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Viewing the Jacobean Cleopatra Portrait: Literary and Visual Intersections in Female Devisership

JESSICA L. MALAY

ABSTRACT

The Jacobean portrait of Cleopatra provides an opportunity to explore more fully the concept of female devisership. Previous identifications of the sitter as Elizabeth Throckmorton and Anne Clifford are problematic. This article explores Clifford's engagement with the figures of Cleopatra and Octavia, and the way in which these served as tropes in print and letters to refer to the troubled marriage of her parents. This essay then argues for an identification of the sitter as Venetia Stanley, Lady Digby, drawing upon the work of a number of writers and artists who used the figure of Cleopatra to represent and explore Stanley's character and reputation. Stanley has most famously been portrayed by Van Dyck, by Ben Jonson, and by her husband Kenelm Digby, along with more spurious commentary by John Aubrey. The Cleopatra portrait, interpreted through the concept of female devisership, allows for the possibility that Stanley provided her own response to the many representations of her that were circulating in seventeenth-century English culture.



The Jacobean portrait which bears the title “Lady Raleigh as Cleopatra” (fig. 1) is an intriguing example of the interplay between literature, drama, portraiture and the social encoding of elite communication during the second decade of the Jacobean period. The painting portrays Cleopatra in a dramatic pose as she lifts the asps aloft in her final act of defeat, defiance, and love. Above the figure's left shoulder, attached to the drapery that frames Cleopatra, is an unfolded scroll of paper displaying sixteen lines taken from Samuel Daniel's *Tragedy of Cleopatra* (1607):



Fig. 1: Cleopatra Portrait, ca. 1613–1624. © National Portrait Gallery.

Come rarest beast, that all our Egypt breeds,
 How deerely welcome art thou now to me?
 The fairest creature that faire Nylus feedes,
 Me thinks I see, in now beholding thee
 Better then death, deaths office thou dischargest
 That with one gentle touch canst free our breath
 And in a pleasing sleepe our soule enlargest,
 Making ourselves not privie to our death
 That lust late dedicated to delights,
 Offering up for my last, this last of breath,
 The complement of my loves dearest rites
 And Egypt now where Cleopatra I
 Have acted this, witnes I die unforce'd,
 Witness my soule parts free to Antony
 And now prowde Tyrant Cesar doe thy Worst. (33–34)

The portraiture text makes one small change in Daniel's poem, replacing the line "And Egypt now the Theatre where I" with "And Egypt now where Cleopatra I." This is a small but significant alteration that changes the emphasis from place, and thus from Cleopatra's role as queen and a body politic, to the personal "I." Cleopatra is thus portrayed as an individual gripped in a very private tragedy, who having lost the man she loves, is defiant in the face of a man who would conquer her. The portrait challenges the culturally pervasive view of Cleopatra as a politically dangerous seducer, and instead represents her as an exemplum of constant love.¹ This change of focus invites us to consider this portrait not as the illustration of a piece of theater, but as personal allegory meant to communicate this constancy and thus the virtue of the sitter, all within a small coterie of viewers privileged to view this portrait.² In order to explore the likely narrative behind this portrayal of personal allegory it is necessary to consider the identity of this "Cleopatra I." Two possibilities have been suggested. In the early twentieth century Elizabeth Throckmorton (Lady Raleigh) became associated with the portrait. Most recently, Yasmin Arshad has suggested the possibility that the sitter could be the Lady Anne Clifford.³ There are significant problems with both of these attributions, and instead the case for Venetia Stanley, Lady Digby as the sitter and deviser⁴ of this portrait will be made here.

The portrait first came to light when it came up for auction at Christie's in 1931 as part of the sale of artwork owned by Muriel Oxenden, Lady Capel Cure of Broome Park, Kent. It was purchased by an F. Howard and then resold in 1948, again at Christie's, to a purchaser named Dent. The portrait has since disappeared into private ownership and attempts to trace it have not been successful. However, in 1948 the National Portrait Gallery was able to take a photograph of the portrait, which is now in their digital collection (Arshad, "Enigma" 32). Unfortunately, this image is in black and white, which creates certain limitations in analysing the portrait. The artist has never been identified, but this portrait is likely the work of the court painter Robert Peake the elder (1551–1619) or his workshop, which included his son William Peake (ca. 1580–1639) whom we know worked alongside his father in the first two decades of the seventeenth century. Robert Peake was appointed as sergeant painter to James I in 1607 jointly with John De Critz, and produced several portraits of the royal family until his death in 1619 (Strong *Henry* 110–114). He was especially favoured by Prince Henry, receiving commissions from the prince from at least 1608 (Sharpe 67). After this prince's death in 1612,

Peake was employed by the younger prince, later Charles I. His portrait of this prince in March 1613 provides some evidence for ascribing him as the painter of the Cleopatra portrait. This full-length portrait of the prince (fig. 2) illustrates what Ellen Chirelstein describes as Peake's use of a "silhouetted abstraction of the figure through the use of line and bright local colour" (Chirelstein 38). His left hand rests against a table, upon which sits his hat. Over his right shoulder is a piece of paper, with fold marks, attached to the drapery which frames him. The structure of this portrait is similar to the Cleopatra portrait. In the Cleopatra portrait the basket which carried the asps sits on the table in the same place as Charles's hat. The paper, again with fold marks and an inscription, is placed over Cleopatra's left shoulder (creating a more balanced image than in the Prince's portrait).

Peake was also much employed in producing portraiture for the elite, and painted a number of aristocratic women between 1613–1619. His portraits of Lady Vere Egerton (ca. 1619) and Lucy Countess of Bedford (1615) both include the framing drapery and a similar balancing of the subject with objects as seen in the Cleopatra portrait. In these portraits, the costumes of the ladies are contemporary. However, in the portraits of Lady Elizabeth Pope (c. 1615) and Lady Cecily Neville (1617) the costuming has more in common with the Cleopatra portrait. Elizabeth Pope is dressed in a masque costume where she is represented as a personification of America. Chirelstein suggests the portrait is an example of Peake's response to Inigo Jones's innovations in costume design, where the "Classical body inhabits the costume [. . . so that] in his designs the full contours of the breasts and nipples are frequently revealed beneath a veil of transparent fabric" (56). She notes that in the portrait of Elizabeth Pope this element is suggested with her left nipple peeking from just above the fabric. In the Cleopatra portrait Jones's design elements are fully realized with the sitter's breasts presented fully rounded, showing the nipple revealed through transparent fabric (Chirelstein 56). In Peake's portrait of Lady Cecily Neville, Neville is also presented in a broad mantle (this time on top of a more traditional dress) within a masque set background. In this portrait her breasts are also tantalizingly, but not fully, revealed.

The Neville and Pope portraits are examples of Peake's use of a frontal plane and framing devices such as the drapery, or in other cases stage scenery which foregrounds the subject (Chirelstein 37). This is the case in the Cleopatra portrait with the figure placed against a dark background. Peake also divides his panels in the manner of heraldic quartering, and again in the Cleo-



Fig. 2: Charles Prince of Wales, artist, Robert Peake the Elder, 1613, Council Room in the Old Schools building in central Cambridge. © University of Cambridge.

patra portrait this is plainly in evidence. The panel is divided into quarters with the scepter in the lower right, the inscription in the upper right, the asps' basket in the lower left, and the asps aloft in the upper left, all carrying symbolic weight. Andrew Stott discusses the way in which portraits of the period invited the viewer to read as well as view a portrait (Stott 13) and this is also in keeping with masque figures. Clare McManus suggests that masque performance invited the audience to read the masquer's body in moments of stasis (McManus 44). Peake's portraits of Pope and Neville are two examples of the influence of court masques upon his work, influences that are clearly discernible in the Cleopatra portrait. The Pope portrait, as well as a portrait known only through the catalogue reference as "Lady as Nymph of Diana with pearls,

flowers in her hair” (ca. 1619) display Peake’s interest in creating portraiture that manifested meaning through symbol and allegory, and again present in the Cleopatra portrait⁵. Without examining the actual Cleopatra portrait it is impossible to be certain that it is by Robert Peake (or his workshop) but the above evidence makes clear that it certainly can be associated with Peake’s work and thus the circle of aristocratic sitters and painters moving in or near the court. The portrait makes use of Inigo Jones’s innovations in costume design and Samuel Daniel’s dramatic poetry, and is stylistically connected with portraiture of the second decade of the Jacobean court. It should thus be dated sometime between 1613 and 1624, the period when Peake and those working in his style were producing portraits which drew upon the visual and allegorical practices of the masque.

The attribution of the portrait to Peake or in the style of Peake does not in itself create any issues with the identification of the sitter as either Elizabeth Throckmorton or Anne Clifford. Peake painted Throckmorton in the 1590s,⁶ and his portrait of Cecily Neville described above connects him to Anne Clifford. Neville was niece to Richard Sackville (Anne Clifford’s husband). However, there is no justification for an identification of the sitter as Throckmorton.⁷ In all known portraits of her, including Peake’s, her image bears no resemblance to the sitter in the Cleopatra portrait. By the second decade of the seventeenth century, Throckmorton was in her late forties, not the young woman presented in the Cleopatra portrait, and thematically the portrait does not fit the events in her life at that time. The identification of the sitter as Throckmorton was based on the rather crudely executed miniature worn on a ribbon around the sitter’s neck in the painting (see fig. 1). In the early twentieth century this was described as a portrait miniature of Sir Walter Raleigh. In fact, this miniature could be a portrait of any number of men with dark hair, moustache and a beard—a common enough feature in the period, as will be discussed below.

Arshad’s identification of the sitter as Anne Clifford, however, requires greater scrutiny.⁸ Her argument rests on three main areas. First she points to the facial similarity between the sitter in the Cleopatra portrait and Anne Clifford’s portraits (figs. 3 and 4) by Van Somer and Larkin (1618–1620) and adds the similarity of the masque costume in the portrait to one designed for her by Inigo Jones as contributory evidence. Arshad also suggests that Anne Clifford’s state of mind, her financial and political circumstances during and after the Clifford inheritance battles (broadly 1607–1630), would have suggested

the figure Cleopatra as an appropriate expression of these. Finally, she points to Anne's close connection with Samuel Daniel, suggesting her use of his lines was connected to her relationship with him.

There is certainly a facial resemblance between the Cleopatra portrait and portraits of Anne Clifford from the early seventeenth century. However, one prominent feature is missing. Anne had a dimple on her chin below the indentation under her lip which is included in all her early portraits, including Larkin and Van Somer. Anne mentions this feature in her autobiography and proudly asserts that she had "a dimple in my chinne like my father's" (*Great Books* 798). Clearly Anne valued this feature which connected her to her father and formed part of her identity. In the portraits she commissioned, including in her last portrait painted in 1673, the dimple on the chin is visible.⁹ Arshad also notes a similarity between the costume in the Cleopatra portrait and one designed by Inigo Jones for Anne Clifford's role as Berenice in Ben Jonson's *Masque of Queens* (1609). However, the masque costume in the Cleopatra portrait resembles a number of Jones's costume designs for this masque, especially the masque costume designed for Susan De Vere. Thus it does not provide any real proof for Anne Clifford as the sitter. Arshad also points to the similarity between the man depicted in the crude miniature and Richard Sackville, a man who, like Sir Walter Raleigh, also sported dark hair, a moustache and beard. As noted above, this miniature could represent any number of men.

More importantly, the portrait does not fit Anne Clifford's circumstances. From 1606–1617 Anne was embroiled in a fierce legal dispute over the Clifford hereditary lands in North Yorkshire and Westmorland. Her marriage to Richard Sackville was both a love match and a strategic alliance that she entered into in 1609 believing that it would strengthen her position in the legal dispute. Certainly during this time Anne was beleaguered by a powerful monarch, in this case James I, but she was no Cleopatra. Anne suffered a severe setback in 1617 with the King's Award.¹⁰ Nonetheless, she was fully alive to the possibilities the future might hold.¹¹ Arshad suggests that Clifford may have chosen the figure of Cleopatra to "send a personal message, saying privately what she could not say publically about the King's Award (1617)" (Arshad, "Enigma" 35). This is a drastic misreading of Clifford's character. Her diary attests to her public denunciation of the award in the presence of James I and his most powerful courtiers. Clifford writes of this public audience in January 1617: "I beseeched the King to pardon me, for that I would

never part with Westmorland while I lived upon any condition whatsoever.”¹² She rejected the advice of the leading men of the period, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, both publically and privately. At one point Richard Sackville removed Anne from the king’s presence for fear that her very public stance would incite the king to retaliate against her. In this second public interview of 1617 she again refused the king’s request and describes how “the King grew into a very great chaff [. . .] my Lord fearing the King would do me some public disgrace desired that Sir John Digby to open the door, who went out with me.”¹³ This was not a woman who would employ the medium of a Classical exemplum that in meaning was only tangentially related to her situation. In fact Anne looked not to Classical exempla, but to Biblical authority—especially the prophets—to ground her resistance to the wishes of her father, husband, uncle, and king.¹⁴

Anne Clifford also relied on what she believed to be her mother’s prophetic abilities to support her in her resistance to male authority. Margaret Russell wrote on the back of a letter she sent to Anne on the 30th of October, 1615, a prophesy that Brougham Castle would be Anne’s,¹⁵ referring to an earlier prophesy which Anne describes later in her *Great Books*:

And in particular shee would often tell her onely daughter the Ladie Anne Clifford that the auntient landes of her father’s inheritance wold at last come to bee hers whatt opposition soever was made to hinder yt, though yt would be verie long first which manie yeares after came to pass. And shee was the rather induced to beleive it by reason of a strange kind of divyneinge dreame or vision that apered to her in a fearfull manner in Barden Tower in Craven when she was great with childe with her third childe, which tould her shee should be delivered a little while after of a daughter, which should bee the only childe to her parents, and live to inheritt the auntientt landes of her father’s auncestors [. . .] Which strange vision wee are the rather enduced to sett downe because undoubtedly whilest shee lived here in the world her spirrit had more convers with Heaven and hevenlye contemplation then with terrine and earthly matters. (274)

The figure of Cleopatra fits nowhere in this mental schema so clearly evidenced in Anne’s autobiographies, historical writing, and letters during the period when the Cleopatra portrait was painted.

Finally, Arshad suggests that Anne may be the sitter in the portrait because Samuel Daniel, whose lines set the scene in the Cleopatra portrait, was Anne's tutor over a decade earlier, and remained in close contact with her and her mother, though this in itself does not substantiate any claim regarding the identity of the sitter.¹⁶ Daniel's work was widely known and available to many in the period. In addition, a letter by Daniel to Margaret Russell, Anne's mother, makes clear that rather than defying Anne's husband and other powerful men in the realm, which Arshad suggests as a possible rationale for Anne's commissioning of the Cleopatra portrait, Daniel advised restraint and reconciliation (Arshad, "Enigma" 35; Arshad, Hackett, and Whipday 175). In February 1616 when it became clear that the inheritance lawsuits would inevitably be settled by the king in favour of Francis Clifford, Earl of Cumberland, Daniel cautions Margaret Russell not to antagonise Richard Sackville in regards to the settlement of the inheritance dispute, noting that Sackville had insisted that any agreement include "this proviso that the lands shall return to her again if the heirs male fail, which is likely enough to happen." He urges Russell to:

Advise your daughter who is now coming down into Westmorland to you with his [Richard Sackville's] good leave and approbation, rather to endure the storms that may come from an angry husband with patience and sufferance than to take the Denyall whollie upon herselfe, for time may reconcile matters between them [. . .] your daughter has much in her of your Witt and Courage and Spirit which joined with the Blessing of Almighty God may help her pass through this storm.¹⁷

Daniel would certainly have advised against the use of his poetic depiction of Cleopatra in a project certain to antagonize Richard Sackville. In addition, Daniel reiterates in this letter his belief that Anne Clifford would ultimately inherit her father's northern lands.

Samuel Daniel's work also provides evidence for the most compelling argument against Anne Clifford as the sitter in the Cleopatra portrait. As noted above, Margaret Russell was the most powerful influence on Anne throughout Anne's life. And it is because of her mother that Anne would never have used the figure of Cleopatra, much less allowed herself to be portrayed as this figure *for any reason*. The figure of Cleopatra was connected both publically and privately to the disintegration of the marriage of Anne's

parents in the late 1590s. As Anne describes it, “he [George Clifford] fell to love a lady of quality, which did by degrees draw and alienate his love and affection from his soe vertuous and well discerneing wife” (Clifford, *Great Books* 710). This sentence only hints at the emotional devastation experienced by Margaret Russell, as shown in her letters during this time.¹⁸ This was not a private grief, and many attempted to support and comfort Margaret through the use of an analogy identifying her with Caesar’s wife Octavia, long recognized as a Classical exemplum of a noble, virtuous and devoted wife. One of the earliest extant uses of this analogy in relation to the Clifford marriage is in a private letter from Peregrine, Lord Willoughby, likely sent in 1599. He writes: “When all is said that may be Antony was a good fellow, Cleopatra, a sunshine day, and Octavia a rich clasped book wherein the secrets of all good wifery is contained.” Earlier in the letter he directly addresses Margaret as Octavia.¹⁹ The identification of Margaret with Octavia and George Clifford’s mistress as Cleopatra was soon to enter into print as clients vied for Margaret Russell (and Anne Clifford’s) patronage (Malay, “Patronage” 251–74). As part of the Clifford household in the late 1590s and tutor to the young Anne, Samuel Daniel was well aware of the Clifford domestic drama. In 1599 he published “A Letter sent from Octavia to her husband Marcus Antonius into Aegypt.” In his dedication to Russell it is clear he has her suffering in mind:

Yet have I here adventur’d to bestow
 Words uppon grieffe, as my griefes comprehend,
 And made this great afflicted Ladie [Octavia] show
 Out of my feelings, what she might have pend.
 And here the same, I bring forth, to attend
 Upon thy reverent name, to live with thee
 Most vertuous Ladie.²⁰

This poem and the dedication were published again in Daniel’s *Certaine Small Poems* in 1607 and 1611 (the same source for the lines in the Cleopatra portrait), which further reinforces the argument that Anne would never have sat for the figure of Cleopatra.

Over ten years after Daniel’s original publication of Octavia’s letter and after the death of George Clifford (1605), the analogies that figured Margaret Russell as Octavia and George Clifford’s mistress as Cleopatra continued to be publically used. Aemilia Lanier, in a bid for Anne Clifford’s patronage,

revived this image of Margaret Russell as Octavia and Cleopatra as the destructive beauty associated with Clifford's mistress in her *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum*.²¹ The two characters make their appearance in "An invective against outward beauty unaccompanied with Virtue":

Beautie the cause Antonius wrong'd his wife,
Which could not be decided but by sword:
Great Cleopatraes Beautie and defects
Did worke Octaviaes wrongs, and his neglects.
What fruit did yeeld that faire forbidden tree [Cleopatra],
But blood, dishonour, infamie, and shame? (60)

Here Lanyer, like Willoughby and Daniel, drew upon Renaissance depictions (which in turn drew on the medieval exemplum) of Cleopatra as the seductress that destroyed Anthony, and worked Octavia's wrongs. This was clearly an understanding of the figure that would have resonated with Margaret Russell and Anne Clifford. Given how extraordinarily devoted Anne was to her mother and how publically Cleopatra was identified with George Clifford's mistress,²² it is incredibly unlikely that Anne would take on the role of Cleopatra in any capacity in the kind of suggestive portrait we see here. During this period Sackville's infidelities were certainly on Anne's mind as her diaries for the years 1617 and 1619 demonstrate, and if she was looking for a classical figure to portray herself, she like her mother, would have seen Octavia and not Cleopatra as the more appropriate. Instead her mother advised her at this time to turn to Christ: "For in what a state so ever you be in there are and will be some discontentments [. . .] with a husband and without one til we enjoy that most blessed husband Jesus Christ which in his mercy I assure myself."²³

Arshad suggests that rather than accepting the advice and the example of the mother she adored, in the year after her mother's death in 1617, Anne Clifford portrayed herself as Cleopatra, a figure associated with her father's mistress, and used the income she inherited from her mother to do so. This scenario is clearly implausible. Clifford did inherit some money from her mother, regulated through the use of a trust that was under the control of her cousin, Edward Russell, 3rd Earl of Bedford. Earlier he had made it clear that he supported the inheritance settlement agreed in the King's Award and constantly encouraged Anne to accept this award.²⁴ Edward Russell would not have advanced money for a provocative portrait such as the Cleopatra portrait



Fig. 3: Anne Clifford, artist Paul van Somer, 1619. © Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Lakeland Arts Trust.

that was likely to create even further conflict between Anne Clifford and those upon whom she depended.

Indeed, instead of antagonizing Sackville through some form of pictorial defiance, by March 1617 Anne Clifford was attempting to reconcile with her husband in line with Samuel Daniel's advice. She wrote in her diary: "I am resolved to take all patiently casting all my care upon God" (61). Part of this strategy of patient forbearance and reconciliation with Sackville was the commissioning of portraiture. In the summer of 1619 the family (Richard, Anne [fig. 3] and their child Margaret) were all painted by Paul Van Somer. Meanwhile, in 1618, Anne Clifford sat for a portrait by William Larkin (fig. 4) (Clifford, *Diary Autobiographical Writing* 89–90). Davidson and Stevenson, through their concept of devisership, suggest women participated in the production of their portraiture through their choice of clothing, jewellery, positioning and other aspects of their representation. It is clear in the two portraits we know Anne Clifford sat for in 1618 and 1619 that she wished to be portrayed in a relatively conservative fashion with no allegorical or figurative elements in the



Fig. 4: Anne Clifford, artist William Larkin ca. 1618. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

portraiture. This was not the only choice available to her as the discussion of Peake's work above shows. Even a conservative portrait could draw upon a number of figurative allusions, but Anne appears not to have been interested in introducing these in her portraiture of 1618 and 1619.²⁵ Arshad suggests that "If the Cleopatra portrait belongs to this period it would accord with Clifford's increasing independence from her husband and development of her own cultural interests, including fashioning her own image" (Arshad, Hackett, and Whipday 175). In fact Anne Clifford's autobiography, portraiture, and other evidence from the period shows that after the King's Award, Anne's focus was on reconciliation with her husband, not independence from him. She records their periods of physical intimacy, and she became pregnant at least once during this period, bearing a son who died shortly after birth in December 1618.²⁶ She did fashion her own image, and this was a conservative image of a well-dressed and modest Jacobean woman.



Fig. 5: Great Picture. © Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Lakeland Arts Trust.

Arshad also suggests that “The painting [the Cleopatra portrait] could even date from the early years of Clifford’s widowhood following Sackville’s death in 1624, when she was entirely autonomous and financially comfortable” (Arshad, Hackett, and Whipday 175). I agree that the Cleopatra portrait could be later than 1620; however, a later date brings even greater evidence into play against an identification of Anne Clifford as the sitter. She certainly had much greater financial autonomy, and she used this autonomy to forward her claims to the barony of Clifford, appealing to Charles I after James I death in 1625 to support these claims. It was also becoming apparent by 1624 that Anne Clifford (or her daughters) would inherit the northern lands of her father through the proviso in the King’s Award that placed her as heir after the male heirs of Francis Clifford, 4th Earl of Cumberland. Anne’s cousin Henry Clifford, 5th Earl of Cumberland, had no surviving male heirs in 1624. His sons Charles, Francis, and Henry had all died as infants before 1622. By 1624 Anne Clifford was relatively certain that she (or her daughters) would obtain both the barony of Clifford and inherit the Clifford lands of the north. Anne Clifford was certainly interested in commissioning and devising portraiture for herself and would continually and well into old age commission portraits and copies of her earlier portraits (which she distributed widely, including a number of copies of the Van Somer portrait).²⁷ One of her greatest works remains her Great Picture (see fig. 5) where she relies on documentary and visual evidence in the form of texts of historical narrative, depictions of real individuals (including Samuel Daniel), heraldry, books with titles, and other objects within a framework of contemporary fur-



Fig. 6: Venetia Stanley, Lady Digby: The Knole Portrait, artist unknown, ca. 1625–1630. © The Sackville Collection, Knole.

nishings. This was in keeping with her training and interests as a historian which elevated documentary and historical evidence above the allegorical (Suzuki 192–299; Malay, “Constructing a Narrative” 859–75).

Arshad’s arguments for Anne Clifford as the sitter in the Cleopatra portrait rests on the physical resemblance, Anne’s relationship with Daniel, and circumstantial claims concerning Anne’s possible response to the King’s Award and the inheritance dispute as a whole. Given the discussion above we can with confidence conclude that Anne Clifford is not the sitter in the portrait. However, there is another candidate for this sitter supported by more substantial evidence. This is the Lady Venetia Stanley (1600–1633) who married Sir Kenelm Digby sometime in 1624 or early 1625.

Venetia Stanley arrived at court during the celebrations for the marriage of Princess Elizabeth Stuart and Frederick V, Elector Palatine, in February 1613. According to Kenelm Digby’s autobiographical romance, *Loose Fantasies*, she quickly attracted the romantic attention of leading courtiers, including Richard Sackville and his brother Edward.²⁸ A portrait of Venetia now in a private collection at Knole, Kent, reveals the close similarity between Venetia and the sitter in the Cleopatra portrait (see fig. 6).

There is no date for the Knole portrait, but in comparing it with Venetia's other portraits, it was likely painted between 1620 and 1633. A portrait from 1633 of Venetia, which will be discussed more fully below, by Anthony Van Dyck (fig. 8) also reveals a distinct similarity to Venetia and the sitter of the Cleopatra portrait. The presence of Venetia Stanley's portrait at Knole was likely due to the close friendship that developed between Edward Sackville, 4th Earl of Dorset, and her husband, Kenelm Digby, in the 1630s. His portrait by Van Dyck is also at Knole.

The portrait miniature worn by the sitter in the Cleopatra portrait also supports the identification of Venetia Stanley. There is, as Arshad suggests, some crude resemblance to Richard Sackville, but there is also a similarity to Kenelm Digby. Digby also wore facial hair, and the round face of the man portrayed in the miniature does suggest Digby. The miniature also operates in the Cleopatra portrait in a similar manner to the biographical imagery in *Loose Fantasies* and is suggestive of the creative strategies Venetia Stanley and Kenelm Digby used to represent their lives in later portraits and texts. An exploration of the relationship between Venetia, Kenelm, and the Sackville brothers using the miniature in the Cleopatra portrait as a starting point, provides an example of this creative strategy.²⁹

The most often cited reference to this relationship between the four is John Aubrey, in his *Brief Lives*, where he describes Venetia as the concubine of Richard Sackville, though Aubrey's recollections concerning Venetia and Richard contain a number of inaccuracies which have put this into question (Aubrey v.I, 330–34). Most commentators agree now that Aubrey confused Richard with his brother Edward Sackville, later the 4th Earl of Dorset, and argue that Venetia was Edward's mistress and not Richard's. However, an intriguing letter, undated but written before Richard Sackville's death in 1624 may indicate that both of the brothers were romantically interested in Venetia at some point. In this letter Richard Sackville writes to Mary, Lady Killigrew:³⁰

I would most unwilling lay a violation of this commaundement, Though shalt not steale uppon my brother. Yet Mistress Stanley tells me I have not her picture, which he tooke long time since from her, but a cobby of it; and the originall remaynes with you. To confirme this she assures me he shewed it her not long since. At first I could not beleeeve he would take it,

conceale it, deny it as he did. So this latter fiction seemes rather a vision
or a Dreame, then a reall thing.

Sackville goes on to ask Lady Killigrew to confirm whether she has the original miniature portrait so that he can ascertain whether his brother is lying or not.³¹ While it is unclear exactly what is going on here, the letter confirms that both Richard and Edward Sackville had pictures of Venetia, and that both men were in contact with her. It is also interesting to note that Aubrey got his information about an affair between Richard and Venetia from Elizabeth Boyle, Countess of Thanet (Bennet v.2, 1205). She was the wife of Nicholas Tufton, grandson of Richard Sackville (and Anne Clifford).³² Much of the gossip she imparted to Aubrey about Richard Sackville was inaccurate, but it does suggest that Venetia was Richard's mistress.

The other source we have for the relationship between Venetia and the Sackville brothers is Kenelm Digby's *Loose Fantasies* where the factual details of Venetia's relationship (and Kenelm's own) with the brothers intersect within the generic conventions of romance. *Loose Fantasies* was composed around 1628, though it built upon earlier work (Gabrieli, introduction xvii–xix). It is a romance/autobiography which Joe Molenska describes as containing "a complex intertwinement of imaginatively wild but generically recognizable fiction and thinly veiled historical and autobiographical fact" (433). Kenelm drew upon cultural tropes to construct personas for the real (and/or composite) individuals he included in the text. He emblematically heightened or foregrounded the qualities of those personas as it suited his narrative purpose. In this way *Loose Fantasies* participates in a romance tradition that engaged in "slippery and playfully imprecise relation between actuality and imaginative fantasy" (Moshenska, "Interruptions" 434), and is thus rich in cultural allusions, imagery, and allegory that are woven into the actual lives of individuals. Julie A. Eckerle, in her discussion of the veiled language of romance, notes that "this same feature made romance an ideal form for family histories" (160). Joel B. Davis, in his discussion of Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, describes how Sidney interwove the autobiographical and familial within the imaginary in a manner that "artfully preserved signifying personal experience" that was thus "rendered aesthetically for semi-public consumption." Davis identifies in Sidney's poetry the functioning of a factual paratext presented within a fictional context (102). Thus Sidney's romance contains an invitation to the reader to

speculate on the identity of the person behind the poetic creation in an attempt to tease out biographical insight about the real person behind the artifice. Moshenska suggests a similar invitation is present in *Loose Fantasies*, where the reader is invited to engage with a text that tantalizes through its enigmatic representations, “teasing the reader with the impossibility of determining where the one ends and the other begins” (“Interruptions” 433).³³ And thus, while this makes it difficult to glean precise biographical information from the text, it does give insight—often in quite visual terms—into the Venetia that Kenelm Digby wished to portray. Kenelm calls this persona Stelliana with perhaps something of a nod to Sir Philip Sidney’s sonnet sequence “Astrophel and Stella,” allowing for a web of allusions to both the reality of their situation, and the many romances circulating in the period.

If the portrayal of characters is rich in allusions, Vittorio Gabrieli suggests that the general outline of the main events concerning Venetia Stanley as portrayed by Stelliana “can be safely regarded as reflecting real experiences in the life” of Kenelm Digby and Venetia Stanley (introduction xxviii). I would modify this statement by suggesting that the experiences of Stelliana and Theagenes (Kenelm Digby’s persona), as portrayed in *Loose Fantasies*, provide a paratext using verifiable biographical facts to underpin a particular narrative. This narrative draws on the conventions of romance to shape the narrative about Venetia and himself that Kenelm wished his readers to accept.

Venetia’s relationship with the Sackville brothers appears to be incorporated into a narrative in *Loose Fantasies* concerning the wooing and attempted kidnapping of Stelliana. The character of Ursatius becomes besotted by Stelliana’s beauty, his heart “set on fire with the radiant beams that sparkled from her eyes” upon Stelliana’s first appearance at court (16). This likely refers to Venetia’s arrival at court during the celebrations surrounding the wedding of the Princess Elizabeth Stuart with Frederick V, Elector Palatine, in 1613. As the narrative of Ursatius’s pursuit of Stelliana progresses, she becomes more and more vulnerable to his advances, especially after the supposed “death” of Theagenes. At one point the character Ursatius attempts to kidnap and ravish Stelliana (15–41). Some commentators have identified Ursatius as Richard or Edward Sackville (Bligh 27, n.1; Gabrieli 16, n.2; Roy Thomas 255). Certainly it is more in keeping with Edward’s behavior. He was a powerful courtier, but one also known for rash and violent behaviour. In 1617 he joined Sir John Holles and Sir Robert Rich in the attempted kidnapping of Frances Hatton.³⁴ In

1613 Edward Sackville killed Edward Bruce, 2nd Lord Kinloss, in a duel which may have been fought over Sackville's attempted seduction of Bruce's sister Christina. In *Loose Fantasies*, Stelliana escapes harm with the help of Mardontius, who may represent Richard Sackville.

This incident as portrayed in *Loose Fantasies* thus supports other evidence of Venetia's relationship with the Sackville brothers, but it also provides an example of the way in which art can reimagine circumstances in order to communicate an understanding of these circumstances that ameliorates or effaces more damaging narratives of an individual's behaviour. In his *Lives*, Aubrey portrays Venetia Stanley as a courtesan. That she was reputed to be sexually active during the period before her marriage to Kenelm Digby is confirmed by Digby himself in a variety of places, including a letter to Francis Thomson, an English priest at Rome and Digby's spiritual advisor shortly after Venetia's death:

But I can not blame you, who in this must see with others eyes and judge by what you have heard; and I believe that heretofore you have had strange colors layed upon her picture that make it appear deformed.³⁵

Loose Fantasies portrays Venetia's behavior before her marriage to Kenelm in a much more positive light, insisting on her faithful and constant love for him despite the importuning of powerful courtiers. Gabrieli, Moshenska and others see *Loose Fantasies* as an early attempt by Kenelm (perhaps in partnership with Venetia) to rehabilitate their reputations in the light of a continued social ambiguity that they worried would interfere with their ambitions.³⁶ The Cleopatra portrait may also have been devised to participate in this rehabilitation.

This portrait is suggestive of a dialogue between the figure of Cleopatra and events described in *Loose Fantasies*. Digby describes how Theagenes' mother, concerned by his growing relationship with Stelliana, encouraged him to embark on a tour of Europe. Before his departure he describes a meeting with Stelliana in a fairly typical romance scene of the departing lover:

They both renewed the protestations of their affections and vows of constancy; and Theagenes presented her with a diamond ring entreating her, whensoever she did cast her eyes upon it, to conceive that it told her in his behalf that his heart would prove as hard as that stone in the admittance

of any new affection [. . .] and she desired him to wear for her sake a lock of her hair which she gave him. (43)

This scene depicts an exchange of promises, perhaps even a *sponsalia de praesenti*, or indissoluble bond between the two. It should be noted that in the Cleopatra portrait a diamond ring is visible on Cleopatra's right hand. As discussed above, the autobiographical and the romance merge in *Loose Fantasies*. Digby did leave England for Paris in May 1620, and in *Loose Fantasies* he portrays his persona Theagenes as caught up with intrigue within the French court, attracting the attention of the queen mother, Marie de Medici. In order to escape the queen regent's advances Theagenes fakes his death, having it spread about that he was killed in military action at Angers, France, and instead goes on to Italy and was living in Florence by November, 1620.³⁷ Theagenes then sends a letter to Stelliana explaining the circumstances of his flight, and that he was alive. However, in true romance fashion the letter miscarries, with subsequent letters suppressed by Theagenes's mother (60). This situation could provide the context for the Cleopatra portrait—either at the time (1620–1621) or, in retrospect, after Venetia and Kenelm were reunited in 1623. The Cleopatra exemplum in the period was complex. The most prevalent view of Cleopatra was as a potent and dangerous seductress as discussed above. However, the image of Cleopatra was complicated, by the use of this figure to express constant and passionate love. This is certainly how Collin Thomas presents Cleopatra in his pastoral poem, *The Teares of Love* (1615):

Wee reade of Women throw themselves in fire,
 When as their loving husbands lives expire.
 Portia tooke burning Coales and swallowed,
 Hating to live, her husband being dead.
 Cleopatra (for Love of Anthony)
 With sting of Aspicks did most stoutly die. (28)

Here Thomas places the virtuous Portia alongside Cleopatra as exempla of true and constant love. Cleopatra was presented in the plays of Mary Sidney, Samuel Daniel, and William Shakespeare as a woman of dignity and passion and was at times celebrated for her constant love (Hannay, Kinnamon, and Brennan 140). Digby's description of Stelliana's reaction to news of his death

in *Loose Fantasies* draws on these Classical exempla of women who sought death in the mode of a Portia or Cleopatra:

'Alas' would she say 'wherein have I offended Death that he thus cruelly should rob me of my dearest jewel? Yet since thy stroke is never to be recalled, I will pardon thee, and, henceforward call thee courteous, if thou wilt level at me thy leaden dart [. . .] But oh! It seemeth my love was weak, that cannot call sorrow enough to break that heart which ought to have lived only in my Theagenes. However, if love and sorrow cannot do it, nor death will come at a wretch's call, fury and despair shall bring my cursed life to a wished end; and this hand only so often made happy with his burning kisses, deserveth to be the instrument of such a glorious act as will bring me to the enjoyment of my soul's delight [. . .] There shall our happy spirits wander in the Elysian fields and be united together with the holy fire of divine love in that immense and glorious flaming light, which comprehendeth all things. (60–61)

This preparation for death and a passionate “flaming” functions as an allusion to the reunion of Cleopatra with Anthony found in a number of depictions of her. It is present in Mary Sidney's *Antonius* (1590) when Cleopatra speaks: “our hearts sweet sparkes have sett on fire” (206). It also appears in Thomas May's *Cleopatra* (1626): “and I descend / As great a ghost as Theban Semele [. . .] [to] Jove's celestiall fire” (E2r). In Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (ca. 1607) Cleopatra, in her preparation for death, calls out, “I am fire and air” (5.2.325). It certainly resonates with the passionate “Cleopatra I” in the lines of Daniel present on the Cleopatra portrait. In that portrait the figure stands poised to lower the asps to her breasts, but she is frozen in that moment of despair. In *Loose Fantasies* this moment is portrayed via rich visual imagery with Stelliana poised to commit a Cleopatra-like suicide. And then Digby, in his construction of a passionate yet virtuous Venetia, moves Stelliana beyond this Classical moment of despair and suicidal resolution to Christian acceptance and a determination to, as Stelliana vows: “continual martyrdom, which, I hope, may purge and refine such defects are natural in me, and make me worthy of that seat, which, I am sure, he [God] will provide for me” (61). In this way Digby transforms Venetia from Classical to Christian exempla, using the Cleopatra figure as a starting point. It is a practice he will employ

often and encourage in others after Venetia's death in 1633, in his continual textual and visual refashioning of this woman he loved.

In 1620 Venetia was a court beauty, pursued by a number of admirers, who according to Digby falls into suicidal despair when she hears of her lover's death. These circumstances fit the theme of the Cleopatra portrait and provide a rationale for its production. This would date the portrait to the period after Robert Peake's death in 1619, but could easily have been produced by his son, or another in his workshop. Caroline Rae and Aviva Burstock observe that Peake's portraits often suggest that they were the "products of more than one hand" (Rae and Burnstock 65), and portraits dated after his death continued in his style.³⁸ I suggest that the Cleopatra portrait (whether painted after Digby's supposed "death" or prior to it) is in conversation with or may even have inspired the scene Digby composed of Venetia's grief and suicidal contemplations in *Loose Fantasies* and remained with him as an image of her devoted love for him after their marriage. Just over a month after her actual death he wrote to his brother John: "if I had dyed (whom she loved above all things in this world) [. . .] I believe verily she would have been upon terms to accompany me to my grave before I had bin carried to it." Here he reiterates even in his profound grief his belief she would have sought a Classical death, in the mode of Cleopatra (Gabrieli, "Letter-Books" [1957] 84).

Digby may also have had in mind at this time his close friend Thomas May's depiction of Cleopatra in his play, *The Tragedie of Cleopatra Queen of Aegypt*, which was performed in 1626. In this play Cleopatra's final speech portrays just such a passion:

My earthly race is run, and I descend
 As great a ghost as Theban Semele,
 When her ambitious love had sought and met
 The Thunderers embraces, when no Pile
 Of earthly wood, but Jove's celestial fire
 Consum'd her beauties reliques, and sent down
 Her soul from that Majestick funerall.
 Farewell thou fading remnant of my Love.
 When I am gone, I'll leave these earthly parts
 To keep thee company: never to part,
 But dwell together, and dissolve together.
 Come Aspe, possesse thy mansion; freely feed

On these two hils, upon whose snowy tops
 The winged Cupid oft has taken stand,
 And shot from thence the proudest hearts on earth.
 Corruption now, and rottennesse must seize
 This once admired fabrick, and dissolve
 This flesh to common elements again
 When skilfull nature, were she strictly bound
 To search through all her store-house would be pos'd
 To tell which piece was Cleopatra once.
 Sweet Aspe, I feel thy touch, and life begins
 From these cold limbs to take her gentle flight.
 A slumber seizes me; farewell my girles.
 Thus let the Romans finde me dead, and know
 Maugre the power of Rome, and Caesar's spleen
 That Cleopatra liv'd, and di'd a Queen. (E2r-v)

In this scene May foregrounds again the theme of constant and passionate love in addition to Cleopatra's inherited nobility.

May revisited this figure of Cleopatra in another of his compositions, *A Continuation of Lucan's Historicall Poem Till the Death of Julius Caesar* (1630), which was his continuation of Lucan's *Pharsalia* (1627). May's text again foregrounds Cleopatra's extraordinary beauty, comparing her with the renowned figure of classical mythology, and portrays her much more sympathetically than in the Lucan material he translated previously, as can be seen here:

Had *Cleopatra* beene
 By those renowned Graecian writers seene,
 Whose deathlesse Poems in the skies above
 Have fix'd so many paramours of *Jove*;
 Before the daughters of faire *Pleione*,
Atlanta, *Maia*, and *Taygete*, she
 Had there beene grac'd: her Tresses farre more faire
 Had shew'd in Heaven than *Berenices* haire.
Calistho's Waine had not in skies beene set,
 Nor *Ariadnes* shining Coronet,
 Till *Cleopatra's* Starre had found a place,
 And chose what part of Heaven she meant to grace. (C5r-v)

In this passage Cleopatra's beauty and nobility are foregrounded. And while it would be a stretch to suggest that there might be some allusion to Digby's Stelliana in May's Cleopatra's star, his depiction of Cleopatra is in keeping with those allusions to the queen that appear in relation to Venetia Stanley. This suggestion is supported by Thomas May's fulsome dedication of his play to Digby in 1639. May was also involved in the elegiac projects that would bring several of Digby's circle together after the death of Venetia, including a contribution by William Habington that specifically unites the figure of Cleopatra and Venetia.³⁹

Venetia Stanley died in 1633 quite suddenly.⁴⁰ Digby recalls in a letter to his brother, "for four dayes together I did nothing but weep [. . .] without intermission" (Gabrieli, "Letter-Books" [1956] 450). His letter-books record the progress of his unrelenting grief in the months after her death (Gabrieli, "Letter-Books" [1957] 82). Venetia's death inspired elegiac grief from a number of poets. These included Ben Jonson, Thomas May, Joseph Rutter, Owen Feltham, Aurelian Townsend, Lord George Digby⁴¹ and William Habington.⁴² Habington's elegy to Venetia appears in his collections of poems to Castara (1635). The Castara of these poems was a persona representing Lucy Herbert, daughter of Eleanor Percy.⁴³ Venetia's mother Lucy Percy was Eleanor's sister. Thus Habington's elegy, "To Castara upon the death of a Lady," gains greater poignancy as it is addressed to a figure representing Venetia's first cousin Lucy in a collection dedicated to Venetia's husband, Kenelm.

The poem entreats Castara to "weepe not, though her [Venetia's] tombe appeare" engraved with flowers that serve her now:

Such office the Aegyptian handmaids did
 Great Cleopatra, when she dying chid.
 The Asps slow venome, trembling she should be
 By Fate rob'd even of that blacke victory
 The flowers instruct our sorrowes [. . .]
 She's [the bust of Venetia on her tomb] but the fairer Digbies counterfeit.
 Come you who speake your titles. Reade in this
 Pale booke, how vaine boast your greatnesse is.
 What's honour but a hatchment? what is here
 Of Percy left, and Stanly, names most deare
 To vertue?⁴⁴ [. . .]



Fig. 7: Monument of Venetia Digby, Christ Church London in *Digbiorum Pedigree*, ca. 1633. © Sherborne Castle Estates.

Or what avails her, that she once was led,
A glorious bride to valiant Digbies bed. (88–89)

This poem stages Venetia's presence at the same point in the Cleopatra story that was depicted in the Cleopatra portrait, perhaps drawing the attention of the readers (most especially Lucy Herbert and Kenelm Digby)—to the Cleopatra portrait, while at the same time inviting them to look up at her tomb. Venetia's magnificent tomb erected in Christchurch, London shortly after her death (and destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666), includes a bust of Venetia in a Classical costume much like that of the Cleopatra portrait (fig. 7), which as Habington's poem suggests, contains a visual allusion to Cleopatra.

But perhaps the most ingenious use and re-inscription of the Cleopatra trope in relation to Venetia Stanley is to be found in Anthony Van Dyck's allegorical portrait of her as Prudence painted in 1633–1634 (fig. 8).⁴⁵ Van Dyck was Kenelm Digby's close friend, and Digby commissioned him to paint at least five portraits of his family.⁴⁶ Digby called him in immediately after Venetia's death to paint her on her deathbed.⁴⁷ Soon after, it appears Digby commissioned Van Dyck to paint a posthumous allegorical portrait of



Fig. 8: Lady Venetia Stanley as Prudence, Anthony Van Dyck, 1633–1634.
© National Portrait Gallery, London.

Venetia as Prudence.⁴⁸ Giovan Pietro Bellori recounts Digby describing his plan for the portrait:

The same Digby conceived the idea of having his lady consort painted on a large canvas, in the guise of Prudence, seated in a white gown with a colored veil and a jeweled baldric. She extends her hand to two white doves, while her other arm is entwined by a serpent. Beneath her feet she has a

block, and bound to it in the form of slaves are Deceit with two faces;
Wrath with a furious aspect; Envy, scrawny, with a mane of serpents;
profane Love in a blindfold, with his wings clipped. (219)

Bellori goes on to list the lesser figures Digby intended to be included and the motto by Juvenal that Digby hoped to use: NVLLVM NVMEN ABEST SI SIT PRVDENTIA [No god is absent if Prudence be present]. Bellori relates that Van Dyck was happy with the scheme and painted both a larger and smaller version of the portrait (219). One of these portraits remained at the Digby family home, Gothurst in Buckinghamshire, until at least 1783 when it is described by Thomas Pennant (348–49). This allegorical project has much in common with the strategy of representation in *Loose Fantasies*, written less than a decade before. In keeping with the hiding and revealing that occurs in this romance, the use of images participates in what Mark Roskell describes as “a combination of images and mottoes that were well matched, and avoided obviousness without falling into the opposite fault of obscurity” and were often designed with a particular coterie in mind, especially in the case of portraiture (180).

The Van Dyck portrait shares several images and devices with the Cleopatra portrait as well as other similarities. The facial similarity between Venetia in the Van Dyck portrait and the figure in the Cleopatra portrait is striking. The triangular structure is also maintained in both portraits. The costume is classical and folds around Venetia’s body in a similar manner as in the Cleopatra portrait.⁴⁹ In Van Dyck’s portrait Venetia holds a serpent in her right hand, not aloft in the moments before the strike, but wrapped around her hand and under her control. Here Venetia is portrayed as conquering death rather than welcoming its mastery over her. Venetia’s left hand is placed upon doves in a gesture of appropriation. In Classical literature doves were connected with Venus and were often used to symbolize love, and thus unsurprisingly they were also associated with Cleopatra (DeForest 169–70). Judy Edgerton in her discussion of this portrait believes an association is being made between the doves and marital chastity (254–55), while the dove and the serpent also allude to Matthew 10.16: “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” This is not a contradiction but a strategy on Digby’s part to appropriate imagery associated with Venetia in her early life and re-inscribe it in order to present her not as a wanton and dangerous Cleopatra, but as a mature and virtuous Cleopatra who is noble, wise and prudent. This is the same strategy

Digby pursues in his letters.⁵⁰ John Peacock suggests that Digby engaged in a discourse of the visual in his writing, using what he terms the “customary language of visualization” in order to help those who might mis-value Venetia to “see clearly” (228). Digby writes of Venetia, “She had not onely a majestike presence, a noble personage and stature [. . .] She exceeded all women living in beauty and delightfulness of outward forme, so had she as brave and as noble a minde, fitt to be joynd to so faire a bodie.” He goes on to say that she was “borne under the dominion of Venus,” and that “Jupiter raigne in her minde, and the Sunne in her heart” (Gabrieli, “Letter-Books” [1957] 83).⁵¹ The Prudence portrait of Venetia is in visual conversation with a number of allusions to Classical figures, but most especially Cleopatra. If one accepts the identification of the sitter as Venetia Stanley, the two portraits form a type of visual reciprocity, foregrounding the idealized love shared by the Kenelm and Venetia. The Cleopatra portrait was likely a pictorial response to the supposed death of Kenelm Digby in 1620, keeping in mind this could be an imagined and romanticized response inhabiting the idea of Kenelm’s death. The Van Dyck’s portrait of Venetia as Prudence is Kenelm’s response to Venetia’s actual death, where he transforms the desperate love and grief of a Cleopatra into the serenity of an assured virtue that conquers death. Digby makes clear in his letters that he believed Venetia’s soul was in heaven, and that their love continued in a spiritual sense and could be resumed after his own death (Peacock 226).

Of course in this Van Dyck portrait of Venetia, her body is possessed and posed by men.⁵² Digby constructed the Venetia he wished to present to the world and carry himself into widowhood. Digby’s letters, his portraits of Venetia, the elegies he encouraged the poets within his circle to produce, and Venetia’s monument where he eventually joined her in 1665, were all designed to insist upon her virtue and constancy, as well as the extraordinary nature of their love.⁵³ Other depictions of Venetia that have survived into the twenty-first century as noted before, are more equivocal. John Aubrey’s description of her as a lascivious courtesan has remained the dominant version of Venetia’s character. We have no direct access to Venetia’s own thoughts or her words, and at present no letter, or other writing by her has been recovered. We know that she did write. Kenelm Digby recounts that Venetia “used to take notes and make collections out of them [books of piety] and sett them downe in her owne hand of which I have seuerall bookes written full by her” (Gabrieli, “Letter-Book” [1956] 85). Unfortunately, there is no evidence any of these have

survived. For a man who was instrumental in the preservation of his own manuscripts and those of several others,⁵⁴ Digby appears to have been uninterested in preserving any of Venetia's writings. And so the Venetia we see is a construction—primarily by Kenelm Digby (though perhaps in partnership with Venetia) and the poets and painters in his coterie, with the enduring dusting of scandal added by Aubrey. In this case, the Cleopatra portrait provides an opportunity to consider Venetia's voice, her self-construction, her "Cleopatra I."

Given the evidence above, it is clear Venetia Stanley is the likely sitter in the Cleopatra portrait. This provides an opportunity to consider the level of her participation in the design and execution of the portrait. Susan E. James suggests that women in the period "discovered the power of speaking to their contemporaries through the voice of portraiture" (3). Anne Clifford provides a clear example of the agency a woman could exert in the representation of herself even within the confines of male authority. In a family portrait by Van Dyck commissioned by her second husband, Philip Herbert, Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery (1635) Anne appears isolated, standing with arms folded in her signature black attire. This portrait gives credence to James's suggestion that women often "reserved to herself the 'flesh,' an assemblage of material goods" including costume, that "defined the portrait's purpose and her role within it" (3). Philip Herbert was known to be unhappy with Anne Clifford's customary attire, and this was a point of contention between the two. In 1636 Anne's signature black dress was lampooned in a libel: "health to my Lady Pembroke / that lookes so like a witche."⁵⁵ Yet in this important portrait by Van Dyck, Herbert did not interfere with Anne's chosen dress. She was able to pose and dress herself in a manner which communicated her identity and values. James also discusses a number of women who actively engaged in the design and commissioning of portraiture including Elizabeth "Bess" Hardwick, Arbella Stuart, and Anne Russell (Countess of Warwick). These women each used portraiture as the means to express their sense of who they were, to promote their interests, and to engage in a cultural dialogue within a society that was keenly attuned to the language of visual representation.

These were all wealthy women, but this form of discourse was not out of the reach of less affluent women. Robert Tittler's work reveals the wide spread cultural interest in portrait painting and stresses the affordability of portraits. Tittler notes that in 1617 Sir Hammon Lestrange of Hunstanton, Norfolk paid £3, 20s for two portraits, and in 1626 George Cottington paid £25 for four

portraits (74). These sums were paid to provincial painters, but the cost of a portrait from a court painter like Peake was not exorbitant. Roy Strong records that Robert Peake was paid £16, 13s for a portrait of Prince Charles in 1613, and Tittler suggests that prices paid for portraits remained relatively static in the early part of the seventeenth century.⁵⁶ Given this we can safely assume that the Cleopatra portrait would have cost somewhere between ten and fifteen pounds (perhaps less). This was a sum that Venetia would have had available to her. Anne Clifford records in her diary that she lost fifteen pounds playing gleek on one night in 1616 (28). We have little knowledge of Venetia's financial situation in the period. However, she was certainly moving in the same social circle as Anne and while perhaps not able to gamble at quite the same rate, portraiture, especially when carried out by the workshop of a leading portrait artist of the period, would have been seen as a reasonable investment. In this case, we can comfortably assume that Venetia could have afforded to commission a painting of herself in a manner which she devised.

The portrait can thus be read as Venetia's reaction to Kenelm's "death" in 1620, drawing on romance discourse to both conceal and reveal the autobiographical moment. Eckerle describes the specific use of romance discourse by women in just this manner in order to communicate the autobiographical, which also offered the opportunity "for enacting wish fulfillment" (82, 104), or, as Waller notes in his discussion of Mary Wroth's *Urania*, enacting a "day-dream" (56). The portrait miniature of the unnamed gentleman provides an artful suggestion of a contemporary relationship embedded within the romance discourse of the portrait. The possibility that the image could refer to more than one man would be in keeping with the suggestive ambiguity of romance as discussed above. Of course, despite her unhappiness as described in Digby's *Loose Fantasies* and suggested by the Cleopatra portrait, Venetia did not commit suicide. However, in the portrait she is able to enact a passionate self-destruction and thus engages potently, but not lethally, with this cultural exemplum of constancy in love represented by Cleopatra. Daniel's lines also communicate her resistance to the powerful nobleman who pursued her as described by Digby in *Loose Fantasies*. The portrait insists on the rarity of her love and her exemplary constancy to her Antonio (Kenelm). In *Loose Fantasies* we see Kenelm perform his love, passion, and constancy for Venetia. The Cleopatra portrait may have been Venetia's expression of the same for him. Both the romance autobiography and the portrait would have communi-

cated the desired narrative about their relationship that they wished the world to accept.

We know that Venetia was keenly aware of the currency of portraiture. The Sackville letter shows Venetia knew who had a portrait of her and that she maintained at least some control of the circulation of her image. Her marriage with Kenelm Digby brought her into close contact with Van Dyck who was a fixture in the Digby household.⁵⁷ He painted her portrait several times and while we cannot be certain of the extent of her involvement in her representation in these painted during her life, it is reasonable to assume that she participated as a deviser in the portraits that represent her as a beautiful and virtuous wife and mother. Ben Jonson, another frequent visitor and close friend to the Digby household,⁵⁸ gives us a glimpse of Venetia sitting for a portrait:

Sitting, and ready to be drawn [. . .]
 Yet something to the Painter's view
 Were fitly interposed; so new
 He shall, if he can understand,
 Work with my fancy his own hand. (261)

The poem places the sitter poised for interpretation. Here Jonson suggests the painter should defer to the poet's imagination in order to produce an image, a representation, that is most like Venetia. Jonson ends by warning the painter not to produce copies of the portrait:

But, painter, see thou do not sell
 A copy of this piece; nor tell
 Whose 'tis. (263)

The person who possesses this painting is clearly meant to be Venetia. In this and Jonson's companion poem, "The Mind" (where Jonson dismisses the painter Van Dyck) it is Venetia who is the generative agent (263–67). In the title of his elegy to Venetia, Jonson describes her as "my muse, the truly honoured Lady, the Lady Venetia Digby, who, living, gave me leave to call her so" (268). This address suggests that during Venetia's life she was an active participant in artistic representations of her person and that she worked with the artists and writers, including her husband, in order to produce an image of

herself that promoted her self-interest and that of her family. She shared this strategy in common with many women of the period. This identification of Venetia Stanley as the sitter and deviser of the Cleopatra portrait allows the painting to be interpreted within the context of Venetia's broader strategy of self-representation in her later portraits and her patronage of poets. It also provides another example of women's active engagement in creative practices in early modern culture.

NOTES

1. This small but significant change presents a Cleopatra that is more in line with Mary Sidney's portrayal of the Egyptian queen in her translation of Garnier's *Antonie*. See Krontiris, Alison Findlay, Marion Wynne-Davies.

2. James Shapiro describes this portrait as "the only portrait to survive from the period based on a scene from a play," effectively erasing the sitter (245). My article will show the portrait functions more effectively as a personal allegory.

3. See Arshad, "Enigma"; Arshad "Imagining Cleopatra"; Arshad, Hackett, Whipday.

4. Peter Davidson and Juliet Stevenson suggest that women's participation in the cultural production of an artefact can be usefully investigated through the concept of "devisership" (209). H.L. Meakin develops this concept in her discussion of Lady Anne Bacon Drury's painted closet, which extends possibilities of autobiographical narrative and communicative purpose in this participation (4–5).

5. Lot 32, sold December 12, 1995, *Early British & Victorian Paintings*, Phillips, London.

6. Robert Peake, *Portrait of a Lady* (said to be Elizabeth Throckmorton), ca. 1595–1600, Maldon Town Council, Maldon Moot Hall.

7. Both Arshad ("The Enigma" 33) and Lisa Hopkins (2) are also sceptical of this attribution.

8. Yasmin Arshad sets out her argument for the identification of Anne Clifford as the sitter in this portrait in "The Enigma of a Portrait," and Arshad, Hackett, and Whipday, "Daniel's Cleopatra and Lady Anne Clifford."

9. *The Countess of Pembroke, 1673*, by John Bracken, Abbot Hall Gallery, Kendal.

10. This award, in accordance with her father's will, placed her after her uncle, Francis, her male cousin Henry, and any male heirs her cousin might have had in the line of succession for the Clifford hereditary lands. Anne believed (based on substantial documentary evidence) that this award was illegal, but in the end, it was the mechanism through which she inherited those same lands.

11. In 1617 Anne was the next heir to the Clifford lands after her cousin Henry as he had no male heirs at that time. Henry did go on to father two male children but both died in infancy. The award also did not bar Anne from seeking her rights to the barony of Clifford and she turned her attention to securing this honor after 1617.

12. Anne Clifford, *Autobiographical Writing* 48.

13. *Diary* 67. Sir John Digby, later 1st Earl of Bristol, was closely associated with Kenelm Digby, who will be discussed below.

14. Especially the prophesies of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel (referred to 40 times) and the Old Testament wisdom texts of Proverbs, Psalms, and Ecclesiastes (referred to 261 times) in her autobiography found in her *Great Books* (795–906). Her reading during this period (1616–1619) was also heavily theological including the Bible, Augustine’s *City of God*, James I’s *A Meditation upon the Lord’s Prayer*, T. Sorocold, *Supplications of Saints*, Josephus’ *Jewish Wars* and the *Life of Josephus*. See Clifford, *Autobiographical Writing*.

15. Cumbria Archives, Kendal, WDHOTH, Box 44, Letter, 30 October 1615.

16. Daniel also served and received patronage from the Herbert family, earls of Pembroke, those in the circle of the Earl of Essex circle, the earls of Salisbury and Somerset, the Countess of Warwick and others. He was also a member of Queen Anne’s personal household.

17. Longleat, Wiltshire, Portland MS 23, pp. 53–54. This letter can also be found in Leeds University Library, Brotherton Collection, MS Lt. q. 36, fols. 8v–10.

18. Margaret Russell letters, Portland MS 23, Longleat House Archives, Wiltshire.

19. Willoughby to Russell, 23 March ca. 1598, WDHOTH 44, Cumbria Archives, Kendal.

20. “A Letter Sent From Octavia to her husband Marcus Antonius into Aegypt.” This poem, with its dedication to Margaret Russell (sig. A2r), was first published in Daniel’s 1599 verse collection, *The Poeticall Essayes of Samuel Danyel*.

21. Lanyer witnessed first hand the pain and struggles Margaret Russell endured because of the estrangement caused by George Clifford’s affair with the “lady of quality.” Lanyer resided at Cookham with Margaret Russell and Anne Clifford in the Autumn of 1604, and we have a number of letters from Margaret Russell dated from Cookham at that time that reveal her troubled state. See Malay, “Patronage.”

22. George Williamson in 1920 wrote “common report had it that she was a Stanley and was young, comely and ambitious” (265). The dates and circumstances surrounding the lives of George Clifford and Lucy Percy provide some support for this identification. Percy was estranged from her husband at times during the late 1590s, and died in 1601 (Digby, “Loose Fantasies” 11). And it may be that Venetia Stanley sought, amongst other goals, to re-inscribe her mother’s identification as Cleopatra with a more positive depiction.

23. Margaret Russell to Anne Clifford, 1615. WDHOTH, Box 44. The spelling here has been modernized.

24. Anne wrote: “My cousin Russell came to seem the same day [16 Feb. 1616] and chid me and told me of all my faults and errors in this business” (*Autobiographical Writing* 40).

25. Anne Clifford had the Van Somer portrait reproduced a number of times, indicating this was the preferred portrait of her youthful self.

26. Chamberlain v.2, 198. Another son was born 2 February 1620 and died the 6th of July 1620.

27. See Cumbria Archive Service, Kendal, JAC 495–497, Anne Clifford’s Accounts, 1669–1675 (microfilm).

28. See Digby, *Loose Fantasies*, ed. Vittorio Gabrieli; and “Loose Fantasies,” Harley MS 6758, British Library, London.

29. It also provides additional reasons to suggest that Venetia Digby is the sitter and not Anne Clifford, even if one insists the miniature depicts Richard Sackville.

30. Mary Woodhouse (ca. 1590–1650) was married to the courtier Sir Robert Killigrew who associated with both Richard and Edward Sackville.

31. Richard Earl of Dorset to Lady Killigrew, National Archives, SP 14/180 f.21. The miniatures discussed may be those that are now at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London and Burghley House, Stamford.

32. She was also second cousin to Anne Clifford, and she was the granddaughter of Henry Clifford, 5th Earl of Cumberland, Anne's cousin who also held the lands of Anne's inheritance in the North, until they passed to Anne on his death in 1643.

33. Moshenska also discusses of the relationship between *Loose Fantasies* to the romance work of Sir Philip Sidney and his circle ("Interruptions" 431–38).

34. Clifford, *Autobiographical Writing* 64. Sackville killed Edward Bruce, 2nd Lord Kinloss, in a duel in 1613 which may have been over Sackville's attempted seduction of Christina Bruce.

35. Digby, "Letter-Book" 87. Whatever the truth of Edward Sackville's relationship with Venetia, by 1632 Kenelm and Edward were close friends, as a letter to Sir Robert Cotton attests (see Nicolas 47).

36. Moshenska notes that a letter to Venetia dated 1628, found in the papers of Sir John Gell, mainly dealing with Kenelm's Mediterranean adventures, may suggest that Venetia actively engaged in strategies (in this case circulating Kenelm's letter) designed to rebuild or recast their reputations in a more positive light ("A New Plot," *TLS*, March 2016).

37. For an engaging account of this adventure see Moshenska, *Stain* 54–58. For Digby's own account, see *Loose Fantasies* 44–57. Moshenska also discusses the difficulty untangling fact from fiction in Digby's account (see "Interruptions" 430–38).

38. Portraits in the style of Robert Peake after 1619 include a portrait of Anne Seymour (1629) Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum; Anne Hawtry (in the style of the Cleopatra portrait) (ca. 1620) Chequers Court.

39. Digby, "Letter-Book" 82.

40. Ironically, Venetia's sudden death was accompanied by rumors of poisoning by viper's blood, or too frequent use of a viper-wine recipe which Digby explained Venetia took for several years for headaches. Gossip of the period suggested Digby encouraged its use so that Venetia would retain her youthful looks. Kenelm Digby made detailed notes on the preparation of viper wine and had a widespread reputation for using it (see Bennett 1214). Lady Eleanor Davies refers to this rumor, and also to Venetia's reputation as sexually active in her *Prophetic Writings* (1651 [355]). John Golborne in his complaint about the vanities of women (1674) addresses the use of viper wine in the attempt to maintain beauty and includes a reference to Cleopatra and to the disintegration of the brain, which was diagnosed as Venetia's cause of death after her autopsy: "Drink Viper-wine, till it drink up their brain, / To keep them fresh: By *Cleopatra* taught" (58). Here Golborne makes a direct allusion to Venetia, illustrating how long-lived and widespread the private aspects of Venetia's life and death had become, and her continued connection to the figure of Cleopatra.

41. See British Library, London, Add MS 30259 and Add MS 89136; Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ashmole MS 38, Oxford. See also Bright, ed., *Poems*.

42. Habington's father William was arrested for alleged involvement in the Gunpowder Plot. Kenelm Digby's father was executed for his involvement with the plot.

43. Habington married Lucy Herbert clandestinely in 1633.

44. Lucy Herbert's mother was a Percy and her grandmother was a Stanley; Venetia's mother was a Percy, her father was a Stanley.

45. Three paintings of Venetia as Prudence by Van Dyck exist: one in the National Portrait Gallery, London; one in the Palazzo Reale, Milan; and a third in the Royal Collection at Windsor. A copy, focusing only on Venetia without the accompanying allegorical figures, is in the Northamptonshire Museum and Art Gallery.

46. The most famous of these is "Sir Kenelm and Lady Digby with their Two Eldest Sons," painted in 1632. See Brown and Vlieghe 252.

47. "Venetia Lady Digby on Her Deathbed" (1633), Dulwich Picture Gallery, London no. 194. Bizarrely, Digby records in a letter to his brother that he and a servant rubbed Venetia's dead cheeks to bring "a little seeming colour to her pale cheeks" which he said lasted until her burial, and which you can see in her deathbed portrait (see Peterson 103).

48. This portrait painted in 1633 has been widely described as posthumous and is described as such in the National Portrait Gallery's description of what is believed to be the original portrait.

49. A.K. Wheelock in his discussion of the portrait recognized its masque-like quality (253–54).

50. These letters are extravagant descriptions of Venetia's virtues. In one letter he writes to Father Thompson aggressively defending Venetia: "I perceive you have mett but with very imperfect notions of that worthy woman my wife [. . .] I will boldly say there hath not in my knowledge gone to heaven a more honored and more admired woman than she was." He goes on to attribute the gossip concerning her to the slander of "crooked minds" (in Gabrieli, "Letter-Books" [1957] 87).

51. Gabrieli notes that Digby equates Venus with good womanhood through allusions to Spencer's Belphoebe and Amoretta mentioned just above this reference to Venus in Digby's letter (83).

52. Venetia's dead body was literarily posed by Van Dyke and Digby for her deathbed portrait.

53. In his letters after Venetia's death one can see that Digby used his vast and eclectic knowledge to define the nature of their love as extraordinary, drawing upon Neoplatonic and Aristotelian ideas, Christian theology, and a wealth of literary allusions.

54. For example Digby presented the collection of the mathematician Thomas Allen (1540–1632), with which he was entrusted at Allen's death, to the Bodleian Library in 1634. Ben Jonson also entrusted Digby with his unpublished poetry which Digby carefully oversaw into print.

55. British Library, London, Add MS Harley 6383, fol. 49r.

56. See Strong, "Robert Peake the Elder" 3; Tittler 73–74; Cooper 55–63.

57. Van Dyck set up his studio in Blackfriars in 1632 and was much involved in the Digby household. See Peterson 96–100; Brown, introduction 28–31.

58. Ben Jonson presented Kenelm Digby with copies of his unpublished poetry, including these verses about Venetia. Digby went on to bring this to publication in the collection called *The Underwood*.

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