined are the *Tempest*, one of the first first-contact stories;[4] *Hamlet*, where concerns about the self and identity lend themselves to issues posthuman identity like artificial intelligence;[5] and *Macbeth* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, both texts in which speculative elements (witches, fairies) already drive the story.[6] Brown notes that "the tragedies are invoked more regularly than the histories or comedies."[7] This is one of the only mentions of the histories. The only Roman play she examines in depth is *Coriolanus*, in the chapter in dystopia. *Antony and Cleopatra* receives no mention.

This exclusion seems intuitive. Shakespeare's histories are, after all, historical. Even the least historically-accurate pop culture Cleopatras are identified by familiarly "Egyptian" symbols: her pharaonic crown and headdress, her elaborate eye makeup, the backdrop of wealth amid the desert, the snake at her breast. Cleopatra's life was circumscribed by her status as a woman in an Eastern client kingdom of Rome. While she was far from the first ruthlessly

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[4] "First contact" stories usually center around humans' initial encounters with alien species, particularly sentient species. Much like the *Tempest*, these stories often (deliberately or not) invoke historical patterns of colonialism.
[5] Brown's sixth chapter focuses on uses of *Hamlet*, but I'd like to add Em X. Liu's *The Death I Gave Him*, as in period and scope it resembles the Robin and Gong texts: a 2023 retelling marketed as queer science fiction, in which an artificial intelligence plays the role of Horatio.
[6] Sarah Annes Brown, *Shakespeare and Science Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021), 11.
[7] Ibid.

powerful Egyptian woman—in Cleopatra's own family, "various Cleopatras, Berenices, and Arsinoes[8] poisoned husbands [and] murdered brothers"[9]—the world remembers *this* Cleopatra because of the Romans (especially Shakespeare's Romans). Her figure loomed monstrous and seductive in the Roman psyche; her rule impacted the fall of the Republic, and even after her death, she slithered her way into the propagandistic art of Horace and Vergil, always a symbol of the Eastern "other."[10]

In his seminal work *Orientalism*, Edward Said illuminates the so-called East and West as constructs. "Neither the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability;" rather, "each is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the Other."[11] He does not claim that there is "no corresponding reality"[12] at all to the Western idea of the "East"—of course the region exists, and of course people live there. Rather, Said sets out that the "Orient" is defined and produced by a Western "intellectual authority,"[13] which partitions particular regions and cultures as "Eastern," then controls academic and cultural representations of this region, filtering each through the lens of the outside "Westerner" or "Occident." The divide has less to do with geography than the need for a dichotomy: one cannot have an "us" without a "them." By constructing the "East," the "West" is able to contrast itself against the Eastern Other, and thus to define itself. The so-called Orient is a region to exploit, but it is also a measuring stick by which to solidify Occidental identity.

Cleopatra, too, is a construction, in history and literature and legend. In the text of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, her "infinite variety" is a product of her almost

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[8] These being the allotted names for royal women.
[9] Schiff, *Cleopatra*, 21.
[10] See Horace's "Nunc est bibendum" and Vergil's Aeneid 8; both texts carefully—fearfully?—omit her name.
[11] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (25th Anniversary ed, New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 1994), xvii.
[12] Said, *Orientalism*, 5.
[13] Said, *Orientalism*, 19.

compulsive[14] theatricality and self-fashioning, from the moment she arrives to meet Antony in a virtuosic display of visual spectacle. On a metatextual level, she is constructed by the Roman propaganda that preserved her in historical amber, by the English author putting words in her mouth, and by a Western audience that still voraciously consumes her image. Cleopatra has often been crafted as metonymy for the entire "East," "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences."[15] Like the East, she is the figure—sinuous, seductive, feminine and dark—against which Romans can define themselves as rigid, logical, and masculine; her scapegoating is not only convenient but necessary in the ongoing process of consolidating identity through the other.[16] It is, to some degree, the role she fills in Shakespeare's play as well, standing in opposition to Octavian and Rome—though Shakespeare complicates and interrogates this binary throughout, demonstrating that the divide between "East" and "West" is reiterated constantly *because* it is not self-evident or stable.[17]

If Cleopatra is, then, a figure grounded in time (the end of the Roman republic) and place (the "East," constructed as it may be), how can she fit into science fiction, the genre of the future? But science fiction is not set in the future by necessity. In an influential 1979 essay, Darko Suvin identified the genre as defined by "the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition…" and "an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment."[18] The "empirical environment" is the world familiar to the writer (and, presumably, to the reader). To Suvin, science fiction is defined by two conditions: first, that it

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[14] Indeed, L.T. Fitz believes this constant performance, and Cleopatra's "feminine wiles," are attempts "to compensate, by being fascinating, for the ravages of age." See L.T. Fitz, "Egyptian Queens and Male Reviewers: Sexist Attitudes in Antony and Cleopatra Criticism" (*Shakespeare Quarterly* 28), 301.
[15] Said, *Orientalism*, 1.
[16] Augustus Caesar, for example, happily raised armies against Antony *and* Cleopatra, but officially declared war only on the latter, whom he could frame as an enemy of Rome and total outsider.
[17] See Maynard Mack, "Antony and Cleopatra: The Stillness and the Dance" (*Shakespeare's Art: Seven Essays*, Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1973, 79–113).
[18] Darko Suvin, "Estrangement and Cognition" (republished in *Strange Horizons*, November 24, 2014, http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/articles/estrangement-and-cognition/), section 2.2.

takes place in a world somehow distinct from this empirical world, and second, that it approaches the strange laws of this new world with scientific rigor.

That is, on the surface, science fiction is defined by an unreal element in the world—a "strange newness" that Suvin calls the "novum" of the text (for example, artificial intelligence, aliens, or the flux capacitor). On a deeper level, however, Suvin argues that science fiction is defined by its ability to reintroduce the reader to a freshly defamiliarized world, similar but uncannily divergent. It holds up, as it were, the mirror to the author's world:

> The aliens—utopians, monsters, or simply differing strangers—are a mirror to man just as the differing country is a mirror for his world. But the mirror is not only a reflecting one, it is also a transforming one, virgin womb and alchemical dynamo: the mirror is a crucible. […] This genre has always been wedded to a hope of finding in the unknown the ideal environment, tribe, state, intelligence, or other aspect of the Supreme Good (or to a fear of and revulsion from its contrary).[19]

Just as the West constructs the East in order to define itself, writers construct science fictional worlds to create an Other by which they can define their own environment. And, Suvin notes, science fiction does not only define, but also redefines, criticizes, and reimagines the world: science fiction is "a diagnosis, a warning, a call to understanding and action, and—most important—a mapping of possible alternatives."[20] As the great science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin wrote, "Science fiction is not *predictive*; it is *descriptive*."[21] That is, even science fiction about the future is really about the present. Creating a new world requires a break with the tradition—or an exaggeration of the tradition—of the empirical world. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, for example, takes place in a society where humans have no sexual dimorphism,

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[19] Suvin, "Estrangement," 1.2.
[20] Suvin, "Estrangement," 3.2.
[21] Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (New York, New York: Ace Books, 2010), xiv.

and thus a society where gender has ceased to exist in any meaningful capacity. The questions this choice invokes—What *are* the differences between man and woman? How does a lack of gender roles problematize human interaction? Are exclusive binaries even possible to uphold?—are questions easily applied to the reader's empirical world as well. Le Guin's constructed world refracts light back at the "real" world, provoking questions with an obliqueness more subtle than a thought experiment. Science fiction is just that: fiction. But the kernels of truth at the core of each nonexistent world allows the reader to look sideways at their own.

Thus, science fiction is perhaps the exact genre in which Cleopatra belongs: a mirrorball genre of constant reflection and infinite variety, a genre playing the eternal Other just as Cleopatra has for centuries. In the two specific science-fictional retellings I will examine, this generic estrangement lends itself to sympathetic depictions of Cleopatra, running against centuries of stories of the vamping, seductive evil queen. In a science fictional world, where the very rules of reality are Other, it is easier to explore what "Other" really means. In a science fictional world, in fact, with the laws of gender and location bent, Cleopatra might not be Other at all. Is Cleopatra exotic in science fiction, or is she right at home?

## NOR CUSTOM STALE HER: RETELLINGS & ADAPTATION THEORY

This thesis sets out to analyze two science-fictional "retellings" of Cleopatra's story. So what defines a retelling? Much of the history of literature is made up of adaptations and re-examinations of the same plots. In the very first paragraph of *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon names Shakespeare and Aeschylus as "canonical" authors who "retold familiar stories

in new forms."[22] The process of adaptation is an old and continuous art, practiced by the same authors whose works supply fodder for adaptation now.

Nevertheless, a more specific definition must exist: *every* work is inspired and influenced by the stories that came before, so the word "retelling" demands more specificity. This thesis draws from Hutcheon's structure, which includes only those texts with an "overt and defining relationship to prior texts, usually revealingly called 'sources.'"[23] Adaptations are "inherently 'palimpsestuous' works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts;"[24] Barthes called them a "stereophony of echoes, citations, references."[25] While no text ever really stands alone, adaptations usually explicitly flaunt this relationship to a "parent." Beneath the surface layer—the words of the new text—lie infinite layers of background reading. Even ordinary turns of phrase are layered with extra weight. The main character Hermione's declaration, on the final page of E. K. Johnston's *Exit, Pursued By a Bear*, that she refuses to live as "a frozen example, a statued monument" of misfortune,[26] may register to any reader as a pretty line. But only those familiar with *The Winter's Tale*, Johnston's "parent" text, will recognize the allusion to Shakespeare's Queen Hermione's fate. A potential reading emerges in which the line deliberately repudiates Shakespeare's ending, opening a new realm of analysis on the relationship between parent and child texts.

Hutcheon defines an adaptation, briefly, as three things: "an *acknowledged* transposition of a *recognizable* other work or works," "a creative *and* an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging," and "an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work."[27]

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[22] Linda Hutcheon with Siobhan O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 2.
[23] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 3.
[24] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 6.
[25] Ibid.
[26] E. K. Johnston, *Exit, Pursued By A Bear* (New York, NY: Dutton Books, 2016), 243.
[27] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 8-9, emphasis mine.

"An adaptation," she adds, "is a derivation that is not derivative;"[28] rather, while an adaptation trumpets its relation to prior texts, it also deliberately warps those prior texts and continues (or diverges from) cultural conversations about the parent text(s).

Working in the strain of Hutcheon, I would like to narrow the parameters even further. Hutcheon counts as adaptation "not just films and stage productions, but also musical arrangements… song covers… visual art… comic book versions… poems put to music and remakes of films, and video games and interactive art."[29] She includes a great many creative forms, but she also excludes a great many. First of all, sampling does not an adaptation make: brief references that "recontextualize only short fragments" are not enough to qualify a work as an adaptation. T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," for instance, references *Antony and Cleopatra* (with a host of other works), but a few lines of allusion to Cleopatra's "burnished throne" are clearly not equivalent to a novel-length reworking of Shakespeare's narrative.[30] Hutcheon also excludes sequels and prequels, adhering to Marjorie Garber's observation that these works are spurred by "never wanting a story to end," while adaptations are spurred by a "desire [for] the repetition as much as the change."[31] On a similar note, I exclude fanfiction from my definition of a retelling. Most fanfiction disseminated in "fandom" spaces requires a prerequisite knowledge of the setting, characters, and plot of its parent text. I am concerned, however, with works sufficiently independent that audiences do not *have* to be aware of the parent text, the type of work that Julie Sanders identifies as a "wholesale rethinking of the terms of the original" (rather than, for example, an adaptation that only changes a work's time period or location).[32] In both of the books I will examine at length, the characters representing Antony and Cleopatra exist in new

[28] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 9.
[29] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 9.
[30] Berny Tan, "A Visual Guide to References in T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land (1922)" (Berny Tan, https://bernytan.com/art/a-visual-guide-to-references-in-ts-eliots-the-waste-land-1922).
[31] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 9.
[32] Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2006), 28.

worlds, but they also have new names and backstories, reminiscent as those names and backstories may be of the parts Shakespeare penned.[33] These works thus stand in contrast to, for example, Linda Bamber's "Cleopatra and Antony."[34] Bamber's work—half essay, half prose adaptation—is a cleverly voicey piece of reception, but it is scaffolded top-to-bottom by the original Shakespeare play: it cannot "stand on its own," because Bamber assumes readers are familiar with Shakespeare's plot, structure, and characters.

Like Hutcheon, I am not interested in "fidelity criticism," that is, in judging an adaptation by how "accurately" it adheres to the details of its parent text. Hutcheon proposes a better way to criticize adaptations: "not in terms of infidelity to a prior text, but in terms of a lack of the creativity and skill to make the text one's own and thus autonomous."[35] This is where my interest lies—not in how faithfully my selected authors can trace every contour of Shakespeare's play, but, rather, in what they change about Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* and what those changes reveal about Cleopatra as a character. This perspective moves away from fidelity criticism's "implied assumption that adapters aim simply to reproduce the adapted text," rather than to reexamine, critique, or expand.[36] If an artist cannot diverge from the original work, there is no reason to take interest in the adaptation over the preexisting parent text. Put simply: if I wanted to reexperience Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, I would read the play again.

So what interests audiences in adaptations? Hutcheon cites the appeal of "repetition with variation… the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise." Audiences like familiarity, even when they seek novelty.[37] The most popular works tend to challenge their audiences a little bit, but not too much, which also makes adaptations relatively "financially

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[33] For example: both Antony figures have recognizably similar names (Ana/Anita and Anton).
[34] Linda Bamber, "Cleopatra and Antony," *Harvard Review*, no. 44 (2013): 82–116.
[35] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 20.
[36] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 6-7.
[37] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 4.

safe" because fans of the parent text already exist as targets for marketing. This financial security is especially important in expensive and exclusive media such as theater, and may explain "the recent phenomenon of films being 'musicalized' for the stage."[38]

But it would be a vast oversimplification to claim that adaptation is only driven by profit. Most stories endure in ever-changing forms because people enjoy them and because they continue to resonate. The Shakespeare plays most famously reworked and adapted are also broadly considered Shakespeare's "best" (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Lear*, and the *Tempest*, to name a few); far fewer novels promise to retell *Timon of Athens*. But the quality of Shakespeare's work still cannot explain just how many Shakespearean adaptations there are. A wealth of literature exists for the reworking; why are so many recent retellings drawn from Shakespeare's plays?

"To appeal to a global market or even a very particular one," Hutcheon muses, an adaptor "may have to alter the cultural, regional, or historical specifics of the text being adapted."[39] When it comes to Shakespeare, however, far less alteration is necessary: Shakespeare's work is already considered familiar. While few can name all thirty-something plays, the average science fiction reader likely read one or two in school. A Shakespearean retelling, then, can get away with very little cultural alteration, because readers will bring a basic level of background knowledge to the table.

Readers will also, often, bring a basic level of respect for the premise. Despite debates about decentering Shakespeare, or at least removing him from his academic pedestal,[40] the Bard

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[38] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 5; for example, *The Lion King*, *Heathers*, *Legally Blonde*, or *Shrek: the Musical*, all adapted from the screen.
[39] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 30-31.
[40] See, for example, Dr. Farah Karim-Cooper's *The Great White Bard,* which traces the historical influence of Shakespeare's work on modern ideas of race. Similarly, Madeline Sayet's "Interrogating the Shakespeare System" urges American theatrical spaces to decenter—not cancel—Shakespeare, in order to allow space for the work of Native people and other marginalized groups.

remains a beacon of intellectualism. A Shakespearean retelling borrows this cultural capital and thus carries some stamp of intellectual validity. And intellectual validity confers a vital degree of respectability, which is crucial when many scholars and reviewers alike consider adaptations "culturally inferior," denigrations and even "desecrations" of the stories they adapt. As Hutcheon observes:

> It does seem to be more or less acceptable to adapt *Romeo and Juliet* into a respected high art form, like an opera or a ballet, but not to make it into a movie, especially an updated one like Baz Luhrmann's (1996) William Shakespeare's *Romeo + Juliet*. If an adaptation is perceived as "lowering" a story (according to some imagined hierarchy of medium or genre), response is likely to be negative.[41]

Never mind that Shakespeare was not actually "high culture" in his day: he wrote for attendees of public theater, hardly a highly-esteemed institution.[42] And, as Hutcheon points out, "Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner were both deeply involved in the financial aspects of their operatic adaptations [of Shakespeare][43], yet we tend to reserve our negatively judgmental rhetoric for popular culture, as if it is more tainted with capitalism than is high art."[44]

Hutcheon discusses this idea of adaptational "desecration" primarily in reference to film adaptations of books, as television carries a stink of assumed intellectual inferiority. Nevertheless, this suspicion of pop culture adaptation can extend to novels, and in particular to genre fiction. While science fiction and fantasy have received some critical attention, this attention is often limited to older literature, already culturally influential (for example, Asimov,

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[41] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2-3.
[42] See, for example, the introduction to Marjorie Garber's *Shakespeare After All* (New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 2004), particularly 22-25, on the stigma attached to public theater and the risks actors endured.
[43] Verdi composed three operas adapted from Shakespeare's work (*Otello*, *Macbeth*, and *Falstaff*, after the character from Shakespeare's histories), while Wagner's *Das Liebesverbot* adapted *Measure for Measure*. See David Ward, "Shakespeare and opera: Verdi, Rossini, and other composers inspired by the plays," Folger Shakespeare Library (https://www.folger.edu/blogs/shakespeare-and-beyond/shakespeare-opera-verdi-rossini/).
[44] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 31.

Bradbury, or Tolkien). Contemporary literary criticism remains hindered by a general cultural idea of which books are "important," that is, realist and literary, versus which books are "fun," that is, commercial. Genre fiction—not only science fiction and fantasy, but romance and horror as well—falls into the latter category.

Both novels explored in this thesis are firmly in the science fiction genre, and, while details in each book reward a reader familiar with *Antony and Cleopatra*, neither book requires intimate knowledge of Shakespeare as a prerequisite. Nevertheless, both texts' translation of Cleopatra into a new world continues the enduring cultural conversation around Cleopatra as an embodiment of otherness—whatever "otherness" in science fiction means. Emery Robin's *The Stars Undying* was published November 2022 by Orbit, an imprint of Hachette;[45] Chloe Gong's *Immortal Longings* was published July 2023 by Saga Press, an imprint of Simon and Schuster.[46] That is, both books were published within the last three years by major publishing houses.[47] Both books are explicitly marketed as new twists on the Cleopatra story; both are also explicitly marketed as science fiction. What were the odds, I thought, that one calendar year might see two sci-fi Cleopatra novels? Why would multiple people even think of putting Cleopatra into science fiction?

These questions provided the impetus for this project. Nevertheless, while they share a parent text and a genre, the novels are very distinct. At the simplest level, they are not even the same kind of science fiction. *The Stars Undying* is a space opera of epic proportions, in which Robin transfers the cultural and physical distance between Shakespeare's Egypt and Rome to a more dramatic distance between separate planets. The same political tension exists: Szayet

[45] "The Stars Undying." Hachette Book Group. Accessed March 13, 2025. https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/titles/emery-robin/the-stars-undying/9780316391399/.
[46] "Immortal Longings." Chloe Gong, July 26, 2024. https://thechloegong.com/il/.
[47] Both publishers are part of the "Big Five," the quintet of companies in charge of most of the traditional publishing market. See Abigail White, "What Are the 'Big Five' Publishing Houses?," BookScouter Blog, February 26, 2025, https://bookscouter.com/blog/big-five-publishing-houses/.

(Robin's Egypt) is a client state in the thrall of the empire of Ceiao (Robin's Rome). In this world, however, Szayet is a prospect for Ceian conquest because of its technological wealth, not its agricultural surplus. *Immortal Longings*, on the other hand, is not a space opera but an alternate history novel, grounded in a nation inspired by Hong Kong's Walled City of Kowloon.[48] Here, the multinational politics of Shakespeare's play take a backseat to themes of fluidity and vacillation: Gong's primary *novum* is a gene that allows most characters to "jump" between bodies as easily as Cleopatra shifts between moods.

On a deeper level, too, the two novels vary widely in style and theme. The Cleopatra figure of *The Stars Undying*, Altagracia (called Gracia), is the struggling new queen of a planet highly vulnerable to extractive conquest. While the novel attends to Cleopatra's legendary love stories (with Mark Antony, but also with Julius Caesar), Gracia's story is at heart a slow, complex political drama, deeply interested in the narratives people create to justify or combat imperialism. Emery Robin is a self-described "sometime student of propaganda;"[49] *The Stars Undying* draws less from Shakespeare's plot than from his musings on mythmaking and history. Indeed, the novel is not marketed as a specifically *Shakespearean* retelling. Its blurb notes only that it "draws inspiration from Roman and Egyptian empires—and the lives and loves of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar."[50] Nevertheless, I include it as a Shakespearean reception text, both because Shakespeare's Cleopatra remains the defining pop-cultural image of the character and because Robin includes a number of direct references to Shakespeare's work (not only *Antony and Cleopatra*, but also *Julius Caesar*).

[48] "Immortal Longings." Chloe Gong.
[49] "About," Emery Robin, https://emeryrobin.carrd.co/#about.
[50] "The Stars Undying." Hachette Book Group.

*Immortal Longings*, by contrast, is marketed as unambiguously "inspired by Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*."[51] Chloe Gong is already well-known for Shakespearean reception. Her debut novel reimagined *Romeo and Juliet* in historical Shanghai; it also made her one of the youngest writers to hit the New York Times bestseller list.[52] Her subsequent work has followed the pattern, placing increasingly obscure Shakespeare plays in historical and fantastical new settings, usually with an emphasis on action and romance. *Immortal Longings*'s adaptation of *Antony and Cleopatra* centers around the play's passionate and disastrous central romance, allowing the political implications to fall to the wayside. Gong's Antony and Cleopatra, Anton Makusa and Calla Tuoleimi, are embroiled in a tournament battle to the death orchestrated by their city's tyrant king. Shakespeare's legendary lovers, should their romance fail, stand to lose their national power, but the stakes of Gong's central romance are more personal: only one can win the death games. Calla's survival and her feelings for Anton stand in direct opposition; the book hinges not on mythmaking but on the potentially-lethal attraction between the protagonists.

These novels approach *Antony and Cleopatra* from entirely different angles. For the most part, then, I do not intend to compare them directly. Rather, this thesis explores how each text responds to the most salient qualities of Shakespeare's Cleopatra: first her unique position as a gendered and ethnic/political Other, then her connection (in the text and metatextually) to theater, which some scholars claim she embodies in herself. How each book employs science fiction to take up, twist, contradict, or ignore Shakespeare's characterization of Cleopatra serves as an extended case study, not only for Cleopatra as a character but also for the use of science fiction to converse with and transform the canon.

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[51] "Immortal Longings." Chloe Gong.
[52] Elisabeth Egan, "Meet Chloe Gong, One of the Year's Youngest Best-Selling Authors," The New York Times: Inside the Best-Seller List, December 3, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/03/books/review/chloe-gong-these-violent-delights.html.

# CHAPTER 2: THIS VISIBLE SHAPE

Both Emery Robin's *The Stars Undying* and Chloe Gong's *Immortal Longings* are set in science fictional worlds without structural misogyny, homophobia, or racism. In the outer space setting of *The Stars Undying*, same-gender relationships are legally and culturally indistinct from heterosexual relationships—Robin's Caesar's marriage to a man is entirely normative, particularly in being political rather than erotic. On the planet of Ceiao, Robin's Rome, citizens of all genders are expected to perform mandatory military service, and on Szayet, Robin's Egypt, the fact that both of the king's potential heirs are women is so meaningless as to go unremarked upon. In *Immortal Longings*, most citizens of the cities of San-Er can jump between bodies, making gender divisions irrelevant. Bodies aren't static, so neither are sexed trait, and while a character may identify with any gender they like, this has no bearing on which bodies they are able to seize or why they choose to do so.

This gendered looseness may seem odd. The long tradition of writing about Cleopatra, in history books or on the stage, has defined her intensely by her gender, casting her over and over as the seductress, the other woman, the exotic witch bending Caesar and then Antony to her will. Even in sympathetic portrayals, she is not only woman but foreign woman, exotic woman, dark woman; Chaucer, for example, cannot represent her as a "good woman" without specifying that she is a good wife,[53] and much ink has been spilled about whether she redeems herself by truly loving Antony. This is the tradition Shakespeare's play inherits: writing Cleopatra without facing down gender is impossible. How, then, can a Cleopatra character exist in a world without misogyny?

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[53] See Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Legend of Cleopatra" (in *The Legend of Good Women*, as accessed http://public-library.uk/ebooks/41/3.pdf).

## LET ROME IN TIBER MELT: *ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA*'S INSTABILITY

Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* is a play intensely concerned with binaries. On the crudest, most simplified level, the thematic poles of the play center on Rome and Egypt. Rome purportedly represents masculinity, rigidity, war, politics, public identity, all figured through Octavius Caesar; Egypt purportedly represents femininity, fluidity, love, sex, private life—all embodied, of course, by Cleopatra.[54] The Romans thus construct their national identity against Cleopatra's opposition, an early example of Said's observation that the "West" produces the "East" to demarcate Western identity via contrast. Yet Shakespeare troubles this easy dichotomy. Over the course of the play, any attempt to maintain this perfect polarity breaks down, revealing that the concept of the "Other" is constructed and precarious rather than natural. The play's binaries are always on the verge of dissolution, because the world of *Antony and Cleopatra* is "a world in flux," defined by "mobility and mutability."[55]

The play's structure conveys this unsteadiness with a destabilizing array of brief and shifting scenes. Maynard Mack highlights the frequency with which "one time, place, mood, or person gives way before another." For one of Shakespeare's longest plays,[56] *Antony and Cleopatra* does not have many long, focused scenes. The play is a mad march of entrances, exits, scene shifts, and character appearances or disappearances, including endless messengers materializing with news from abroad. The Folger Shakespeare edition[57] of *Julius Caesar*, the

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[54] Maynard Mack, "Antony and Cleopatra: The Stillness and the Dance" (*Shakespeare's Art: Seven Essays*, Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 83-112. Mack also proposes "nature and art… indulgence and austerity, loyalty and self-interest, sincerity and affection… loyalty and self-interest, grandeur and humility, mobility and constancy." One gets the sense it could continue forever.

[55] Mack, "The Stillness and the Dance," 89.

[56] "Play Lengths," PlayShakespeare.com: The Ultimate Free Shakespeare Resource.

[57] All scene lengths are pulled from Folger editions for consistency. While the act and scene numbers scholars use now were editorial impositions, not Shakespeare's work, they are editorial impositions based on the entrances and exits Shakespeare did provide. Comparing the line numbers of various scenes is an imperfect but approximate demonstration of *Antony and Cleopatra*'s choppiness.

play most topically close to *Antony and Cleopatra*, is composed of eighteen scenes, half of which are shorter than 100 lines long. *King Lear*, a play of similar length to *Antony and Cleopatra* and likely written in the same year, has twenty-six scenes, twelve of which are shorter than 100 lines—a similar ratio as that in *Julius Caesar*. *Antony and Cleopatra* has forty-one scenes. Of these forty-one, thirty are shorter than 100 lines.[58] There are a few setpieces—namely, the party aboard Pompey's ship in the second act and Cleopatra's grandly-staged suicide at the end—but most scenes do not linger long. This formal instability echoes the locational instability of the scenes themselves. The play lurches from Alexandria to Rome, then back to Alexandria, then to Pompey's exile, back to Rome, then back to Alexandria again, all before the second act is finished.

Mack finds a constant shifting in the poetry, as well, the language lyrically rife with "allusions to the ebbing and flowing of the tides; the rising and setting… of stars, moons, and suns; [and] the immense reversals of feelings in the lovers and in Enobarbus."[59] In the same way, the prose shifts between the tragic mode and the comic mode: it is never clear, at any given point, if the audience will get the titular lovers in a moment of heroic tragedy or petty squabbling. It is hard to square Antony's grandiose declaration that he could "let Rome in Tiber melt" for Cleopatra's sake with Cleopatra's sardonic "Can Fulvia die?" two scenes later.[60] The play bundles together serious war scenes with comedy and slapstick: the same Cleopatra who chases a messenger in circles to beat him[61] will later raise an army against Rome, and the political parley on Pompey's boat teeters between violence and drunken laughter.[62] Even the tension of Antony's suicide attempt is punctured—more effectively than his body—by his

[58] Not counting 3.7 and 4.15, 104 and 105 lines respectively.
[59] Mack, 90.
[60] William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* (Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine; New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1999). I.1.38, I.3.70.
[61] Shakespeare, II.5.
[62] Shakespeare, II.7.

confused, "How, not dead?," a line difficult to deliver without provoking a laugh.[63] The audience is not *only* forced to oscillate between the play's physical poles, the cities of Alexandria and Rome; there is a constant emotional and tonal oscillation at play as well.

The nexus of this oscillation, however, is not the audience but Antony. It is Antony who travels constantly: physically between Egypt and Rome and politically between his alliance with Octavian and his love affair with Cleopatra. Antony is the character who most embodies the gap between grandiosity and insufficiency; Antony drives the play's greatest emotional shifts, as he swings from swearing his undying love for Cleopatra to swearing, quite seriously, to murder her for betraying him in battle.[64] At the start of the play, he wants nothing more than to leave Cleopatra and return to Rome; within an act, married to Octavia, he will confess his desire to return to Cleopatra. He resents his first wife, Fulvia, until she dies and, abruptly, he misses her. Even his Roman identity shifts: he has himself "publicly enthroned" in Egypt, Shakespeare's allusion to the real-life Donations of Alexandria, in which Antony and Cleopatra distributed Roman lands to their children in a mostly-theatrical show of union.[65] Octavian sees this as a clear declaration of allegiance—Antony has sided with Egypt over Rome, declaring his children "the kings of kings."[66] Yet an act later, Antony declares that his suicide makes him "a Roman by a Roman vanquished," clinging to his last vestiges of Romanness, even as he dies in his Egyptian lover's arms at the end of a military campaign against Rome.[67] If the Egyptian-Roman binary holds at all, Antony has no stable place in it.

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[63] Shakespeare, IV.14.123.
[64] While Antony can't be blamed entirely for the brevity of the play's scenes—some of the shortest are cuts away to Octavian or Sextus Pompey—it's also worth noting that the scenes are packed shortest and fastest in the fourth act, where Antony is at his most despairing. The fifth act, after Antony's death, has only two scenes, one of which is very long; it is also the act that Cleopatra has to herself, and perhaps she brings some element of stability to it.
[65] Shakespeare, III.6.5.
[66] Shakespeare, III.6.14.
[67] Shakespeare, IV.15.66-67.

Indeed, Antony has no stable self at all. He "cannot hold [his] visible shape."[68] Over the course of the play, multiple characters declare that he is losing his grip on his manhood. This is a claim with massive stakes, because it implicates Cleopatra. If Octavian and Rome represent masculinity, Cleopatra and Egypt femininity, then Antony's attraction to the latter threatens the solidity of his masculinity. In turn, the potential fluidity of his gender threatens his broader identity: in a Roman worldview, for the consummate soldier, a loss of manhood is equivalent to a loss of personhood. At the start of the play, everyone agrees that he "has been the soldier par excellence,"[69] even his enemies. Sextus Pompey, however hurt he may be about Antony occupying his dead father's house,[70] still declares that "his soldiership / Is twice" that of the other triumvirate members.[71] Octavian, his greatest rival, waxes practically poetic about his military prowess, claiming that he endured hardships "so like a soldier that [his] cheek / So much as lanked not"[72] after the battle of Modena.[73]

This Antony, however—the Antony whose eyes "o'er the files and musters of the war / Have glowed like plated Mars," whose "captain's heart… in the scuffles of great fights hath burst the buckles on his breast"[74]—exists only in others' words, and only in past tense. What the audience does see is Antony's emasculation, ostensibly at Cleopatra's hands. In the very first lines of the play, Antony's servant Philo grouses that his master's heart "is become the bellows and the fan / To cool a gypsy's lust."[75] A moment later, Cleopatra enters, "with Eunuchs fanning

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[68] Shakespeare, IV.14.18.
[69] Laura Levine, "Strange Flesh" (*Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-Theatricality and Effeminization, 1579-1642*; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 48.
[70] See Shakespeare, II.7.
[71] Shakespeare, II.1.41.
[72] Shakespeare, I.4.80-1.
[73] This is an especially hefty commendation considering that, as Levine notes, in the historical battle of Modena, Antony and Octavian fought against one another; there is no indication of a Shakespearean retcon that would make this untrue here.
[74] Shakespeare, I.1.2-8.
[75] Shakespeare, I.1.9-10.

her."[76] "Metaphorically, through the image of the fan," Laura Levine observes, "the play begins by comparing Antony to a eunuch."[77] Shortly after, when Antony tries to leave Alexandria, his subservience to Cleopatra is on full display. He opens with an apology and allows her to interrupt him multiple times. When he does rise to anger, Cleopatra mocks him for a poor performance of "perfect honor," sarcastically calling him "Herculean" (Antony's family claimed descendence from Hercules, and Antony in particular wore the connection proudly), then implies that he is only *acting* as an angry man: "becom[ing] / The carriage of his chafe," though he could "do better yet."[78] Antony's anger, which might have once been construed as masculine, is twisted against him. He seems to expose himself as only performing dominance, not achieving it.

The emasculation intensifies. Cleopatra dresses Antony in her "tires and mantles"[79]—not only a cross-dressing, but one he has no agency to enact, as by this point Cleopatra has "drunk him to his bed" and, with blatantly phallic flair, stolen his sword for herself.[80] In the fourth act, the god Hercules departs from Antony's camp, stripping him firmly of his relation to the manliest man in Greco-Roman myth.[81] After a slew of catastrophic military decisions, Antony flees battle following Cleopatra's deserting train, sending his army into disarray; he then claims that he has "kissed away kingdoms and provinces"[82] and that Cleopatra has made his "sword… weak by [his] affection."[83] *Sword* is here metonymy for maleness and soldiership alike, and shortly afterward, Antony loses both. After his failed suicide attempt, one of his underlings quite

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[76] Ibid.
[77] Levine, "Strange Flesh," 45.
[78] Shakespeare, I.3.98-103.
[79] Shakespeare, II.5.26-27.
[80] Shakespeare, II.5.25-27.
[81] In Shakespeare's source, Plutarch's *Life of Antony*, the god that deserts Antony is Bacchus, god of wine and revelry. The shift to Hercules, a famed warrior and oft-unlucky lover, emphasizes the gendered aspect of Antony's abandonment.
[82] Shakespeare, III.10.9.
[83] Shakespeare, III.11.71-4.

literally steals his sword away, delivering it up to Octavian, his rival. “Our leader’s led,” his soldiers moan, “and we are women’s men.”[84]

Antony is keenly aware of his dissolution. He spends the latter half of the play desperately trying to recover his eroding masculinity, making a cascade of ineffective choices along the way. Levine catalogues his attempts at displacement: first declaring that the land itself “bids [him] tread no more upon’t,” then slinging accusations of effeminacy at Octavian, then furiously ordering the whipping of Thidias until Thidias’s father “repent[s] / Thou wast not made his daughter.”[85] But he is unable to project his plight onto others: it is not Octavian or Thidias whose masculinity is seeping away, and his attempts at displacement cannot save him from the sense that he has “fled [him]self.”[86] Even his death is imbued with emasculation. Antony and Cleopatra compare themselves, and are compared by scholars in turn, to Aeneas and Dido:[87] the brave Roman warrior tempted by the exotic, seductive foreign queen, a romance both passionate and doomed. But the parallel only holds so far: it is not Cleopatra who dies like Dido. Cleopatra’s suicide is far more controlled, far more theatrical. It is Antony who, like Vergil’s Dido, falls on his sword but fails to die immediately; it is Antony who takes his last breaths struggling to rise, held in the arms of a loved one with his city spread out beneath him.

Ultimately, Antony cannot adhere to any binary the play puts forth. His death is simultaneously a heroic manly suicide and a reflection of Dido’s grief; he calls himself a “Roman by a Roman / Valiantly vanquished,”[88] but he dies in the arms, and the kingdom, of the woman he calls Egypt. His constant inconstancy reveals that the simple Rome/Egypt dichotomy cannot contain, describe, or express the play’s overflowing fluidity: the binaries are insufficient.

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[84] Shakespeare, III.7.86-7.
[85] Levine, “Strange Flesh,” 53.
[86] Shakespeare, III.11.8.
[87] See, for example, Janet Adelman’s overview in *The Common Liar: An Essay on Antony and Cleopatra* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 68-78.
[88] Shakespeare, IV.15.66-67.

This insufficiency, and the problem of human fluidity, passes as inheritance to Robin and Gong, both of whom explore the constructed "Other" in their novelizations. But in science fictional worlds, with looser or entirely different social categories, what is an "Other" at all?

## SERPENT OF OLD NILE: IMPERIAL GENDER IN *THE STARS UNDYING*

Certainly the "other" in *The Stars Undying* is not defined by race or gender, because Robin's Cleopatra, Gracia, exists in a world where race and gender are no longer core identities or positions in structures of power. *Man* and *woman* still exist as categories, but these categories are far looser and exert less defining force over a person's life. One's gender expression is, for the most part, a quality as unremarkable as their hair color or musical taste. Nevertheless, Gracia's femininity is eventually wielded against her by theatrical artists in Ceiao, the empire under which Gracia operates. Even if gender is not inherently hierarchical, then, it remains available as a *potential* weapon. The Ceian theater's construction of a femme fatale stereotype, meant to define first Gracia's sister and then Gracia herself as an immoral seductress, proves that gender in this world can be shaped into a mechanism of political attack and control. That is, Robin's Cleopatra does not escape gendered stereotyping—but she experiences a different kind of misogyny, as an extension of imperial power.

Gracia's gender expression, and the Ceian theater's response to it, is best understood in comparison with Robin's Antony, Captain Ana "Anita" Decretan. In their blurb for the book, queer romance writer Casey McQuiston writes that Robin has "dare[d] to ask, what if Mark Antony was the hottest butch girl in space?"[89] The decision to rewrite Mark Antony as a butch girl is, perhaps, not intuitive. Shakespeare's Antony is chasing a masculinity that is expected of him, that he once performed well, and that he cannot perform anymore. The loss of this

[89] Casey McQuiston, praise for Emery Robin, *The Stars Undying*, front cover.

masculinity is a loss of manhood, particularly Roman manhood, and thus a loss of self. By contrast, butch women's performances of masculinity run counter to societal expectation; furthermore, butch masculinity does not necessarily constitute manhood. Thus this blurb serves as an entry point to Anita's gender: What work is a butch Mark Antony doing in this text?[90] Indeed, what does "butch" even mean in a world without strict gender roles?

The paperback edition of *The Stars Undying* opens with a dramatis personae written as a found document: a cast list from the book's in-universe theater consortium. The cast list describes Anita as "a Ceian [space Roman] officer" and "Ceirran's [Julius Caesar's] right hand." The fictional director notes that "we were strongly, strongly advised to ensure that this actor is handsome."[91] Because the dramatis personae precedes the novel's first chapter, this is a reader's first impression of Anita, an impression that emphasizes her military status and her handsomeness. The latter descriptor is freighted with gendered implications, in the reader's empirical world if not in the world of the text—"handsome" is applied to women infrequently enough to prick ears. Nevertheless, Gracia [Cleopatra] will later call Anita's handsomeness "plain and very ordinary,"[92] a description that emphasizes the naturalness of her masculinity. There is nothing strange about commenting on Anita's good looks with language reserved for the masculine; her handsomeness is so ordinary that it would be strange *not* to.

Anita's first appearance in the text itself sees her "sprawled" in her chair, as Ceirran, Robin's Caesar equivalent, describes her as "a quick draw and a vicious brute in battle."[93] That is, Robin immediately foregrounds both Anita's military viciousness and her carefree willingness to take up space. For contemporary readers, neither is a particularly "feminine" quality. Nor are

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[90] "Butch," for the unfamiliar, generally describes a lesbian/woman attracted to women who adopts, expresses, and/or plays with stereotypical masculinity.
[91] Emery Robin, *The Stars Undying* (London, UK: Orbit Books), ix.
[92] Robin, 421.
[93] Robin, 14.

Anita's other qualities: she sits with her boots up;[94] she drinks with her squadron; she swears frequently and vulgarly; she is always the first to advocate violence. She brags about her sexual conquests of other women—in which she always takes the pursuing role, as when she recounts climbing down through a lover's roof.[95] Her enemies harp on her "degeneracy," citing her hedonism and carelessness.[96] In every way she fits the model of the womanizing, carousing soldier. And soldiership is not solely her job, a mere part of the fabric of her character; she is constantly associated with war. In her second line of dialogue, she declares an intention to capture her enemy "like conquerors,"[97] clearly reveling in the violent and domineering associations. Gracia compares her directly to "a couple of first-class warships," and judges her "not significantly less dangerous."[98] Soon after, Anita calls herself Gracia's "knife hand," promising to kill on her orders: "Only say the word and it's done."[99] As happily as Anita takes on the role of conqueror, she will just as gladly slip into the role of a weapon, more tool than person and much more deadly. The first time Gracia sees her, she notes that Anita looks "in all aspects [like] an officer from a propaganda holo."[100] Anita is not merely a soldier: she is the consummate soldier, competent enough to perform as an educational model. She is most alive in wartime; she is willing to conquer, but also eager to serve as someone else's blade.

Of course, violence and vulgarity do not inherently disqualify one from femininity, nor are hedonism and sexuality inherently masculine traits. Butchness is a complex identity constructed over decades in lesbian subcultures; there is no DSM-style itemized list of

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[94] Robin, 80.
[95] Robin, 295; this is all the better for being a historical reference that injects (or makes explicit) queerness—Mark Antony really did climb down through the roof of his friend and potential lover, Curio.
[96] Robin, 343.
[97] Robin, 14.
[98] Robin, 163.
[99] Robin, 175.
[100] Robin, 106. "Holo" here is a shortening of hologram; *The Stars Undying*'s characters communicate at a higher level of digital technology than readers in the empirical world.

requirements, and if there were, manspreading in a chair likely wouldn't make the cut. Furthermore, in the world of the characters, Anita's soldiership says very little about her gender expression: there is no indication that the world of the *The Stars Undying* enforces the institutional misogyny or homophobia that would stigmatize Anita in the reader's world. Every citizen in Ceiao, Robin's Rome, must serve in the military for a mandated period, regardless of their gender. And the word "butch" itself only appears in the blurb—Robin never calls Anita butch within the text itself. Without the sharply divided gender roles of the empirical world, it stands to reason that the world of *The Stars Undying* understands gender very differently. The concept of a butch emerges in the empirical world from a specific historical and cultural context; to stand out as gender-nonconforming, a person must live in a world that expects conformation to a defined role. The characters of *The Stars Undying* use plenty of language familiar to contemporary readers, but "butch" is not one of them—the blurb follows the logic of the empirical world, but not the world of the text.

Nevertheless, the reader of *The Stars Undying* lives in the empirical world, where the novel still upsets the expected by placing a woman in the role of the macho soldier-libertine. Anita's gendered positionality becomes most intelligible in comparison to other major female characters, because not every woman in *The Stars Undying* occupies this role. For example, Anita's sister Flavia is equally sharp and competent, but explicitly more feminine. Her note in the dramatis personae is sparse: she is Anita's sister and an "alarming woman" with "fabulous gowns:"[101] that is, of the little said about her, her (conventionally feminine) outfits are important enough to make the cut. Correspondingly, her first appearance in the text emphasizes her "elaborate braids" and "smooth hostess smile,"[102] foregrounding her carefully-polished

[101] Robin, x.
[102] Robin, 283.

appearance and her adopted social role: where Anita is a soldier, Flavia is a socialite. In opposition to Anita's sprawling debauchery, Flavia excels at "effusiveness and studied charm"[103] and moves with "delicate" attention to her skirts.[104] When Gracia compares them, she notes Flavia's "real, striking beauty,"[105] an expectedly feminine word in contrast to Anita's "handsome." Gracia, too, wears only skirts and dresses; Gracia, too, is carefully made-up, delicate in her speech, and about as suited to the battlefield as Flavia, who spent her mandatory military service doing desk duty.[106] Both Gracia and Flavia are formidable in their own rights—indeed, both of them use their charisma and persuasive skills to incite others to join their cause—but neither shares Anita's particular machismo. That is, the lack of misogyny in Robin's world does not mean all women are like Anita. The reader is meant to understand *this* woman as masculine.

The clearest establishing moment of this masculinity comes from her portrayal in the theater—the play-within-a-book midway through the text, in which Gracia, Ceirran, and Anita attend a Ceian street show about the three of them. The show is, of course, thoroughly propagandistic, setting up Ceiao as a virtuous conquering country and Szayet as a land of tricks and wiles. The troupe puts forth idealized versions of these real-life characters: Ceirran is played by an "enormous" actor waxing poetic about glory and love, while Gracia and her sister, as foreign royals, are ineffective and scantily-dressed. The Anita character looks quite like Anita—dressed in a "blue cloak" and "a very bad wig of straight dark hair"—except that this character is played by a man.[107]

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[103] Robin, 383.
[104] Robin, 387.
[105] Robin, 292.
[106] Robin, 165.
[107] Robin, 304-6.

A reader conditioned to imagine patriarchal worlds might assume this, too, is propaganda: perhaps Anita's gender is a shameful subject in Ceiao, requiring theatrical revision. But nothing in Anita's response to the show indicates this is true. Ceirran and Gracia are both displeased by their portrayals—Ceirran because his actor is bald; Gracia because her actress is nearly naked and cannot remember her lines. Anita, however, takes no issue at all; her only comment is that her actor is "almost good-looking enough for the part." She says this not in displeasure, but "thoughtfully," as if she truly means that the representation would be fitting if the actor's attractiveness were tweaked. Significantly, she is the only person in the trio whose gender is swapped on-stage. That she is also the only one more entertained than embarrassed by her portrayal emphasizes her comfort in her own masculinity.[108]

Shakespeare's Antony has no such comfort, or stability, in his gender. But a gender-nonconforming Antony is not as strange a choice as it may initially seem. Shakespeare's Antony *does* vacillate between the binary poles of gender. If Cleopatra is all of womanhood, infinite variety in one body, and Octavian is rigid, masculine Rome, then Antony lies in the in-between. In Shakespeare's text, this intermediate gender positioning is not straightforwardly positive. Though scholars like Laura Levine have written persuasively about the play as a defense of theater, most characters *inside* the play have nothing but mockery for Antony's failing manhood. Robin, however, employs this non-binary space as a source of power rather than inadequacy.[109] Unlike Antony, Anita is not failing manhood, nor is she vacillating between poles. Instead, she combines masculinity and femininity with seemingly no effort at all. Midway

[108] Of course, this is probably also a joke about the original Shakespeare play—in theatrical tradition, Antony is always a man, including, apparently, in space-Rome. This may also serve as inversion of Shakespeare's gender-bending of *Cleopatra*, who famously references the young boy actor that would have played her on the Elizabethan stage.

[109] "Nonbinary" generally refers to gender identities that fall outside of, or between, male and female. I do not mean to posit that Anita—or Antony—is *literally* nonbinary, but rather that both characters exist in a similar outside-in-between space.

through the book, Gracia encounters her at a nightclub. Anita wears the knee-high sandals of a Hollywood gladiator, proper Mark Antony costuming, but she also wears "a little pleated cotton skirt barely covering her thighs, and a bright pink feathered coat of such enormity that it was impossible to tell if she was wearing a shirt underneath."[110] The skirt, the pink coat, and the glitter on her face are splashes of femininity, but this femininity is elective, not gender failure. This is Anita's most gender-ambiguous moment, and Robin chooses this moment to write Gracia's observation of Anita's "comfort in her own body," the ease and ecstasy of her movement as she grinds on another woman, head "flung back in pleasure." Here Gracia's attraction shines through most strongly; in this moment, Anita is the most desirable she has been yet, the most handsome.

Thus, while Shakespeare shows us a man stuck between genders, unable to hold his shape and denigrated for it,[111] Robin (a trans-nonbinary author himself) offers a securely masculine woman, retaining Antony's gender duality but transforming it from weakness into strength. Anita can hold her shape just fine—she is extremely comfortable in her skin, and even characters who dislike her are drawn in by her attractiveness. One might argue that Robin's text is empowering for gender-nonconforming readers, reclaiming Antony's gender failures with the "hottest butch girl in space."

This is the most obvious reading. It is also too simple. For, in the militant society of Ceiao, Anita expresses masculinity primarily through military action. The hierarchical nature of the military—Anita serves as a captain under Ceirran—means she also exhibits her masculinity specifically through submission. The descriptions of Anita as warships, as knife hand, as

[110] Robin, 360.
[111] By the other characters and, on some level, by the text—even in death, Antony cannot reclaim his masculinity, but has his sword stripped after his failed suicide attempt. This is not a particularly heroic death. Compared to Cleopatra's suicide, it's humiliating.

propaganda holo, all position her as a *tool* of war, not a general: she is the weapon animated by a higher-up's will. More than once, the narrating characters compare her to an animal—a poetic dehumanization, not entirely negative (Gracia describes her as such in their desperately passionate sex scene[112]), but a dehumanization nonetheless. Most notably, Ceirran describes her with "her head cocked like a dog that had scented prey,"[113] a skewering comparison: Anita's is the obedient dog sort of manliness, the yes-sir sort of manliness. When she and Gracia verbally clash, Gracia tells her to sleep on the floor "if [she] can't sleep anywhere else." Gracia is lashing out by leveraging power—but her royal power only extends so far as the Ceian military lets it; Anita, as an arm of that military, might well ignore or override her. Nevertheless, Gracia realizes later "that she had obeyed [the] order, after all:"[114] Anita is quite willing to show her dedication by sleeping on the floor like a dog.

Even in the street theater scene, the most distilled and one-dimensional depiction of Anita, her character's first lines declare that he is "bid to follow faithful to [Ceirran's] will" before anything else.[115] Later, when Gracia wants to hurt Anita, she aims directly at Anita's subservience to Ceirran: "He's left you behind again," she says, "he always leaves you behind," because Anita's best faithful-dog heeling is never quite enough.[116] Indeed, when Anita displeases Ceirran, she responds by begging him to kill her. His refusal, in which he treats her as just another soldier he can't "afford to lose," affects her like "a physical blow."[117] Her worth in her own perception is synonymous with her usefulness to her commander; both viewpoint characters (who are also her social superiors) use her loyalty to cut her to the core.

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[112] Robin, 455.
[113] Robin, 17.
[114] Robin, 183.
[115] Robin, 304.
[116] Robin, 364.
[117] Robin, 206.

Robin's characterization reworks and challenges a common trope in lesbian art and poetry, the comparison of butches to medieval knights. This association usually emphasizes the chivalry and honor of female masculinity, pushing back against homophobic stereotypes of butches as threatening and predatory. But to be a knight is definitionally to be in service to another, a type of masculinity only achieved by constant deference to a lady or king.[118] Historically, knighthood also definitionally requires the knight to perform violence on behalf of the (usually Christian) state. Robin's portrayal of Anita emphasizes her attractiveness and competence, but also lays bare the associations of butchness with violent servitude. Anita's masculinity exists inextricably in service of the Ceian empire, an empire whose very "antithesis" is peace.[119] Near constantly, from her very first words on the page ("Let me at her"[120]), she begs Ceirran to let her commit violence on his behalf. When Ceirran says he "cannot run an empire on [his] own," Anita adds, "Yet," "very cheerfully."[121] She goes so far as to tell him, straightforwardly, that when he wants to invade Ceiao and seize his own nation, she'll "be there by morning," unquestioning and unhesitating.[122] She is truly the consummate propaganda holo, the perfect soldier, her masculinity intertwined inherently with her total dedication to the empire.

What happens, however, when a character's gender expression does not function to grease the gears of empire? Gracia, Robin's Cleopatra figure and the femme to Anita's butch, finds herself in this position. Where Anita's gender expression serves the state, Gracia crafts her self-expression (gendered and otherwise) to highlight her status as a royal—that is, a political player not necessarily allied to the Ceian empire. As a result, her enemies begin to use her

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[118] Historical knights were, of course, largely upper-class, but most butch-as-knight artwork employs the usual cultural shorthand for knights (suits of armor, horses, etc) rather than delving into the socioeconomic positioning of real-life medieval knights.
[119] Robin, 288.
[120] Robin, 14.
[121] Robin, 100.
[122] Robin, 144.

femininity against her, not because femininity is *inherently* suspect in the world of the text but because gender *can* be wielded as a weapon.

Robin establishes that Gracia is feminine at least in empirical terms, in the same way that Anita is masculine. Of Anita, Ceirran, and Gracia, Gracia is the one Robin describes as beautiful, the one who never goes into battle herself, the only one to hold a gendered title like *queen*. Her outfits are closer to Flavia's than Anita's: it has been "a long time since [she] had worn trousers,"[123] and Ceirran registers that her eyes look differently "without the kohl," suggesting it has been a long time since she went bare-faced as well.[124] In the Ceian theater, Gracia's sister, Arcelia, gets the brunt of the effeminization in the Ceian theater—portrayed in "an extremely tight red dress, very bright red lipstick, and enormous false eyelashes," a caricature of a seductress[125] and the first indication that, as I will explore, gender *can* be weaponized. Nevertheless, this effeminization does not match Gracia's own memories: Gracia is the traditionally feminine twin, Arcelia the one who spends their childhood stomping around with treasure-divers and gamblers.[126] Gracia, instead, is all diplomacy and glittering clothes. She adopts a performance of femininity just as Anita adopts a performance of masculinity. In Anita's case, this performance is part and parcel with her soldiership. In Gracia's case, it is an aspect of her status as royalty. She is the more respectable twin, in part, because she rejects Arcelia's "rough-and-tumble" lifestyle[127] to focus on her studies.[128] She dresses herself in pants only when she wants to mingle with the lower classes unseen. Her gender expression and her claim to the throne go hand-in-hand, a defensive performance of polish.

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[123] Robin, 358.
[124] Robin, 285.
[125] Robin, 305.
[126] Robin, 58.
[127] Robin, 58.
[128] Robin, 64.

This polish is a defensive strategy: Gracia holds the losing ground in Ceiao, where most respond to her as Ceirran's lover, not a political player in her own right. Her defensiveness is not, however, a product of institutional misogyny; there is none in the world of *The Stars Undying*, and Gracia does not quite face the same pressure to perform flawless womanhood that many real female rulers and politicians have. Nor is it a product of racism, because there is no indication that racism exists in this world, either. None of the characters is described in terms of race, only nationality and planet. Gracia notes that Ceirran is "much darker" than she is,[129] but even as she sizes him up strategically, she assigns no political meaning to this fact. Robin's treatment of race thus diverges from Shakespeare's play, which emphasizes Cleopatra's darkness and implicitly links it to her sexual desires.[130] While Gracia is certainly brown—her identical twin sister has "a warmth to her brown skin, so that when the sun from the ocean caught it, it flushed with gold"[131]—her "race" and others' are never discussed, only physical appearances and, separately, markers of nationality like language and clothing. The concept of racial identity in the reader's empirical world, shaped by transatlantic slavery and white supremacy, does not exist in this distant galaxy. Thus, unlike Cleopatra, Gracia is not inherently "other" because of her gender (Cleopatra as seductive witch) *or* her race (Cleopatra as emphatically dark foreigner), let alone because of both simultaneously.

Still, Gracia is a foreigner in Ceiao nevertheless: she comes from an entirely different planet, her otherness signified primarily by her religious background and planet of origin. In Shakespeare's play, Alexandria and Rome seem culturally worlds apart—but as the play progresses, the binary between the two cities begins to collapse. In transferring Cleopatra's story

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[129] Robin, 107.
[130] Shakespeare, I.5.30-34, in which Cleopatra describes herself as "with Phoebus's amorous pinches black." See also Janet Adelman's "Appendix C: Cleopatra's Blackness" in *The Common Liar*.
[131] Robin, 57.

to a space opera setting, Robin intensifies this divide: Szayet (Egypt) and Ceiao (Rome) are quite literally different worlds, whose divide cannot be crossed without a spaceship.

As an adaptational choice, this intensification deepens Egyptian/Roman in *Antony and Cleopatra* that Robin deconstructs in regards to gender. Simultaneously, however, this allows Robin's text to sympathize far more overtly with Cleopatra than Shakespeare's text does.[132] *The Stars Undying* opens in Szayet, Robin's version of Shakespeare's Egypt. Shakespeare's play, however, was written for an audience already familiar with a particular (patriarchal and nationalist) story of Roman history and values, an audience primed to read Egypt as the loose, luxurious antithesis to Roman manhood.[133] But working in science fiction means Robin is not beholden to preexisting cultural images of Rome and Egypt, and *The Stars Undying*'s world does not necessarily adhere to historical fact. As a result, the first location to which the reader acclimates is Szayet, where the first half of the book is set.[134] When Gracia lands on Ceian soil in the twenty-fifth chapter, the new city is strange and unfamiliar to her, but it is also strange and unfamiliar to the reader. Unlike Shakespeare's play, a theatrical work meant to be observed, Robin's text is limited to the first-person perspectives of Gracia and Ceirran. The former gets both more page time and the first chapter in Ceiao, which the reader must see through her eyes after nearly three hundred pages acclimating to her world. One might argue that Ceirran experiences the same—he lands on Szayet for the first time at the outset of the book—but Ceirran is a conqueror who constantly hops between planets, remaining on Ceiao for only a few months at a time. Gracia, however, has left her own planet only once, as a child. She is an othered figure to the people of Ceiao, who do not speak her language and disdain her religious

[132] Which is not to say that Shakespeare does not sympathize with Cleopatra at all, or that he one-dimensionally demonizes her—far from it—but Robin's book is taking a more decidedly pro-Cleopatra stance.
[133] For the Elizabethan perception of Rome, particularly on the stage, see the first chapter of Coppélia Kahn's *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds and Women* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1997), 1-26.
[134] The location switches to Ceiao after 260 pages in Szayet, out of 514 pages in the paperback edition; this also marks the end of the second of four parts/volumes.

practices. The construction of the book, however, invites the audience to receive the Ceians themselves as the real "others," the culture with which the reader is least familiar. Unlike in Shakespeare's play, the reader is meant to identify with the first-person voice of the outsider, as Robin centers Gracia's struggle to hold her own in the heart of a foreign empire.

Ceiao is not only a different planet; it is also a conquering nation with power over Szayet. Szayet is a largely marine planet, rich with the sunken treasure of past civilizations—mirroring ancient Egypt's agricultural fertility and immense wealth. Like ancient Egypt, it is also defenseless. Even as she strikes up a romantic relationship with Ceirran, Gracia is constantly aware that his city could seize and destroy hers. She is the vulnerable party from the subordinate "client" nation. While the Ceians have "a significant fondness for Szayet's things," filling their homes with plundered Szayet trinkets (whose provenance they do not care to know),[135] most of the city takes no interest in Szayeti culture beyond using it as decoration.[136] Indeed, the first time Gracia meets Anita, the latter mocks her nation's languages, jabbing that "Sintian [a language spoken alongside Szayeti] was very amusing in school" as she deliberately mangles Gracia's father's titles.[137] Even the city's most famous intellectual refuses to drink any wine but Ceian. He defaults to his native language when speaking to Gracia; when she claims (falsely) that she only speaks Szayeti, his confusion and alarm suggests that her language has no intellectual or cultural worth.[138] And though Gracia's position of Oracle is the most important religious office on her planet, she is almost forced to give up her oracular supercomputer when she enters the anti-theist Ceiao. Indeed, she is exempted from this treatment only because of Ceirran's affection for her,[139]

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[135] Robin, 310-11.
[136] This aesthetic preoccupation carries hints of the historical phenomenon of "Egyptomania," the 19th-century European obsession with ancient Egyptian culture (but not modern Egypt, except for purposes of colonial extraction). Robin's Szayet and Ceiao, however, are not exact replications of Egypt and Rome; the most crucial factor in their relationship is that Ceiao has the political and military advantage.
[137] Robin, 29.
[138] Robin, 334-6.
[139] Robin, 278.

while the other Szayeti people in the city are forced to conceal or abandon their religion.[140] The relationship between Szayet and Ceiao is straightforwardly imperial: the empire wishes to consume Szayeti goods and to gawk at Gracia's quaint eccentricities, but ultimately Szayet is only good for resource extraction.

This power imbalance unlocks the reasoning behind the portrayal of Gracia and her sister in the Ceian theater. The street troupe presents the sisters as simultaneously feeble and formidable, seductive and pathetic. The troupe does not, however, cast Gracia as a heartless and hungry seductress. Instead, the character forced into this trope is Arcelia—whose army, notably, Ceirran has just defeated in battle. Gracia's actress is scantily dressed, but the emphasis lands on her weakness and smallness, not her dark womanly power.[141]

In *The Stars Undying*'s dramatis personae, however, the game has changed. Importantly, the dramatis personae is set up to postdate the plot of the novel: it is a cast list for a play called "*the Tragedy of Matheus Ceirran.*"[142] Presumably, this play chronicles Ceirran's murder, as Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* chronicles Caesar's—but Ceirran's murder comes at the tail end of Robin's text. When Ceirran is killed, Gracia flees the city, and her planet becomes embroiled from afar in the resulting Ceian civil war. Now that Gracia has gone from Ceirran's lover to a potential enemy of Ceiao, the troupe's dramatic treatment of her shifts. The director's note in her dramatis personae entry declares:

> *We are looking for SEDUCTION! GLAMOUR! WILES! The right actress should be like a snake in lipstick, and more lipstick = better. Sintian, but costumed to represent the ancient, mysterious, frightening rituals of the Szayeti people, etc. We will discuss details closer to dress rehearsal. (On wiles—I hope it is obvious that on no account should the*

[140] Robin, 388.
[141] Robin, 306.
[142] Robin, vii.

*actress come off as <u>more</u> intelligent than Commander Ceirran and co. Let's be reasonable here.)*[143]

Here is the familiar Cleopatra, the lascivious enemy of Rome, cunning enough to put up a fight but, of course, still "reasonably" inferior. The actress who plays Gracia in the original street play, before Ceirran's death, does "plaster herself over [the Ceirran actor's] chest," but any seductive power is tempered by her inability to remember her lines. Her headdress and white face paint indicate her exoticism, but the headdress is cardboard,[144] and the effect is overall far from "ancient, mysterious, [and] frightening." The new presentation of Gracia, however, is motivated by xenophobia more than misogyny: Gracia is forced into the trope of the debauched femme fatale only after breaking off her alliance with Ceiao, fully establishing herself as a foreigner and a potential enemy. Rather than *expressing* preexisting gendered power structures, the Ceian theater here invents, or at least redefines, gender as a trait that *can* be weaponized in propaganda. In Robin's world, womanhood and femininity are not inherently disempowered positions, but Ceian propagandists can construct gendered stereotypes in order to use gender as a mechanism of political control. Gracia's gender expression has not changed, but as her relationship to the Ceian empire shifts, so does the way her gender is received, interpreted, and ultimately made intelligible as threatening foreignness.

This is the truth about gender in *The Stars Undying*: it is always framed through and limited by one's relationship to empire. Anita's and Gracia's respective genders matter far less than their social positioning as loyal Ceian soldier—a propaganda piece—and foreign Szayeti threat—a snake in lipstick. Arcelia and Gracia are each hyper-feminized and demonized not because they are women, but because they are threats to Ceiao who must be identified and

[143] Robin, viii.
[144] Robin, 306.

mocked as such. The gendered dimension of this exoticism is a side effect, just one part of the Ceian attempt to define and thus contain a culture perceived as "mysterious" and strange, to deny Szayet as a political rival and redefine it as a mere source of resource extraction. Conversely, Anita's masculinity is valid and acceptable because she expresses it through submission to her betters, through the furthering of imperial power. Women in Ceiao, after all, are pressed into mandatory military service the same as anyone else. In a futuristic outer-space setting where gender roles and homophobia no longer exist, one's gender can be anything—so long as it can be absorbed by the imperial machine. But a Cleopatra figure, a foreign outsider whose power and very presence threatens the empire's stability, must be defined and made legible from the outside so that she may be conquered.

## SHAPED LIKE ITSELF: UNREMARKABLE GENDER IN *IMMORTAL LONGINGS*

Like Robin's, Chloe Gong's Cleopatra exists in a world where racial and gendered categories are far looser and less socially consequential. In the world of *Immortal Longings*, in fact, embodied categories are transient: body-jumping allows Gong's characters to slip in and out of bodies as if accessorizing with clothing. This *novum* may seem engineered to interrogate the racial and gendered dynamics of Shakespeare's play, but ultimately, the science fictional and adaptational aspects of the text never connect. Unlike *The Stars Undying*, where Robin is conscious of how the empirical world's concepts of gender might frame the characters, *Immortal Longings* entirely disregards these categories as thematic tools. Race and gender make no difference in this text—for Gong's characters or for the reader.

Chloe Gong's *Immortal Longings* centers twin cities, San and Er, languishing in poverty under a tyrannical king. Every year, the king hosts a gladiatorial death match, in which

competitors picked from a lottery strive to kill or disqualify their opponents, using the entirety of the twin cities as their arena. Complicating this endeavor is the book's primary *novum*:[145] a large percentage of the population gains the ability at puberty to jump from body to body, possessing others' bodies with their own *qi* (soul or life essence). Even citizens outside of the gladiatorial games make frequent use of this ability, and few people "pay [attention] to faces in a city where faces are always changing."[146]

*Antony and Cleopatra* is already intensely concerned with race, gender, power, and selfhood. While Robin relegates gender and race to the background, Gong foregrounds the embodiment of race, gender, and class by complicating embodiment itself. Physical characteristics become more or less detached from social positioning, as anyone can step into any postpubescent body, regardless of the culture, identity, or upbringing of the body's original *qi*. This in turn introduces questions of selfhood: does one's "true" self lie in the body they occupy or the *qi* that transports them? Is a Cleopatra or an Antony defined by their subjective experience, or the way they appear (altered through performance or body-borrowing) to other people?

The book's paratext trumpets the book's association with Shakespeare: the epigraph quotes the play directly:

> *Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale*
>
> *Her infinite variety. Other women cloy*
>
> *The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry*
>
> *Where most she satisfies. For vilest things*
>
> *Become themselves in her, that the holy priests*

[145] See Darko Suvin, "Estrangement and Cognition" (republished in *Strange Horizons*, November 24, 2014, http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/articles/estrangement-and-cognition/).
[146] Chloe Gong, *Immortal Longings* (New York, NY: Saga Press, 2023), 13.

*Bless her when she is riggish.*[147]

The book opens, then, by foregrounding Cleopatra as a character with a thousand faces, always in flux. So the introduction of Gong's Cleopatra, Calla Tuoleimi, comes as a surprise: Calla is the only major character who does not body-jump. Particularly in the games, this is "not just dangerous" but "unheard of. No one would enroll with such a disadvantage—no one except Calla Tuoleimi, apparently."[148] Nevertheless, Calla shrugs off the disadvantage. She has no interest in the dualism espoused by the other characters, who locate their sense of self in their *qi*: in Calla's mind, "This is her body. It belongs to her. It is her more than any collective identity."[149]

In Shakespeare's play, Cleopatra is notable because she is always changing. Her constant performance makes her irresistible even to her detractors; more, it functions as self-defense, allowing her to maintain power *because* she is so fascinating.[150] One might expect a body-jumping Cleopatra to shift bodies ceaselessly, making her variety truly *infinite*. Yet the world of *Immortal Longings* is a world where jumping is commonplace. Changing one's body is closer to changing an outfit than creating a new identity. Calla's refusal to body-jump achieves the same function as Cleopatra's variety: it makes her captivating in her strangeness. Her attachment to her body is socially unexpected, even disruptive. Instead of adapting to match every situation, Calla is straightforward and blunt. She makes others adapt to her—and they do, her competitors scrambling to get out of her way and Anton quick to offer allyship. Gong's reversal of her own epigraph, however unexpected, thus produces a figure as unique as Shakespeare's queen.

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[147] Shakespeare, II.2.276-281.
[148] Gong, 96.
[149] Ibid.
[150] See again L.T. Fitz, "Egyptian Queens."

At least in this arena. In others, however, Calla makes a strange Cleopatra, even when one analyzes her traits as deliberate reversals of expectation. Gong goes to great lengths to make Calla sympathetic: Calla is the main character, more so than Anton. The book's blurb frames the central conflict from her lens: "Calla must decide what she's playing for—her lover or her kingdom." She drives the plot, entangling Anton in her quest to destroy the tyrant king. While Gong has emphasized the book's focus on toxic romance, she has *not* marketed Calla as a main character meant to be loathed, stating instead that while "none of [the characters] are good people… none of them are entirely wrong, either; they all believe that they are doing the right thing."[151] Gong, it would seem, wants Calla to appear both morally conflicted and sympathetic, a character willing to kill to stand against injustice. *Immortal Longings*, like *The Stars Undying*, is thus ultimately sympathetic toward its Cleopatra.

However, Calla is only a sympathetic Cleopatra insofar as Gong distances her from the qualities that made Shakespeare's Cleopatra threatening. First and most importantly, she is no longer a foreigner. *Immortal Longings'* San-Er is a science fictional location, but it is modeled after twentieth-century China,[152] coded Chinese in the same way that, for example, George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* resembles medieval Britain. Every character is presumably fictionally Chinese; in this world, whiteness is emphatically not the default. Little detail is given about characters' cultures or backgrounds, but it *is* clear that Calla and August (Gong's Octavius Caesar) are cousins, part of the same royal family, their birth bodies related by blood. Here the Rome-Egypt dichotomy collapses. Technically, San and Er are two cities functioning as one,

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[151] See "5 Minutes With ... Chloe Gong" (YouTube, August 30, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTU385c5AP4), in which Gong states that her trilogy is "inspired by *Antony and Cleopatra*, *which means*… the romance is quite obsessive and toxic, and I love it that way" (emphasis mine).
[152] See Gong's website ("Immortal Longings," Chloe Gong, July 26, 2024. https://thechloegong.com/il/), where the publication announcement graphic specifies that Gong modeled San-Er after Hong Kong's populous and enclosed Kowloon Walled City.

each ruled by one branch of the royal family; in practice, however, the tyrant king Kasa rules both, and the only palpable difference between the cities is that Er has dirtier slums. Shakespeare's Rome and Egypt may be alike in unexpected ways, but the exotic existence of Egypt is nevertheless critical to the play's exploration of duality, art, and luxury. In *Immortal Longings*, there is no Egypt—or, if Gong's intent is to flip the script by staging a world where the "East" *is* the norm, then *everywhere* is Egypt. Either way, Gong's stand-ins for Cleopatra and Octavian no longer represent opposite, contrasting nations. One might argue that Calla is an enemy from within, that her "otherness" comes from her desire to destroy the monarchy—but Calla is not interested in destroying the *monarchy* as a structure, only King Kasa. She easily acquiesces to August's plan to put himself on the throne after she kills the king;[153] she and August remain two branches of one dynastic power.

Perhaps, then, Calla is "foreign" because of the reveal, two-thirds of the way through the book, that she is not the "original" princess Calla. Instead, her *qi* is that of a poor rural village girl who body-jumped into the princess years ago, overpowering the original Calla's *qi* and assuming her identity. It is thus possible to argue that Calla and August are not "actually" related, because Calla is an imposter in August's cousin's skin. Nevertheless, Calla makes it clear in the text that she considers herself a complete whole, not a *qi* borrowing a body: her body is hers. Functionally, she is the princess. And, critically, every other character receives her as such. Shakespeare's Cleopatra is hated and feared by Rome because she is blatantly Other, extravagantly flaunting her "Eastern" luxury.[154] Calla, by contrast, assimilates easily into the culture of the palace and of San-Er. She moves through lush palatial settings and grimy underground slums alike; she is not, as Cleopatra is, conspicuously from elsewhere. Thus, her

[153] Gong, 43: "'Very well,' she agrees plainly. She can always back out later if she needs to. She can always kill August too, if he's only trying to use then discard her."
[154] As in the description of her elaborately decorated barge, Shakespeare, II.2.227ff.

enemies cannot tar her as an exotic witch or seductress, nor as an international enemy plotting the end of San-Er. The text never seizes on her lack of Otherness as a point of conflict or an asset to her plans. The ever-present Otherness in the original play is simply lopped away.

Of course, Shakespeare's Cleopatra is not threatening solely as a foreigner, but as a foreign woman. Here Calla achieves some depth: *she* is the nonbinary figure, not her Antony. Though Calla "enjoys femininity and how it looks on her," a line that frames femininity as an accessory rather than a critical aspect of selfhood, she does not "[align] one specific way." She is "a woman in the same way that the sky is blue," that is, "woman" is the "easiest identifier" for something "nebulous [and] inexact."[155] Many critics have read Shakespeare's Cleopatra as the archetypal woman, mysterious and sexual and cunning.[156] Calla's apathy about her gender suggests that *Immortal Longings* will explore that nebulous inexactness, perhaps examining the ways in which Cleopatra's gendered positionalities, and the concept of womanhood in itself, are too complex to reduce to "masculine Rome versus feminine Egypt."

As it turns out, *Immortal Longings* is profoundly uninterested in Calla's gender. After Calla describes herself as "a woman in the same way the sky is blue," discussion of her identity never arises again. Calla is always effortlessly beautiful and effortlessly feminine, even in battle. In her partnership with Anton—first as allies in the games, then as lovers—she always takes the feminine role to his masculinity, such as when she poses as a courtesan so the pair might conceal themselves in a brothel.[157] The dynamic is similar to that in *The Stars Undying*: even in a world with looser gender roles, even in queer or nontraditional relationships, femininity seems an essential component of a recognizable Cleopatra.

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[155] Gong, 96.
[156] See L.T. Fitz's survey in "Egyptian Queens," 298.
[157] Gong, 179.

The lack of focus on Calla's gender is not in itself is not a bad thing. Nevertheless, it reflects a larger pattern: *Immortal Longings* adapts only the surface level of the play Gong claims to retell. Calla's gender may be allegedly nebulous and multifaceted, but she is always feminine by default, with no further exploration. Is femininity something Calla chooses strategically, as Shakespeare's Cleopatra performs hyperfemininity upon her barge to entrance her rivals and flaunt her riches? Does Calla's gender presentation make her vulnerable to accusations that she is a wiley seductress or preoccupied with lust, charges leveled against Shakespeare's Cleopatra as well as the historical queen? One can only wonder, as *Immortal Longings* reveals nothing; Calla's femininity seems to spring from her effortlessly and naturally, because Gong would have it so.

Nor does Calla use her beauty and charm to win her way. Shakespeare's Cleopatra is labeled a seductress as misogynist detraction, but one does not have to be a misogynist to allow that she *is* persuasive: she is a diplomat, reliant on charm and strategy to maintain her throne. While Antony is lauded for his (former) battle prowess, Cleopatra's powers are not physical[158] but political and interpersonal. She is so charismatic and attractive that even Enobarbus, who has no love for the queen, admits "vilest things / Become themselves in her."[159] Calla, however, relies almost entirely on her physical lethality and skill with a sword: she stands out among the games' contestants because her swordplay is "professional" and "fast," and Anton is certain he can recognize her in battle because "there [is] no one [else] moving with her precision."[160] Calla's scheming cousin August, who once watched a younger Calla murder her parents, tells her he thought her "bloodlust would fade with time," but Calla "is only more unhinged now," bluntly

[158] The only possible exception comes in II.5, when she beats the messenger who brings her news of Antony's marriage, but this scene is slapstick: there is no indication that Cleopatra is physically threatening beyond the power she wields.
[159] Shakespeare, II.2.276-281.
[160] Gong, 63.

threatening to "gut" him where he sits.[161] This is not a momentary slippage of control, like Cleopatra's attack on her servant, but Calla's general modus operandi. The narrative tells us flatly that she "hardly plans in advance," but "establishes one concrete end goal, then rams through whatever barriers stand between herself and the result."[162] The historical Cleopatra took hold of a precariously-positioned kingdom before the age of twenty-five, then kept Egypt out of Roman hands for years, partially through her relationships—manipulative or genuine—with Caesar and Antony in turn. Shakespeare's Cleopatra demonstrates her adept planning skills quite decisively in Act V, where she pulls off a regal and literally-showstopping suicide even as a captive under constant surveillance. Calla Tuoleimi, by contrast, is a battering ram in lipstick. She is neither diplomatic nor strategic nor politically savvy; indeed, Anton observes that her plans for social change are "unrealistic," that killing the king without dismantling the systems of power in San-Er means "merely swapping one mortal man for another."[163] Gong makes no effort to prove his perception wrong in the broader narrative. Instead Calla spends her page time killing her competitors brutally, then feeling conflicted about it. "She could do nothing on a throne," *Immortal Longings* declares, "but she can do everything with a sword in her hand."[164] At the very least, she has Cleopatra bangs.

Granted, by removing Cleopatra's supernatural charm and poise, Gong does avoid reinforcing the image of Cleopatra as an oversexed, manipulative destroyer of men. She also avoids interacting with this aspect of Cleopatra's myth at all. The result is the transformation of an extravagant and cunning dramatic character into a walking sword with little personality.

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[161] Gong, 35.
[162] Gong, 235.
[163] Gong, 302.
[164] Gong, 58.

Without the book's framing—the epigraph and blurb—or the Shakespeare quotes Gong scatters wantonly into her prose, it would be difficult to recognize Calla as a Cleopatra figure at all.

Of course, this Cleopatra does have an Antony. But Anton's relation to his analogue is even weaker than Calla's, his character on the whole shallower. An ex-noble living in exile, Anton has been deprived of his body by the palace. He lives by jumping continuously between others' bodies and briefly assuming their identities:

> Anton Makusa is picky when it comes to the bodies he occupies, and his narcissism takes first priority. He'll gravitate toward the masculine ones, same as the body he was born into, but he's not fussed if that isn't an option. What matters most is that they look good. Under the terms of his exile, his birth body was taken by the palace. The least he can do now is find worthy replacements.[165]

At first blush, this choice seems to literalize the struggle of Shakespeare's Antony as a man trapped between two poles, unable to maintain a visible (or invisible) shape. If Robin's Antony is dually-gendered, Gong's is un-sexed: Anton is literally not embodied. He is literally fluid, in ways that go beyond gender: no physical form exists to solidify him. Like Shakespeare's Antony, Anton cannot maintain a stable identity, but he has lost his shape in a much more dramatic way than his predecessor. Presumably, then, Anton's attempt to perform and thus legitimize his identity is even more dramatic than Antony's. Anton has no control over any aspect of his identity or selfhood; he lacks even the skin in which he was born. Ostensibly, his manliness is the last thing to which he can cling: choosing to occupy mainly masculine bodies is a final attempt to carve out a sense of self and control over his self-presentation. Nevertheless, this fix is only temporary. Because Anton cannot remain in the same body for long without arousing suspicion, he must jump constantly, meaning his struggle for self-definition must be reenacted over and

[165] Gong, 24.

over again, much as Antony struggles endlessly to assert manhood. There is no finish line: the masculine self must be constantly reasserted.

I write "ostensibly" because this analysis is all conjecture. On paper, Anton Makusa experiences very little grief about the fact that he "cannot hold [his] shape." Of course, an Antony figure does not *have* to be insecure about his gender or selfhood to function as a recognizable Antony: as witnessed, Emery Robin's Anita is quite secure in her gender-nonconformity, and quite desirable for it. But Anton does not revel in his fluidity, either. In fact, he barely thinks about it. Even in the above excerpt, the text notes that his preference for masculine bodies is not intense enough to make him "fussed" about his situation. According to *Immortal Longings*' blurb, Anton's driving motivation is the desire to rescue his beloved paramour Otta from a coma with the money he wins in the gladiatorial games, but, in truth, he barely thinks about Otta, either. Most of Anton's page time is devoted to cliched flirty banter and a preoccupation with Calla—not because she is especially charming or mysterious, but because the plot requires an Antony to want a Cleopatra. Though Anton has been violently degendered by the loss of his body, Gong seems to take little interest in his experience of identity; primarily, Anton exists as Calla's bad boy battle partner. Here is another version of infinite variety—a character without physical consistency, with a limitless amount of possible forms—that fails to impact the story at all.

Warlike instead of diplomatic, constant in a world of inconstancy, Calla is a Cleopatra defined by reversal, her lover an Antony defined by exile rather than glory. At its beginning, *Immortal Longings* thus seems set to turn the play inside-out. Yet the thematic threads Gong introduces early in the book are laid aside in favor of battle scenes and endlessly-reiterated

information about the setting. Ultimately, the themes and concerns of *Antony and Cleopatra* are only set dressing, aesthetic trappings without substance.

Even so, this lack of substance is revealing. If Robin's main character is recognizable as Cleopatra where Gong's is not, some essential facet of Cleopatra-ness must hang in the balance. Viewed together, these two characters suggest that Cleopatras are usually feminine, but also that femininity is not enough to define a Cleopatra. Robin's Gracia is closer to Shakespeare's Cleopatra than Gong's Calla for two primary reasons so far: because she is a foreigner fighting an uphill battle against a neighbor with intimidating military power, and because she is a skilled diplomat with a sharply political approach to her problems.

Of course, her positioning in the social order is not the only critical aspect of Shakespeare's Cleopatra. Her status as a powerful Egyptian woman is important, but so is her status as the embodiment of theater, a self-consciously performative character introduced to the stage in an often-antitheatrical era. To understand Cleopatra's adaptation in these novels, then, one must also examine the movement from one medium to another.

# CHAPTER 3: THE ACTOR MAY PLEAD PARDON

All of Shakespeare's oeuvre is on some level concerned with the medium of theater, the opportunities and drawbacks it offers. *Antony and Cleopatra*, however, is a text particularly obsessed with the very concept of performance and its effects—on audience and performer alike. Robin's and Gong's adaptations are both novelizations of this play; these two authors are not only placing Shakespeare into science fiction, but also into a format without actors, sets, costumes, or effects. Many questions invoked by theater, however—like the issue of what makes something "real" and how much power performance has to represent or create truth—are also evoked by science fiction. Where Robin and Gong lack Shakespeare's theatrical medium, then, they do have the traditional tools of science fiction to trouble the "real." Robin uses these tools, and the qualities unique to the novel form, to retain and translate *Antony and Cleopatra*'s interest in the construction of narratives and legends. By contrast, Gong fails to align *Immortal Longings*' generic and formal qualities with the book's themes, hindering the text's ability to provoke destabilizing questions.

Many academics have read Cleopatra as an embodiment of theater itself—for good and for ill. As Laura Levine observes, Enobarbus's declaration that she "makes hungry / Where she most satisfies;" she draws Antony back to her over and over, as theater was believed to incite audiences to return again and again.[166] No one tires of her, because Cleopatra is the woman "whom everything becomes," shifting mercurially between moods to evoke a response from Antony.[167] When her mutability does not suffice, she explicitly provokes him into "excellent dissembling," then chides him for playing his part poorly, for all the world like an exacting

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[166] Laura Levine, "Strange Flesh" (*Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-Theatricality and Effeminization, 1579-1642*; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 48.
[167] William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* (Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine; New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1999), I.2.56-7.

director.[168] Like a director, she puts men in women's clothing and steals away their manhood.[169] Her penultimate performance—convincing Antony she has committed suicide—is "a scene… so destructive it drives its audience to kill himself," echoing the logic of antitheatrical tracts declaring theater an active hazard to its witnesses.[170]

Her theatricality, however, is not the same as falseness. Even Cleopatra's faked suicide, her most dishonest performance, is ultimately—like her other histrionic fainting "deaths" throughout the play[171]—a rehearsal for her final show, her real suicide, a performance that sets the terms of the narrative of her life and memory. She "conceives of reality itself as a scenario waiting to be improvised and shaped," that is, she conceives of reality as something that *can* be shaped by the script she decides to set.[172] Cleopatra's seductive and terrifying power is *not* the power to misrepresent herself or the world—it is the power to *change* herself and the world, by representing what she means to make real.

Indeed, representation is all an audience has of Shakespeare's Cleopatra. Many academics have noted the lack of interiority Shakespeare offers his title characters,[173] who are never staged in a private moment together. They make their grandest declarations of love in front of crowds of attendants; they do not soliloquize; the play occludes "the motives of the protagonists at the most critical points in the action."[174] Not only does Cleopatra never speak directly to the audience, but she is actually never alone on stage, which means that even within the text she always represents herself to someone else's gaze. Unlike other characters famous for

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[168] Shakespeare, I.3.91-103.
[169] Levine, "Strange Flesh," 49-50.
[170] Levine, "Strange Flesh," 56.
[171] Levine, "Strange Flesh," 67-68.
[172] Levine, "Strange Flesh," 48.
[173] Emma Smith,*This is Shakespeare: How to Read the World's Greatest Playwright* (London UK: Penguin Books, 2020), 255.
[174] Janet Adelman, *The Common Liar: An Essay on Antony and Cleopatra* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 16.

their ability to perform—Hamlet and his antic disposition, for example, or Iago and his complex web of lies—Cleopatra offers no glimpse of a sheltered inside self. Scholars may struggle to set a clear boundary between Hamlet's interior and his exterior (there is no critical consensus on the degree to which his madness is natural, rather than feigned). But Cleopatra does not even have an interior to begin with—at least, not one that the audience can see. What the audience sees is all exterior: what she does, what she performs.

This representative performance is not limited to theatrical performance, even if Cleopatra is a figure in a play. I am also drawing on Judith Butler's use of the concept of "performative acts," in the sense of a "speech act:" a piece of speech that in itself performs what it describes (the classic example being "I promise," which itself enacts the promise).[175] Butler departs from the common view that gender is "expressive" of a deep essential truth, buried in a person like a gemstone, predating the "acts, postures, and gestures by which it is dramatized and known." Rather, they view these acts, postures, and gestures as "performative" in that they "constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal;"[176] there is no inner truth; the emperor has no clothes, or perhaps the emperor is only clothes. People *create* gender through performative acts, not just once but repeatedly and continually. The meaning associated with these acts—the idea that a certain gesture or outfit is masculine or feminine—is not inherently attached to the act; rather, meanings have been inscribed onto these acts through complex processes of culture and history. To access the cultural idea of "manhood" or "womanhood," one must perform certain acts. "Gender reality," in Butler's world, is thus "real only to the extent that it is performed."[177] Interiority as an "essence" is a "fabrication."[178]

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[175] Mitchell Green, "Speech Acts" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, September 24, 2020. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/speech-acts/).
[176] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (*Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 519–31. https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893), 528.
[177] Butler, "Performative Acts," 527.
[178] Butler, "Performative Acts," 528.

If representation creates reality, then *Antony and Cleopatra* is a very Butlerian play. Within the play's world, this model of performative acts applies not only to gender—though the play is certainly obsessed with the performance and reiteration of masculinity—but to identity as a whole. As Levine argues, Octavius Caesar reacts with hostility to "Cleopatra's presentation of herself as a goddess" because he recognizes that "the power to stage oneself" is also the power to create oneself.[179] Similarly, Antony's scramble to prove his manhood is fueled by the same understanding: when he stops adequately performing manhood, he loses his access to it, through the potent symbol of his stolen sword. This is a play where theater's power is not just to hold "the mirror up to nature," to imitate the real,[180] but to *create* the thing it reflects: "representation itself is not merely a matter of presenting… a copy of what already 'is.'"[181] Cleopatra's idea that the world *can* be scripted and directed is correct: "if things fail to exist apart from their own theatricalizations, then what is enacted is simply more 'real' than what is not, theatricality simply the constitutive condition of existence itself."[182] The end of the play sees Cleopatra victorious. Octavian's desire to stage her as a prisoner in a triumph, played by a squeaking boy, is overpowered by the show of her suicide, in which she combines the parts of noble queen, nurturing mother, bereaved wife, honorable Roman suicide, and mortal apotheosized.[183] She dies, but she dies the ultimate actor and director of herself.

But what, then, is Cleopatra's "self," if she can perform as anything? How can one define a self at all? Beneath the basic anxieties of Shakespeare's antitheatrical contemporaries, like the fear that wearing women's clothes might cause a man to degenerate into a woman, lie deeper

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[179] Levine, "Strange Flesh," 65.
[180] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1992), III.2.21.
[181] Levine, "Strange Flesh," 69.
[182] Levine, "Strange Flesh," 71.
[183] See *Antony and Cleopatra* V.2.335 (the robe and crown), V.2.418 (the asp "here on her breast"), V.2.342 ("Husband, I come!"), IV.15.101-2 ("Let's do 't after the high Roman fashion / And make death proud to take us"), and V.2.336 ("immortal longings").

gaping chasms of doubt. If a man *can* become a woman, then what does it mean to be a man? What does it mean to be a woman? If a boy on stage can embody a woman, if a poor actor can embody a queen, however briefly, then what is a "real" queen or woman? For that matter, what does it mean to "become" something else? And, if it's possible for the self and the role to merge inextricably, what separates the "real" self from the adopted, performed self? What are the qualifications for something being *real*, anyway?

These questions are begged by Cleopatra's self-creation. They are also questions begged frequently by science fiction. In fact, Darko Suvin's definition of science fiction as the genre of estrangement[184] suggests that begging these questions *is* the purpose of science fiction—not merely to hold the mirror up to the "empirical environment" of author and reader, but to call the empirical environment into question. The "novum" of each text (its unreal element) is meant to trouble what the reader takes for granted as natural and immutable. Exploring a world in which the human mind could be preserved after death, or in which consciousness is not always fixed in one body, provokes questions about which aspects of the mind and consciousness a reader has taken for granted as natural and immutable. Robin and Gong, then, are working in a long tradition concerned with the same questions as Shakespeare's play.

But the novelist has different tools. Theater is what Robert Stam describes as a "multitrack medium," with more than one "track" by which to express itself. Stam focuses on film, not drama, but his "tracks" are easily applied to theater: "phonetic sound, music, noises, and written materials" also exist on stage, and Stam's fifth filmic track, "moving photographic image,"[185] in theater takes the form of sets, costumes, and living actors. The words of the text are still critical, but these other dimensions exist simultaneously, layered over and under the verbal.

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[184] Darko Suvin, "Estrangement and Cognition" (republished in *Strange Horizons*, November 24, 2014, http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/articles/estrangement-and-cognition/).
[185] Robert Stam, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation," (*Film Adaption*, 2000), 56.

Directors must make choices novelists do not have to consider: exactly what each character will look like, for example, as determined by which actor embodies them.

The presence of an actor itself invokes many of the aforementioned questions, because the presence of an actor is a reminder that there is *some* difference between the idea of a character and the physical body enacting that idea. An actor who plays Cleopatra is not *actually* the long-dead queen; similarly, the play's set is not actually ancient Egypt. More so than film, where editing and special effects can smooth over this verisimilitude, theater makes this incongruity visible. Even a play less obsessed with theater-as-reality than *Antony and Cleopatra* has to navigate a double reality, the reality of the actors and stage lying beneath the story the actors and set signify. An audience can suspend disbelief to imagine, for example, that the person playing Cleopatra has actually died, but at some point the play will end and the actor will stand up again, the theatrical space revealed as only a room. Theatrical art cannot escape this double vision, only navigate and mediate between its layers.

Novelists, on the other hand, only have words. Stam observes that this limitation creates a "subordination to linear consecution"[186]—while film and drama can express visuals and sounds all at once, a novelist must describe one thing at once. Nevertheless, Stam does not consider this a flaw in the written word. This "linear consecution" lends the novelist control over a reader's attention and access to information: a reader can only know what the prose tells them, in the order it tells them. In adapting Shakespeare's play to prose, Robin and Gong have more authority than Shakespeare did over how their Cleopatra figures are received. Theater is limited by the biases of the audience, who may react to unintentional details about an actor's appearance or voice. But novelists—though their audiences, too, are biased—have far more exacting control over what information reaches their audiences at all.

[186] Stam, "Beyond Fidelity," 59.

Yet there is a cost: without a theater, how can a novelist create a theatrical Cleopatra? How can prose recreate her dramatics—her emotional vicissitudes, her grand self-display—without recourse to visual spectacle or an actor's ability to imbue feeling into a text? The force of Cleopatra's "infinite variety" must be achieved through words alone—and yet she herself "beggar[s] all description."[187]

Of course, it is worth noting that Shakespeare's resorts to costumes, sets, and actors were limited as well: early modern drama had very little in the way of set pieces, and Shakespeare's original Cleopatra would have been played by a boy actor in castoffs.[188] Indeed, one of Cleopatra's most extravagantly theatrical scenes comes to the audience only through hearsay. Her appearance on the River Cydnus, fanned by Cupids and wafting perfume, is what Marjorie Garber calls an "un-scene:" "unseen by the spectators in the theater except in the mind's eye," because it is not staged but described in lavish detail.[189] This very lack of staging gives the scene its power: because it exists only in the mind, it presents a Cleopatra who is definitionally unreal, allowing her to attain a grandeur that a staging could never live up to. She is not a stumbling boy actor but a "paradox of nature and a work of art,"[190] and she is made so, like a character in a novel, by words alone.

So perhaps *literal* visual spectacle is not necessary to convey Cleopatra's drama; the imaginary visual spectacle created verbally is enough. Notably, however, Cleopatra's River Cydnus appearance is narrated by Enobarbus, one of Antony's Roman fellows. Her spectacle is framed through an outsider;[191] she remains all exterior, her intentions for the performance left for

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[187] Shakespeare, II.2.235.
[188] See Phyllis Rackin, "Shakespeare's Boy Cleopatra, the Decorum of Nature, and the Golden World of Poetry" (*PMLA* 87, 1972), 201-212.
[189] Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 2004), 733.
[190] Ibid.
[191] And, significantly, an outsider who doesn't even like her; even her haters are swept up in Cleopatra's thrall.

the guessing. Shakespeare thus aligns Cleopatra's in-text and meta-textual audiences, both of whom find her performances so captivating at least in part because she remains a mystery.

Robin's and Gong's novels, however, are each partially from the narrative point of view of their respective Cleopatras. This allows the novelists an easy way to create what Linda Hutcheon calls the "*res cogitans*, the space of the mind," which conveys a character's "psychic reality."[192] In Shakespearean theater, the *res cogitans* takes shape in soliloquy—but Cleopatra has no soliloquies. Both novelists, through their chosen medium, offer the reader a direct line to their Cleopatra's thoughts, but what—and how—does Cleopatra think? If her appeal depends in part on her unpredictable mutability, can Cleopatra remain alluring in prose, with her mystery diminished and no actor lending life to her words?

## A PLACE I' TH' STORY: NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN *THE STARS UNDYING*

Robin's Cleopatra certainly can. Gracia, Robin's Cleopatra, achieves the original Cleopatra's fascinating magnetism and "infinite variety" through her role as an unreliable narrator in a biased frame narrative. Furthermore, the text's broader questions about selfhood and legend are expressed through the science fiction novum of the Pearl of the Dead, which allows Robin, like Shakespeare, to invent a world where storytelling is reality-making.

Like Cleopatra, Gracia cannot be pinned down. From the outset, she is difficult to read. The other point of view character, Ceirran, though he is her lover and the two are quite intimate, remarks frequently on her inscrutability—an inscrutability she creates through her constant (en)acting of royal beauty. Even after the two sleep together, Ceirran catches Gracia adjusting her behavior to play to his desires and expectations: "After only a few seconds of my observation the faint line between her eyebrows disappeared, and she tilted her chin a little, and the soft curve of

[192] Linda Hutcheon with Siobhan O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 14-15.

her jaw caught the light." "It's a lovely picture," Ceirran tells Gracia, because he recognizes that she *is* constructing a picture, the same way he recognizes the "curious distance to how she looked at [him]."[193] Later, he observes that he understands "barely half of what passed through her mind;"[194] that that he cannot tell when she is lying;[195] that her moments of vulnerability are so rare and fleeting as to startle him.[196] Gracia, too, is conscious of the distance between them. "I might have said yes, if [yes] had been the truth," she thinks when Ceirran asks her a tender personal question. She knows he speaks with "neither suspicion nor rancor,"[197] and yet the *might* lingers. Even the counterfactual, if all else *had* been true, would not ensure Gracia's honesty. And even her attraction to Ceirran is part performance: the touch of her tongue to her lips as she flirts with him is only "*almost* more nervousness than show."[198]

So Robin's Cleopatra is as unpredictable as Shakespeare's. Yet mere words still do not reproduce the living, breathing, glimmering stage presence of a fascinating performer. *This* effect is achieved through the novel's frame narrative: it steadily becomes clear that the two point of view characters are not only narrating, but telling their stories in first person *to* a specific audience. The reader has not only a direct line to Gracia's subjective experience, but a direct line to Gracia's subjective experience *as she chooses to shape it*. Cleopatra has Enobarbus to describe her on the River Cydnus, but Gracia is her own Enobarbus, crafting her own image for her audience. And she manipulates this editorial power, unabashedly. More than once, she confesses she has obscured major information from the reader. The first act of the novel follows Gracia's civil war, waged against her sister, whose religious claim to the throne Gracia denies. She introduces the war as if she had no choice in the matter: Gracia's citizens knew she was the

[193] Emery Robin, *The Stars Undying* (London, UK: Orbit Books), 116-118.
[194] Robin, 235.
[195] Robin, 238.
[196] Robin, 259.
[197] Robin, 134.
[198] Robin, 114, emphasis mine.

rightful queen, and Gracia was more or less forced to raise arms to fulfill their wishes. The story proceeds upon this information for a hundred pages; then, abruptly, Gracia announces in her narration, "I lied about the war," revealing that she deliberately provoked unrest in the city and organized her own coup.[199] Her civil war and her innocent facade are both carefully orchestrated; she steers events rather than reacting helplessly. "I am a liar, of course," she notes in her first chapter, and proceeds to prove it.[200]

Gracia has no illusions about her preoccupation with her public image or her deftness at refining it. She achieves an alliance with the Ceians by threatening to make herself a martyr, "a display that no one watching her will soon forget,"[201] emphasizing her understanding of the power of public display. Her narrative neatly elides inconvenient moments in her personal history. Gracia skips parts of her story; she doubles back and corrects her omissions; she elides her own uncomfortable emotions with a simple, "I don't think I'm going to tell you about that right now."[202] She is keeping secrets, that is, but she is also teasing the tantalizing moment where she might reveal those secrets. The greatest elision looms over most of the novel. When Gracia assumes her throne, she also becomes the priestess to her planet's god, whose soul is stored inside a computer chip. Upon emerging from this chip to meet her, this god declares that he "might have known" she would take the throne. Rather than depict the rest of their conversation, Robin-through-Gracia skips forward to the end of the scene.[203] Almost two hundred fifty pages of mystery pass before Gracia confesses the secret her god knew at once: that she lied about being his chosen queen; that her sister was the one chosen all along, making her civil war tantamount to blasphemy.

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[199] Robin, 126-7.
[200] Robin, 12.
[201] Robin, 111.
[202] Robin, 67.
[203] Robin, 152.

Here is Gracia's infinite variety: over and over, she reveals another lie woven into the thread of her story. The unreliability of her narration is how "she makes hungry:"[204] the lies provoke a desire for the truth. *The Stars Undying* cannot be read while distracted: the reader must struggle to differentiate propaganda from the "true" story, bearing in mind not only the complicated science fictional politics, but also the narrator's habitual dishonesty. Her inscrutability requires full focus, the exact sort of focus Cleopatra commands on the stage.

Even with her greatest—not her final—secret revealed, Gracia's motivations are difficult to ascertain. She never admits *why* she chose to blaspheme her way to the throne; her reasoning must be assembled from her statements about loving the people of Szayet or distrusting her twin sister's governance. That twin, Arcelia, tells her that "trying to be your sister is like trying to be sister to [a black hole]. There's nothing inside," only a ruthless willingness to embody whatever story she intends to tell.[205] The reader, too, begins to wonder if there is a genuine woman beneath the propaganda.

It is not a particularly sympathetic question, but it is a fascinating one. Like Shakespeare's Cleopatra, Gracia may not be a paragon of virtue, but she is nevertheless more interesting in the "vilest things [that] become her" than the Romans (Ceians) in all their rigid straight lines. As Emma Smith says, bluntly, "We would rather be in the scenes with Cleopatra than in those with Caesar," who is less "dramatically engaging."[206] Smith means Octavius Caesar, not the Caesar Ceirran represents, but the same pattern holds true in *The Stars Undying*. Ceirran, too, is a biased narrator, but only because of his lack of self-awareness about his authoritarian leanings. Gracia is much less oblivious of her own dishonesty, which means she is

[204] Shakespeare, II.2.276-281.
[205] Robin, 481.
[206] Smith, 267.

much more deliberate about the way she organizes her story, which means her chapters carry a dramatic flair Ceirran's do not.

Both narrators tell their own stories, but Ceirran is recording for no one in particular, recounting his life for posterity.[207] Gracia's audience is decidedly more personal. The final chapters reveal that she has been telling her story, all along, to Anita. "Give me my robe," Gracia tells her maidservant. "Put on my crown. I am going to tell her a story."[208] While the words directly invoke Cleopatra's death scene,[209] at this point in *The Stars Undying*, Gracia is not preparing for her death. She is preparing to approach Anita in full regalia on an extravagant spaceship, at the height of her royal power—that is, this is Gracia's equivalent of Cleopatra's River Cydnus moment. The story she intends to tell Anita is her own narrative, both a defense of her slippery political dishonesty and a charm campaign. Robin's choice to place the reveal here emphasizes that the book itself is an extension of the River Cydnus display: it is not only the spaceship that constitutes Gracia's most alluring and daring performance, but also the story she has shaped word by word.

Cleopatra's infinite variety is thus preserved by Robin's frame narrative and choice of point of view. Grounding the story in Gracia's head equalizes the epistemological power dynamic of the original work. In Shakespeare's play, Cleopatra is almost always framed through the eyes of Romans—particularly Enobarbus, who constantly attacks her distracting, allegedly effeminizing effect on Antony. His perspective is one that venerates Roman manhood, and his dislike for Cleopatra is thus inextricable from her un-Romanness. The play's other Roman characters discuss her with a mixture of awe and disdain. Only in the final act does Cleopatra

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[207] This is likely a historical reference—Ceirran's historical counterpart, the real Julius Caesar, left behind lengthy writings recounting his military campaigns. Like Ceirran's, these writings were not directed to a distinct audience but written as raw material—in Caesar's case, for future historians; in Ceirran's, for the Pearl.
[208] Robin, 514.
[209] See Shakespeare, V.2: "Give me my robe. Put on my crown. I have / Immortal longings in me."

command the audience on her own terms, and even then, her desire to write her own legend with her death conflicts with Octavius's desire to write her a different script. In *The Stars Undying*, however, Gracia has far more power to present herself on her own terms, without a veil of exotification. (While Ceirran narrates every other chapter, his are generally shorter, and after his death, Gracia's is the sole voice.) By letting their Cleopatra speak for herself, rather than presenting her through a Roman lens, Robin breaks from depictions of Cleopatra that judge her through orientalist and misogynistic frames.

What Robin preserves is Shakespeare's fascination with fate, legend, and hearsay. *The Stars Undying* is intimately concerned with the power of storytelling—particularly dishonest storytelling. The very first paragraphs of the book foreground the tension between myth and historical truth, between self-fashioning narratives and material reality:

> In the first year of the Thirty-Third Dynasty, when He came to the planet where I was born and made of it a wasteland for glory's sake, my ten-times-great-grandfather's king and lover, Alekso Undying, built on the ruins of the gods who had lived before him Alectelo, the City of Endless Pearl, the Bride of Szayet, the Star of the Swordbelt Arm, the Ever-Living God's Empty Grave.
>
> He caught fever and filled that grave, ten months later. You can't believe in names.[210]

This invocation and immediate deflation of legend sets the stage for the rest of the novel, wherein both main characters are extremely aware that story and history are not synonymous. The story of Alekso Undying also sets the stage for *The Stars Undying*'s primary *novum*: the Pearl of the Dead.[211] Created by Gracia's "ten-times-great-grandfather," lover of the conqueror-turned-god Alekso (a character modeled after the historical Alexander the Great), the

[210] Robin, 3.
[211] Arguably, the base *novum* of the book is its space opera setting, but the Pearl of the Dead is the object upon which large parts of the plot hinge.

"pearl" is actually a supercomputer housing the downloaded contents of Alekso's mind and memories. When connected to the brain of a living person—the Oracle of Szayet, who wears the Pearl at their ear at all times—this supercomputer offers advice and admonishment through a projection of Alekso.

To the people of Szayet, who consider him a god, this projection is Alekso's immortal soul. To the unreligious Ceians, it is merely a complex superintelligence. Gracia and Ceirran both spend the novel haunted by the implied question: "whether, should [a computer program] be an identical replica of a human mind, that mind can be said to remain alive and well."[212] It is not a mere philosophical exercise. Threatened by Ceiao's military power, the one unique resource Gracia can offer Ceirran is Szayet's technology. Driven by a combination of political duress and personal tenderness toward him, she offers to make Ceirran a Pearl for his own mind, provided that she can serve as his Oracle and wear his Pearl after his death. If the supercomputer is a mere imitation of a mind, this would give Gracia a great deal of political power in Ceirran's wake. If, however, the replicated mind really *is* "alive and well," if Alekso Undying lives on, then Gracia is offering Ceirran immortality—an unending retelling of his story built directly from his memories.

Robin deploys this invented technology to literalize a question already present in the Shakespeare play: what it means for a person to become a myth. Both viewpoint characters are obsessed with the legacies they will leave behind, but they are also aware that the image of them that lives on may not be objectively "true," and both are eager to put forth "an excitingly justifiable narrative" of their actions.[213] The philosophical debate around the Pearl only highlights what Gracia already knows, as Cleopatra did before her: that all narratives are

[212] Robin, 83.
[213] Robin, 137.

subjective, so truth may not be "anywhere to be found" in memory—neither the collective memory of a culture nor the emotional memory of an individual.[214]

Marjorie Garber situates Shakespeare's Antony as somewhere between a "failed hero or successful myth."[215] In doing so, she exposes another of the play's many dichotomies: history and legend. A man who "fails" in his mortal life might still live on in romantic legend—for example, on the stage. While Octavius Caesar wins history, Garber asserts, in that he materially defeats Antony and Cleopatra and seizes imperial power, the lovers win the narrative with the sheer force of their paradoxes and excesses: "His glory is history, [but] their story is legend."[216]

Robin, less explicitly, asserts something similar: the story that endures, however false, however consciously crafted, is always more important than the truth. The novel never offers a definitive answer about the Pearl. Ultimately, it does not matter if the Alekso projected into Gracia's brain is the "real" Alekso: he is the only Alekso to whom she has access. The long-dead man whose mind provided the code is out of reach. Gracia's Alekso has his "memories" and "the intelligence to animate them;" when Gracia asks if he is "anything more than that," he answers, "Are you?"[217] Every person, after all, builds themself from their memories, just as their posthumous legacy is built by others' memories of them. Even if the projected Alekso is not the "real" Alekso's soul, he is still the guiding advice-giving hand of the Oracle, and thus for all functional purposes he "is" Gracia's god.

Gracia's confrontation with Alekso is one of the few scenes where Robin lays bare the tension between fact and myth. The other is Ceirran's death scene—or, rather, the lack of it, because the scene is a gap in the narrative. Like Garber's "unscene," this event happens

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[214] Robin, 409.
[215] Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, 726.
[216] Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, 752.
[217] Robin, 473.

off-stage, transmitted only through hearsay and secondary report. Ceirran is a clear Caesar analogue, which means the narrative builds inexorably to his assassination, with a dramatic irony the audience would be hard-pressed to ignore. Robin is so bold as to reference Shakespeare's famous "Et tu, Brute?," when Ceirran asks Jonata Barran—Robin's Brutus—if the council (taking place of the Roman senate) will forgive him for his lateness. "And you, too, Jonata?" he says, and if at this point the direction of the plot is not clear, nothing else can be done.[218]

Yet Ceirran's last scene ends there, as he enters the council meeting. The violence of his death is elided entirely. Rather, Robin relies on the reader's understanding of the extratextual story of Caesar's assassination to put together the pieces, as only the tumultuous aftermath of Ceirran's death is described in any detail.[219] Ceirran's death is a lacuna. Outside imagination must fill in the gap—not only the imagination of the reader, but of the other characters within the plot, who variously claim that Ceirran, "had he lived… would have erased all debt… would have killed Jonata Barran with his bare hands… would have been a tyrant to the Ceian people… would have been the savior of the Ceian people."[220] Thus, though Ceirran's own transference into a Pearl is never completed, he nevertheless attains his own kind of immortality. When only his memory remains, he becomes a fractal figure, his reputation shaped by stories and rumors more than any objective list of facts.[221] This is the moment he achieves godhood, or something close to it: the moment he becomes more myth than man. It is very similar to Cleopatra's achievement at the end of *Antony and Cleopatra*.

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[218] Robin, 444.
[219] Through Gracia's narration, Robin describes fragmented images of Ceirran's body as seen on screens, as well as pieces of Anita's version of Antony's funeral speech—but neither is described in full. Despite the centrality of Caesar's funeral to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (Antony's speech is the hinge upon which the play turns), the reader gets very few of Anita's words.
[220] Robin, 463-4.
[221] Robin, 440.

Here is the true triumph of Gracia's narration: she *must* be the character who helms a story about mythmaking, because no figure is made of myth quite so much as Cleopatra. Ceirran's death scene is an empty space, a tantalizing lack of detail inviting theorizing and supposition. The same is true of Cleopatra's life. Historians have one (disputed) record of her handwriting and no record of her thoughts. The concrete facts about her life are few and far between, and rather drab next to the glittering array of myths about her wealth, her beauty, her sex life, her seductive powers, her cruelty, her tragedy. The historical Cleopatra is compelling not in spite of but because of her mystery, just as Shakespeare's Cleopatra is interesting not in spite of but because of her inscrutability. By introducing the Pearl of the Dead as a literalization of preservation through memory, Robin employs the tools of science fiction to create a world where creating a mythos can directly create reality, where placing a dead man in the role of a god can actually lend him immortality through technology. And by placing the story squarely in Gracia's hands—decisively so, after Ceirran's death ends his point of view—Robin emphasizes that Gracia is the pinnacle of self-mythologizing. If she is really, as her sister claims, a black hole, a vacuum, then she is a vacuum people leap to fill with their stories, none so well as Gracia herself.

"There is something greater than a lie," she declares near the end of the novel, "wider and wilder… and which holds men in its current… the Sintians might have called it greatness, and the Ceians glory. The Szayeti might have called it divinity."[222] If to lie, to craft a story, is to become divine, then Gracia's act of self-narrativization is not only her equivalent of a display on the River Cydnus. It is also her apotheosis.

[222] Robin, 491.

## EXCELLENT DISSEMBLING: DECEPTIVE THEATER IN *IMMORTAL LONGINGS*

Like Shakespeare's play, *Immortal Longings* asks whether identity is something you are or something you do. At times, Chloe Gong seems to follow a Butler-type view of identity, where the "self" is not a secret internal truth but created through the performance of culturally meaningful acts. At other times, however, the text presents these performance acts—and all attempts to narrativize reality—as fundamentally dishonest, working to obscure a secret internal truth that *does* exist. Rather than offer a coherent answer, *Immortal Longings* vacillates unproductively between these potential understandings of identity, ultimately failing to commit to a theme or to resolve its own internal contradictions.

Initially, the Butlerian idea of identity seems at odds with Gong's worldbuilding. The *novum* of *Immortal Longings* is that most people in San-Er have a gene that allows them to transfer their *qi* from one body to another. Almost every character in *Immortal Longings* frequently body-jumps via this ability. In traditional Chinese medicinal practices, *qi* loosely describes the "vital energy that is held to animate the body internally."[223] In Gong's universe, this is the part of the person that can detach from the physical body: the mind, memories, and subjective consciousness. The only physical freight carried with *qi* is a person's eye color, which also transfers to the newly occupied body. Otherwise, body and *qi* are entirely separable. While some characters seem attached to their "original" bodies, this is simply personal preference. Identity clearly resides in the *qi*; Anton is entirely bereft of his birth body, but narration and Calla alike call him Anton, no matter whose skin he arrives in. In this world, then, the type of question scholars might ask about Hamlet or Iago—whether they have a "true" self behind their actions—seems moot. That self is the *qi*. The answer is obviously yes.

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[223] "Qi Definition & Meaning." Merriam-Webster. Accessed March 20, 2025. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/qi.

This is not to say *Immortal Longings* is uninterested in theater and truth. Gong constructs San-Er as a city of performance, in a simpler sense than Butler's: the city is obsessed with manufactured entertainment, particularly the death games that drive the plot. The second paragraph of the book settles its focus on the city's coliseum, which is so central—spatially and culturally—that the royal palace "was built into" it, "the north side of the elevated palace enmeshed with the coliseum's south wall."[224] This emphasis on the palace and coliseum "[closing] the gap[s]" in one another[225] decisively pairs the tyranny of the royal family with the physical space of the coliseum and what it represents—itself a gory kind of theater, a place where royal power narrativizes material violence for the enjoyment of spectators.

Like Shakespeare's audiences, this spectating requires a suspension of disbelief. The people of San-Er "pretend that everything is just a show, forgetting that the players entering the coliseum are readying to tear each other apart."[226] Through Calla, Gong makes the point explicit:

> These games are entertainment, whether on the television set at home or in the stands of the arena. Never mind eighty-seven of their fellow civilians being murdered by the end of it. Murder by sword or by the throne's refusal to save its most vulnerable from starvation… what's the difference? San-Er has so many fucking people that one life is as common as a cockroach, fit to be squashed and disregarded without remorse.[227]

Critically, this form of theater is a distraction with political ends. The apathy and bloodlust of the people of San-Er do not actually make life "common as a cockroach," nor does the act of pretending turn the real violence into stage magic. And treating the contestants in the death games as characters, with no identity beyond their status *as* contestants, does not create but

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[224] Chloe Gong, *Immortal Longings* (New York, NY: Saga Press, 2023), 2.
[225] Ibid.
[226] Gong, 47.
[227] Gong, 42-43.

destroys, flattening and obscuring the contestants' complexity. As the games rage, the populace invent their own "narrative" (Gong's word) for Anton and Calla's alliance, deciding they are "lovers, each of whom registered for the games because of depleting funds, not knowing the other had done the same."[228] Calla and Anton acknowledge this story offers palatable cover for their alliance, which is in truth more rebellious in nature. Still, the value of that cover lies in the fact that it is "what the games are. Entertainment. A distraction."[229] Similarly, when she and Anton disguise themselves as courtesans to escape a dangerous fight,[230] there is no indication that the disguise is constitutive like Shakespeare's Cleopatra: while Calla-as-courtesan "looks very different from the player… glimpsed in the lobby,"[231] she only temporarily conceals her status as a player, returning swiftly to the contestant's role in a burst of violence. The narratives invented in *Immortal Longings* are closer to Hamlet's antic disposition than Cleopatra's self-definition: useful insofar as they provide a mask to hide behind. Unlike Shakespeare's Cleopatra, Calla is not *directing* the world; she is *mis*directing.

More, the text suggests that this misdirection is inherently dishonest. While the narrative of Anton and Calla as star-crossed lovers arises from the games' spectators, most stories about the games are disseminated from the palace, top-down. While Anton claims to be "shocked that the games can be manipulated so thoroughly," Calla takes for granted that her contacts in the government will help her, because she knows the games are *always* manipulated. The work of the throne is "feeding the civilians" simple, toothless stories to keep the city complacent. On television, the king is "airbrushed" and "serene," an effect achieved through "digital alterations" from the palace's "communication rooms."[232] Calla's knowledge that this is a strategic

[228] Gong, 155-156.
[229] Gong, 156.
[230] Gong, 179.
[231] Ibid.
[232] Gong, 215.

choice—the digital editing hides the king's precise location—goes hand-in-hand with her "derision" for the king and his obfuscation. Though she later sarcastically prays to her television "and the gods inside,"[233] it's clear that Calla does not actually believe the king, like a god, is creating or defining truth. She disdains and resents him because she knows his performance is a lie—because she has access to the hidden truth he chooses to conceal.

This is a novel, then, where truth is stable, just as *qi* is. Unlike in *The Stars Undying*, where the dominant cultural narrative becomes functionally true, the most popular and repeated narratives in *Immortal Longings* are demonstrably false. At best, attempts to rescript the world are tantamount to misinformation. At worst, the very act of acting is villainous. The text's primary constructor of narratives is not its Cleopatra; it is King Kasa, a paranoid authoritarian ruler who appears in a few scattered scenes to order random acts of violence. His eager use of the games to distract from (and extend) his abuse of power tells the reader very clearly how to feel about political theater.

If this narrative-construction-as-disguise is a form of deception, then the book's antidote must be Calla, the one stable point in a city of shifting bodies, whose refusal to transfer her *qi* makes her a social oddity. In a world of body-jumping, Calla's fascinating spectacle resides in her (anti-Butlerian) belief that her body not only "belongs to her," but "*is* her more than any other collective identity."[234] Through use of genre tropes, Gong turns Shakespeare's parent play on its head: the *novum* of *Immortal Longings* makes mutability normal, so Calla stands out for refusing fluidity, provoking the reader to wonder if the body really is integral to one's identity.

Yet the text is less clear about what Calla's stability means for its overarching views of identity and storytelling. Indeed, it is not even clear how Calla views the two. Her rejection of

[233] Gong, 261.
[234] Gong, 96.

others' mind-body dualism, coupled with her clear loathing for King Kasa's propagandistic storycraft, seems to imply that she rejects the idea that performance might create rather than conceal. Nevertheless, her narration offers no coherent indication of her worldview. Indeed, it often contradicts itself. Calla muses that "most others in San-Er refuse to think of their body as their own," preferring to consider only their *qi* "wholly theirs," but she believes that "her whole body is the very narrative of her existence," each of her scars a record of events from her past.[235] This makes sense—it places the existence of objective facts, like the fact that Calla has trained for combat, before her self-narrative, which is contingent on and determined by those objective facts. Yet one line prior, Calla wonders, "What are memories if not stories told repeatedly to oneself?"[236] Suddenly her worldview seems far closer to Shakespeare's Cleopatra's—reality is determined, at least in part, by the way a person narrativizes it, not by the cold truth about what occurred. Maybe Calla's viewpoint on the matter actually falls somewhere between binary poles, but if so, neither she nor Gong seems interested in mediating the contradiction.

It is a contradiction that may seem minor, at least in the details. A few clumsy sentences do not necessarily make an ideologically confused text. But even in the most emotionally fraught scenes, *Immortal Longings* continues to vacillate between opposing views of identity and selfhood. In the last third of the book, Calla confesses her secret to Anton: she is not the "real" princess, but a rural village girl's *qi* occupying the princess's body.

When Calla protests that she does not truly know Anton—who has to jump between others' bodies to survive, as his own body is state property—Anton reassures her that she does: "I am Anton Makusa. It doesn't matter what body I'm in."[237] Indeed, though he expresses vague desires to have his body back, that desire seems motivated primarily by convenience: first and

[235] Gong, 202.
[236] Ibid.
[237] Gong, 296.

foremost, he just wants a body he doesn't have to share. His worldview falls in line with the reigning opinion of characters within the text: the most important aspect of a person's identity is their *qi*, regardless of the body housing it. Calla retorts that "by this logic, I am nothing. No one. I don't even have a name," because she does not remember her life before occupying the princess's body.[238] Both seem in agreement that identity depends on memories and uninterrupted consciousness. Calla may act as the princess, just as Anton may disguise himself with someone else's body, but neither of them *become* the person they perform as, because they retain their original *qi*, memories included. By this model, Calla's occupation of the princess is fundamentally dishonest. Regardless of what she says or does, she is not Calla Tuoleimi.

> Yet Anton's response introduces another potential understanding of identity:
>
> "You are Calla Tuoleimi. If you choose to be."
>
> "Don't you—" Calla cuts off, huffing. "I stole her."
>
> "You have been her for fifteen years. She is more you than anyone else. … Forget your name and adopt the title instead."[239]

This model is more performance-based: Calla is the princess because she spent fifteen years playing the part of the princess. Ergo, acting *as* another person—at least for an extended period of time—is the same as *being* that person. As Shakespeare's Cleopatra would have it, being and doing are synonymous. This model of the self is far less self-contained and far less stable. Implicitly, a person's identity is not independent from their actions, meaning that identity can change with those actions.

In this case, identity is not actually dependent on a consistent internal experience, just as Butler's theory of gendered acts opposes the idea of an essential immutable gender. To be is to

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[238] Ibid.
[239] Gong, 296-297.

do, so performing as someone else is not a lie but a self-constituting truth. The implications for Anton's selfhood are worrying—when he conceals his identity, does "Anton" cease to be?—but this model gives Calla almost total control over her selfhood. If the interior "self" is irrelevant, if the only identity that matters—or even exists—is the identity a person displays, then the most effective way to define oneself is through an impressive display. Shakespeare's Cleopatra is the most dramatic person on the stage, so she is also the most real; she portrays herself as larger-than-life and so becomes almost godly. Likewise, Calla has spent fifteen years becoming the princess. She may not wear her original body, but she does have a more stable identity than any other character in the text, because she has spent fifteen years playing the same part. She is, in all functional ways, Princess Calla.

Or is she? Immediately after Anton tells her to adopt the princess's position, she asks: "Would you know me in another body?"

"In any body," Anton promises, "you would still be the same terrifying princess."[240] This line is presumably romantic: Anton would know Calla anywhere, which proves there is a Calla to know, not a "nothing." It also immediately punctures his affirmation of Calla's self-creation. If Calla would be "terrifying" in any body, then her ability to intimidate is not a trait she has chosen to cultivate and display, but an immutable fact. She expends no effort to be frightening; she simply *is*, with animal instinct. Furthermore, Anton's words imply that Calla's status as princess is fixed, regardless of whose body she occupies. This fixedness directly contradicts Anton's urging that Calla "adopt" the role fully: she cannot adopt the status of "terrifying princess" if she always was. He frames Calla's position as essential, rather than the result of a deliberate choice she made to occupy and imitate a stranger, actively, every day for

[240] Gong, 297.

fifteen years. This framing strips Calla of all of her autonomy. If the self is inherent and always recognizable, it cannot be created; it only *is*.

Like Calla's musings on memory, this scene presents two simultaneous and paradoxical Callas: a Calla whose traits are essential (she is inherently royal and powerful; there is a definable truth to her memories and to her qualities), and a Calla who chose to construct herself (her memories are the stories she tells herself; she is the princess by making herself the princess). Sometimes *Immortal Longings* suggests that static and inherent truths exist. Anton would know Calla anywhere because she has a fixed Calla-ness; the palace's attempts to create narratives about the death games are dishonest and despicable propaganda. The power of theater lies in its ability to conceal these self-evident truths. But sometimes *Immortal Longings* suggests, like *The Stars Undying* does, that theater creates its own truth: a person is who they pretend to be.

## MAKE DEFECT PERFECTION: NOVELIZING THE STAGE

Up to this point, I have analyzed the novels as texts independent of one another, connected only to their mutual parent. Comparing all three texts, however, offers the broadest look at how theater functions in Cleopatra narratives. Particularly, the question of medium must take center stage (or, as it were, center page): what work is medium doing in these texts?

As mentioned, *Antony and Cleopatra* is, of all Shakespeare's plays, one of the most self-consciously concerned with the uses of theater. It is also one of the most emphatically a play—which is to say, it is not merely a story told in the shape of a play, but a play exploring what it means to be a play. In its unwieldy length, in its countless cast members, in its oddly-paced swinging from scene to scene and locale to locale, in all its chaotic vacillating overflow, *Antony and Cleopatra* pushes the medium of theater to its limit. This experimentation

is a major risk: testing what *can* work on stage means accepting the possibility that it won't work on stage, the possibility that scholars might spend centuries debating whether the play is a an artistic failure.[241] Rather than try to mitigate the risks of experimenting, however, Shakespeare explicitly draws attention to the play's status as something constructed rather than "real," to the machinations behind the scene. The prime example is Cleopatra's prediction that, if taken prisoner, she will "see / Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / I'the posture of a whore."[242] As Phyllis Rackin points out, this moment is "daring to the point of recklessness," because in the seventeenth century Cleopatra *would* have been played by a boy actor:

> The treatment Cleopatra anticipates at the hands of the Roman comedians is perilously close to the treatment she in fact received in Shakespeare's theater, where the word boy had an immediate and obvious application to the actor who spoke it. Insisting upon the disparity between dramatic spectacle and reality, implying the inadequacy of the very performance in which it appears, the speech threatens for the moment the audience's acceptance of the dramatic illusion. And the moment when the threat occurs is the beginning of Cleopatra's suicide scene—her and her creator's last chance to establish the tragic worth of the protagonists and their action.[243]

This is the climax of the story, the crux where Cleopatra either performs her way to immortality or, like Antony in the previous act, embarrassingly bungles suicide. If the play is to succeed as anything but a farce, the audience needs to take her seriously. Yet rather than trying to preserve spectators' suspension of disbelief, Shakespeare dares a mocking implicit reminder of the double

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[241] L.T. Fitz states in "Egyptian Queens and Male Reviewers" that there is no reason *Antony and Cleopatra* should not be informally grouped with Shakespeare's "big four" mature tragedies (*Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello*). All five plays are concerned with the balance between personal relationships and political circumstance; all deal with some kind of tortured love; all feature flawed protagonists who create some (but not all) of their own problems. *Antony and Cleopatra* is excluded, Fitz argues, solely because of misogyny: it is the only play of the five to co-star a woman. I certainly think misogyny is part of the picture. Tragically, I don't think it's all of the picture.
[242] Shakespeare, V.2.266-8.
[243] Rackin, "Shakespeare's Boy Cleopatra."

reality of theater, metatheatrically highlighting the gap between the character represented and the actor doing the representation. *Antony and Cleopatra* does not only test the bounds of theater; it also pokes winking fun at its own flaws, the places where the medium stretches so far that it begins to fray.

Without actors, Robin and Gong cannot replicate this moment exactly. But Robin is also pushing his chosen medium and daring divisive choices. The most obvious is the aforementioned bias of their narrators, but the unreliable narration is not the only risk. Robin also makes the deliberate choice to write in first person despite the presence of multiple point of view characters. Multi-POV novels are usually (though not always) told in third person, to prioritize clarity about which perspective frames each scene. *The Stars Undying*'s use of first person emphasizes the conflicting perspectives and distinct voices of its two narrators, as well as offering a level of intimacy (and, potentially, deception) that limited third person might not achieve. Even so, Robin runs the very real risk of confusing the reader entirely about who is at the helm, which character thought or said or did what.

Still, first-person novels are hardly rare. Robin's more dramatic interference in the novelistic format is his inclusion of paratextual matter. The paperback edition of *The Stars Undying* is bookmarked by a dramatis personae before the story and a glossary in the end matter. Both serve an obvious informational purpose, respectively cataloging the many characters and the unfamiliar science fiction terms. But these documents are not merely neutral exposition. Both are written from the perspectives of other characters within the world of the novel—that is, perspectives that are not Gracia's or Ceirran's, truths that might directly conflict with the narratives constructed by Robin's Cleopatra.

The dramatis personae is particularly risky because it directly invokes theater. The dramatis personae as a concept comes from a performance context: it lists the characters whose roles need filling. Its appearance in a novel emphasizes that *The Stars Undying* is mimicking certain aspects of stagecraft, which in turn is something of a wink at the novel's status as an adaptation. But reminding the reader of the parent text is a bold choice, because *The Stars Undying* is adapting something that is already theater. If Robin is trying to write a play, he has picked the wrong format. In the dramatic realm, without sets, actors, or effects, *The Stars Undying* cannot compete.

Yet the theatrical world within *The Stars Undying* cannot compete with the novel's main story. The dramatis personae adds another voice to the novel's polyphonic set of narrations, just like the theater scene within the text: theater acts as a vehicle for popular critique. The play that Gracia, Anita, and Ceirran see about themselves does not match either narrator's representation of events. Rather, the play-within-a-novel offers the Ceian populace's version of the story—a woefully flattened one, reducing the depth and allure of Gracia's narrative voice and turning her into a one-note foreign figurehead. The dramatis personae extends this work: the description of Gracia, as described in the prior chapter of this thesis, resorts to lazy stereotypes that bear no resemblance to the story Gracia tells about herself. By placing this dramatis personae before the book begins, Robin offers a counternarrative about Gracia before Gracia ever gets the chance to speak for herself. Simultaneously, he suggests that the theatrical world cannot compete when it comes to *this* story—Gracia's story requires a novelist's hand negotiating between many competing voices.

That is precisely Robin's task: to expose the gaps between various characters' representation of the "truth." The glossary does similar work, even if it is less directly

contradictory to Gracia's story. Titled "Some Useful Notes on the Galaxy," it declares itself the perspective of "the Library of Alectelo… written under the realm of Arcelia Caviro Diomata, Oracle of Szayet."[244] This is not neutral information. It offers the specific viewpoint of a scholar on Szayet, under a particular and controversial ruler, a point driven home by its worshipful description of the "true and living King… who dwells in the Pearl"[245] and its scathing description of Ceian landmarks as "heathen cultural quirks."[246] Beneath this bias lies yet another layer of subjectivity. The glossary is attributed to "Mariana Benigna Capsuna, First Archivist of the Library of Alectelo, with minor assistance from Sofia Boryszaya, Third Junior Underlibrarian."[247] Yet the glossary is littered with editing notes—specifically, the editing notes Capsuna has scribbled on definitions Boryszaya penned. The document may be presented as Capsuna's work, but implicitly, this is itself an obfuscation: the junior librarian has done the bulk of the work, but the credit goes to her superior.

Both dramatis personae and glossary thus use the friction between media to invoke the same tension as Shakespeare's play: if representation creates truth, *whose* representation is prioritized? If the most convincing story becomes functionally "true," whose stories or perspectives are elided or exploited? Will the truth about Cleopatra be defined by her own self-created legend, or by Octavius Caesar's attempts to counterstage her as a pathetic captive? Will Gracia be remembered the way she presents and constructs herself, as the cunning protector of her planet and culture, or as the manipulative seductress monstered by unsubtle popular theater?

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[244] Robin, 519.
[245] Robin, 520.
[246] Robin, 522.
[247] Robin, 519.

Both formal choices, then, are clearly doing thematic work. The double first-person narration and the inclusion of the paratext forces the reader to navigate a host of contradictory narratives, calling attention to the inherent constructedness of *all* narratives, and Robin refuses the simplicity of claiming any of these narratives as the right one. The form of *The Stars Undying* continues and complements the book's content, just as Shakespeare's bold theatrical choices work in concert with *Antony and Cleopatra*'s thematic concerns. Nevertheless, like Shakespeare's, Robin's formal innovations come with drawbacks, as the novel's ambiguity might easily frustrate or confuse the reader. Robin does little to mitigate this risk. The novel does not hold the reader's hand; the chapters are labeled by narrator, but there is no timeline of events or unbiased source of narrative information. Like *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Stars Undying* not only pushes the bounds of its medium; it also flaunts and revels in the resulting tension. Robin relies on the tools of the novelist rather than the playwright, but he is doing literary work very similar to Shakespeare's.

*Immortal Longings* is not. For one thing, it displays very few formal innovations. Like *The Stars Undying*, the novel is told through multiple limited points of view. Unlike *The Stars Undying*, it is told in third person, likely because *Immortal Longings* cycles through a greater number of narrating characters who might otherwise blend together. Employing multiple third person limited perspectives is not in itself a poor choice,[248] but Gong attempts nothing unusual or experimental. Despite the vast array of point-of-view characters (some of whom only appear once to deliver exposition), the style, voice, and tone of the prose never change. Each narrative voice sounds identical, whether the viewpoint character in question grew up on the streets of San-Er or inside the palace. The narrative voice is not omniscient, so it sticks to the information

[248] Most novels with multiple narrators, particularly in science fiction and fantasy, are told in third person; look no further than *A Song of Ice and Fire*, which has more narrators than *Antony and Cleopatra* has messengers.

held by one character at a time, but none of this information is ever biased or misleading; there is no indication that the reader should weigh any of these perspectives as more reliable or less biased than another. Gong's formal choices do not complement the content. *Immortal Longings* defaults to the obvious: it is a novel told the way novels are usually told.

Even outside the realm of point of view, Gong takes few risks. *Immortal Longings* has fissures just as Shakespeare's play does, but without the same pleasure in flaunting its internal tensions. The reveal of Calla's secret, as discussed, presents a contradiction: is Calla the role that she plays, or would she be the same person in any body? If theater in the world of San-Er is always dishonest, then pretending to be a princess is not enough: she cannot *be* Calla Tuoleimi. Perhaps this contradiction is meant to go unresolved—Shakespeare didn't end *Antony and Cleopatra* with a final explicit ruling on the Roman worldview versus the Egyptian; Octavius may have the last word, but Cleopatra leaves the strongest impression. But *Immortal Longings*'s drastic departure from Shakespeare is that it does not even acknowledge the places where it frays. Immediately after Anton declares that he would know Calla "in any body," the text's focus returns to the games and to the central romance. Calla shares her plan to kill the king. Then she asks Anton, with no small amount of jealousy, if he still loves his childhood sweetheart. This sequence is the novel in microcosm: it exposes its fissures, but rather than linger, it flinches away, redirecting to the flashy drama of blood and sex. Nothing in its form as a novel does the work of *Antony and Cleopatra*.

In fact, nothing in its genre does the work of Antony and Cleopatra, either. The novum of *The Stars Undying*, the Pearl of the Dead, is both plot device and thematic tool, provoking questions about selfhood and immortality. But the body-jumping of *Immortal Longings* only muddles the book's statements about selfhood. Its primary function in the text is as a plot

shortcut: body-jumping allows Anton to get around the city, and Calla's refusal to jump raises tension by putting her in danger. Rather than use the text's novum to explore character, world, or philosophy, Gong deploys it only at the shallowest level. The great irony is that this lack of formal engagement actually does mimic one aspect of the book's content: like the authoritarian government, *Immortal Longings* uses its violent action scenes as a disguise. By emphasizing the gore, by detailing every slash of Calla's swords, by ignoring worldbuilding inconsistencies to linger on Anton and Calla's tortured romance, Gong misdirects rather than directing, concealing the fact that the novel refuses to commit to any strategy or theme.

To be clear, *Immortal Longings* is not flawed for failing to precisely imitate *Antony and Cleopatra*'s depiction of theater and performance. Similarly, *The Stars Undying* is not well-crafted on the basis of taking a similar stance to the play's, that theater can create reality and "truth" is not objective. Fidelity to the parent text is never wholly possible, and many adaptations seek to critique or contradict the themes of their sources.[249] Rather, *Immortal Longings* suffers because it fails to make use of the advantages and opportunities of its genre and medium. *The Stars Undying* is bold in its translation of the play to a science fiction novel. It works because Robin is deliberate about adapting story *and* form, which is to say, deliberate about which aspects of novel-writing and genre fiction cohere with the preexisting plot of the play. Conversely, Gong does not seem to consider the process of turning a play into a novel, instead retelling by default: taking the plot, the characters, and the easiest narrative route. This lack of consideration hobbles the novel's themes as well as its form. *Immortal Longings* remains limited

[249] Shakespeare is not exempt from this. In Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), Shakespeare's Lear—a flawed parent who scholars nevertheless often sympathize with over his daughters—becomes an explicit antagonist who raped his daughters as children. In another instance, Dahlia Adler's short story "I Bleed" (published in *That Way Madness Lies: Fifteen of Shakespeare's Most Notable Works Reimagined*, New York, NY: Flatiron Books, 2022) recasts the *Merchant of Venice*'s Bassanio as a modern teenage neo-Nazi and Shylock as the unambiguous hero of the story, displaying a much more decisively pro-Jewish bent than Shakespeare's.

to the most familiar concepts of what a novel might be, but it also remains limited to the most familiar concepts of what a *world* might be. Gong cannot seem to envision a society, for example, where bodies are fluid but binarily gendered categories still exist, or where people might not take the "self" for granted as discrete and unchanging. *Immortal Longings* may have a science fiction *novum*, but its society resembles the empirical world unconvincingly disguised.

This is problematic, to say the least, because the point of science fiction is to defamiliarize that empirical world. If, as Suvin writes, science fiction's task is to invoke questions about aspects of the world taken for granted, to present the reader with a brave new world that threatens their own self-understanding, then *Antony and Cleopatra* is much better science fiction than *Immortal Longings*. The play may not contain a tool equivalent to the modern concept of the *novum*, but Shakespeare uses the structural qualities of drama to do the work of the genre more effectively than the novel marketed within that genre. Cleopatra, after all, is the famous estranger, the eternal Other destabilizing the worldviews of Antony and the theatrical audience.

But this does not mean the theatrical medium is inherently better science fiction. Cleopatra may be theater embodied, but Emery Robin has demonstrated that Cleopatra can destabilize and unsettle in a novel as well. *The Stars Undying* shows that Cleopatra's defamiliarizing work can transfer across media if, like Shakespeare, the adaptor emphasizes and experiments with their chosen form. *Immortal Longings* shows what happens if the adaptor doesn't: the text loses its ability to sustain questions about the nature of reality and the power of theatrical representation.

In turn, this comparison shows that it is not Shakespeare's status as a playwright that makes Cleopatra so successfully fascinating. The enduring quality of Cleopatra is that her story

calls into question what her audiences take for granted—the stability of gender, the primacy of Roman civilization, the concept of an indivisible interior self, the rigid rules of genre and medium. From this angle, the question of why an artist would put Cleopatra into sci-fi begins to sound very silly. Cleopatra is already doing the same literary work as the genre. *Antony and Cleopatra* is already science fiction, before any adaptations at all.

# CONCLUSION: ALL THE NUMBER OF THE STARS

It seems that all things become Cleopatra after all, not only the vilest. Her variety is truly infinite; even two novels of the same genre and era have produced wildly different translations of her character. Gracia and Calla diverge in major ways not only from each other, but from Shakespeare's Cleopatra, too, even as some characteristics tie all three fictional women together.

Both Robin and Gong, for example, have written distinctly feminine Cleopatra figures like Shakespeare's—sometimes deliberately, her gender expression one of her many tools for producing fascination (such as Calla's choice to retain the same body and gendered appearance), and sometimes because she has been forced into the role of the seductress (as Gracia is in the Dramatis Personae of *The Stars Undying*). Notably, both Gracia's and Calla's relationships to gender are communicated (at least partially) in relation and contrast to their respective Antony figures. Calla may not feel particularly attached to womanhood, but she adopts the stereotypically "womanlike" role in her erotic scenes with Anton; similarly, Gracia plays the femme to Anita's butch, even if both words are insufficient in a world without harsh gender norms. Even in a queer relationship, then, Cleopatra is still markedly feminine. Nevertheless, the fact that a Cleopatra character can exist in a queer relationship at all speaks to a commonality between the two novels: neither text uncritically reproduces the narrative of Cleopatra as a seductress or wicked sorceress, weakening men with her dark charms. When this accusation is slung at Gracia, it clearly comes from an unsympathetic foreign public, one of many voices in the novel instead of a defining truth about her. Calla, meanwhile, is never called a seductress at all. Even when she briefly adopts the disguise of a brothel worker, her ability to sell the role is less a detriment to her morals than it is a demonstration she can think on her feet.

This urge to resist misogynist historical narratives is part of a larger pattern: both Robin and Gong seem unambiguously pro-Cleopatra. That is to say, each author places their Cleopatra figure squarely in the protagonist role, not in spite of her questionable morals and her ability to disrupt society but because of these qualities. The misogyny, xenophobia, and Orientalism that color perspectives of Shakespeare's Cleopatra all still exist, but perspectives have shifted—and so, to some degree, have the identities of people who write on Cleopatra, as opportunities slowly broaden for marginalized authors. In Roman ink, Cleopatra is the villain, but in novels penned by queer authors, women, and people of color, her status as the eternal other makes her more underdog than antagonist.

Of course, in science fictional worlds, the concept of the "other" rarely manifests in the same way. The worlds of *The Stars Undying* and *Immortal Longings* figure gender more loosely and race very little at all. Gracia is a national outsider with a strange culture, but unlike Shakespeare's Cleopatra, "with Phoebus's amorous pinches black," her physical appearance is irrelevant—she is "exotic" for her religion, not her appearance, and Ceirran is darker-skinned than she is. Even so, Gracia *is* threatening to dominant societal expectations; her introduction into the Ceian world is destabilizing and dangerous to the status quo. Similarly, Calla's mere existence undermines social norms in San-Er: first in that she refuses to jump; second in that she has transgressed her original social class (by taking over the original princess's body) and uses her new position to (literally) attack the monarchy. A Cleopatra character, then, does not have to be specifically Egyptian or specifically subject to misogynist judgment. But she must somehow run counter to expectations, on a scale beyond her performatively unpredictable moods. Here mere presence must subvert or disrupt some fundamental pillar of societal belief, something taken previously for granted (Ceian atheism; the necessity of body-jumping). This is what makes

her the perfect science fiction character: she and the genre both distort the world, and in doing so enable questions about otherness, reality, the self, and what the future could—or ought to—be.

Of course, two novels can't offer a single definitive statement on (or summary of) all adaptations of Cleopatra. The specific patterns common between these books (for example, her femininity, or the tendency of modern authors to sympathize with her position) do not necessarily generalize beyond these texts. What these texts *can* offer is a reminder that science fiction (and "genre" fiction as a whole) is vastly underutilized in analytic contexts. Shakespeare clearly understood the interrogative power of estrangement that Suvin analyzed, the power of the presence of the Other to break down and reshape the audience's understanding of the world. As I concluded in the third chapter, *Antony and Cleopatra* is not only reckless on a craft level but also deliberately *destabilizing*, in a fashion that allows a reading of the play as proto-sci-fi. This reading isn't limited to one play, either. The same thematic questions and technical experimentation occur in many of Shakespeare's plays, and not only the ones with recognizable "genre" elements like magic and fairies.

I do not mean to ignore the critical attention some "genre" texts *have* received. But science fiction taken seriously tends to be science fiction that has entered the "canon," older and more presumably respectable texts, "serious" work. More recent science fiction has not reached these heights. The two novels I've explored have received almost no academic analysis—partially because they are very new, but also because most genre fiction is shunted into the realm of pop culture and pulpy entertainment. Linda Hutcheon's observation that adaptation is viewed as damage to a text[250] isn't limited to film adaptation. It also extends to adaptations of work by writers like Shakespeare, now considered elite, "canonical" high culture, and blatantly introduce generic tropes. This is viewed as mass entertainment, mostly good for a laugh or a

[250] Linda Hutcheon with Siobhan O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 3.

scoff. No one responds to *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, for instance, as a work of criticism, just a dumb joke played on a stodgy old book.[251]

Yet *The Stars Undying* and *Immortal Longings* probe the same questions as the original play, regardless of whether either book is "high culture." More, these retellings introduce new lenses from which to view the original play. Framing *Antony and Cleopatra* as a science fiction text might change the way one reads or even stages the play. Thus, even if inspiration only chronologically moves one way, intertextuality flows in both directions: rather than doing "damage," these adaptations retroactively add to the original text from whence they sprang.

Furthermore, the idea that adaptation into genre fiction demeans Shakespeare's "high art" falls flat: in his day, Shakespeare was very much "pop culture." The Bard's work is respectable now, but in early modern England, theater was scornful and scandalous, viewed as potentially able to erode audiences' intelligence and morals (not unlike the way genre fiction, especially mass-market and romance novels, are discussed now). Adapting Shakespeare into these genres is something of a return—if not to the precise context of his era, then at least to the idea that a text might appeal to the masses while also delving into complex and enduring themes and questions. Even attempting to adapt Shakespeare into science fiction, then, ever-so-slightly pushes back against the elitist presentation of Shakespeare as an untouchable paragon of literature. I hope that this thesis does the same, by extending serious scholarly analysis beyond the bounds of fiction usually considered serious, educational, and important.

Of course, this thesis is a very small foray into the field of genre-fiction adaptations (and of genre fiction analysis at all). My analysis has remained primarily based in close-reading, but there are a number of lenses through which to explore further. One dimension neglected in this

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[251] Steve Hockensmith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (New York, NY: Random House Publisher Services, 2011), which rewrites Austen's classic… but zombies are also there.

thesis is the relationship between retellings and contemporary publishing. Literary adaptation is far from new, but modern adaptations exist in the context of an increasingly monopolized publishing industry, as well as the new power of social media to popularize books on a consumer-to-consumer level. In particular, modern retellings, as observed by Jeremy Rosen, are often directed at "identity groups that are reconceived as target publics."[252] That is, publishers can market to feminists with retellings helmed by female characters, especially those initially on the margins of the parent text. Similarly, retellings in which characters of color or LGBT characters are given center-stage—whether these characters belonged to those groups in the original text or, like Robin's Anita, they have been transformed—can be marketed to readers of color and LGBT readers. Indeed, a prominent blurb for *The Stars Undying* sang the praises of casting Mark Antony as "the hottest butch girl in space," just as marketing for Gong's work tends to emphasize her adaptations' integration of Chinese culture and history. And both novels considered in this thesis are arguably feminist projects, responding to a long history of villanized depictions of Cleopatra by centering her as sympathetic.

I am passionately in favor of increased diversity in publishing, which particularly impacts the reading habits of young children of color and the opportunities available for minority authors.[253] Nevertheless, the publishing industry is hardly run by activists. Rosen takes the bleak view that diverse retellings actually "preserve the cultural centrality of the canon" by broadening canonical texts' appeal. Women, people of color, and LGBT people are not aimed *against* the canon but absorbed *into* it. This allows publishers to "accrue economic and social capital" at every turn,[254] profiting from readers attracted by canonical flair and readers attracted by diversity,

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[252] Jeremy Rosen, "An Insatiable Market for Minor Characters: Genre in the Contemporary Literary Marketplace," *New Literary History* 46, no. 1 (2015): 143–63.
[253] Mary Ellen Flannery, "Why We Need Diverse Books" (NEA, October 26, 2020, https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/why-we-need-diverse-books).
[254] Rosen, "An Insatiable Market," 4.

reaping the reward of "both the timeless value of the classics and ostensibly oppositional political energies."[255] Are publishers equally receptive to novels by marginalized authors that do *not* reshape "classic" texts, or are these authors allowed into the system only if they pay their dues to the white male canon? Is it radical to apply a queer or Chinese or feminist lens to texts that often uphold oppressive hegemonies? Then again, is it fair to expect LGBT authors, or authors of color, to avoid drawing on these familiar cultural touchstones? Are diverse retellings acts of reclamation or assimilation?

There is no single uncomplicated answer to these questions, and I can't even begin to provide answers. Still, I would like to introduce the question of what the practice of "minor character elaboration," particularly in its recent and increasingly inclusive iteration, means for Shakespeare reception specifically. For one thing, Shakespeare's body of work (more so than some other canonical writers') already frequently examines what we now call queerness, race, disability, gender, and mental illness. If a modern author writes an explicitly lesbian Countess Olivia, or a hemiplegic version of Richard III,[256] is this author imposing modern categories forcibly onto characters written in the past, or expressing something already implied beneath the text? The question feels especially pertinent to Shakespeare because his plays exist as scripts, with no definitive "version" and a long variegated production history. Many other "canonical" authors have been adapted, but unlike, for instance, *Jane Eyre* (famously retold in *Wide Sargasso Sea*), a work like *Antony and Cleopatra* calls for actors. Do the same questions begged by "minor character elaboration" appear in theater, with the advent of "colorblind" and "color-conscious" casting? Is it radical for a Black woman to play Cleopatra, or does this

[255] Rosen, "An Insatiable Market," 2.
[256] Respectively: *The Last True Poets of the Sea* by Julia Drake (New York, NY: Hyperion, 2019); *Teenage Dick* by Mike Lew (New York, NY: Dramatists Play Service, Inc, 2019).

concede victory to the exotification of the written role by making a Black woman ventriloquize the seductive queen?

Finally, following the theater thread, I would like to pose the question of exactly how far intertextuality can stretch both ways. I have claimed that modern retellings written long after Shakespeare's death can still transform their parent plays, because they allow readers to view the parent text through a new lens. These particular transformations came in part through a move from theater to novelization. Just how far can these novels influence the play in retrospect? Is it possible to move transformatively back to the stage again? One might stage an explicitly Black Cleopatra, or a Chinese Cleopatra, or a butch Mark Antony whose love affair with Cleopatra is a love affair between women. Is it also possible to stage an explicitly *science-fictional* Cleopatra? What would it look like to try? How might a production engage with science fiction tropes on the stage, and how might these tropes help draw attention to the interrogative and disruptive aspects of the playscript itself? How might audience understandings of the play and of Cleopatra change? Would this science-fictional *Antony and Cleopatra* become a new text entirely, or would it merely fit into the long cultural history of Cleopatra-as-lightning-rod, a character always taking the shape of the questions that preoccupy the era of her audience?

There are no easy answers to these questions, either. The best one can say with certainty is that many avenues remain open for exploration—not only in the literary world, but in the theater. Shakespearean adaptations will continue to evolve, as they always have, with the ages, reflecting contemporary tensions, values, and fears. What will the Cleopatras of the future look like, in all of their infinite permutations and varieties?

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